

## Minnowbrook Concept Paper

### **Making Professionalism a Central Focus in Public Administration\***

I articulated the rationales behind this concept paper in my John Gaus lecture at the American Political Science Association (APSA) conference in 2017. The thesis of my Gaus Lecture (Perry, 2018) was simple and direct: “Public administration would be well served to pursue professionalism as a core theme because it is a central construct for understanding and acting in public administrative contexts” (p. 93). Although I consider public administration first and foremost a professional enterprise, public administration scholars have given little attention to the field’s professional content.

My call for public administration scholars to elevate their attention to professionalism is filled with irony in the context of this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary of the 1968 Minnowbrook conference. Not only was 1968 the year in which scholars convened at Minnowbrook to discuss the field’s health and future, but 1968 represents a watershed in the field’s embrace of professionalism. Dwight Waldo (1968), analyzing the scope of the theory of public administration, proposed that public administration adopt a professional perspective as a way to address its identity crisis.

In the same year that Waldo reflected about the direction of the field, Frederick Mosher published the first edition of his influential *Democracy and the Public Service* (1968). Arguably, the most influential aspect of Mosher’s book was his attention to the professions. Mosher’s focus on the importance of professionals was relatively novel at the time. Scholars had previously given little formal recognition to professions in public service and their influence in shaping policy and its implementation.

Nearly three decades after Waldo (1968) first proposed embracing profession as a means to clarify the field’s identity, Philip Jos and Mark Tompkins (1995) assessed the results of the drive toward professionalism. Their conclusion was direct and unequivocal: The professional focus had not helped and should be relinquished. Their critique rests on the premise “that appeals to professionalism fail to take account of the diversity of tasks performed in the public sector and tend to mis-characterize the sort of complexity that public managers and other public employees encounter” (Jos and Tompkins 1995, 208). While I agree with Jos and Tompkins (1995) that the field of public administration has not reaped the benefits that Waldo and others expected from a focus on professionalism, I dispute their conclusion that such a focus is futile. The reasons the field has not reaped expected benefits is multi-faceted, and includes a failure to frame research about professionalism to capture the diversity and complexity of public service, a dearth of empirical research to ground our understanding of professions and professionalism in public service, and expectations that exceeded what a professionalism focus could achieve.

---

\*This concept paper draws extensively from my 2017 John M. Gaus Lecture. See Perry (2018) for elaboration on proposals in this concept paper.

## How Should We Conceive Professionalism in Public Contexts?

Let me briefly summarize several new conceptual ideas for making professionalism central to public administration:

- *Concept name.* Many PA scholars (including Dwight Waldo) were uncomfortable with “baggage” associated with the term “profession.” The hangup with sociological meanings of profession can be addressed by adopting a concept name, “public service professionalism,” that is better suited to the history and intent of the construct in public administration.
- *Construct dimensionality.* Accept a two-pronged conceptualization of public service professionalism as (1) instrumental, focused largely on effectiveness of administrative action, and (2) normative, attentive to the substance and fidelity of obligations to the governance regime. Following this line of research permits public administration scholars to embrace simultaneously the Simon and Waldo traditions of the field.
- *Multi-level units of analysis.* Public service professionalism, and the normative obligations of public servants (Waldo, 1988), is a complex phenomenon. Research about public service professionalism should incorporate several levels of analysis, ranging from institutions to operations.
- *Plural in contrast to universal.* We are unlikely to encounter a universal public service professionalism. Instead, multiple conceptions of public service professionalism are likely to coexist due to the complex institutional and structural arrangements in which public administrators are embedded.

## Research Questions

Scholars and practitioners should move forward expeditiously on a professionalism agenda to fill knowledge gaps, integrate disparate research streams, and affirm an identity that has fit the reality of public administration for nearly half a century, since Waldo broached the issue in 1968.

A variety of research questions could get the ball rolling. They include:

**1. Is there a public service professionalism?** As Mosher (1968) reminded us, government is crowded with professionals—lawyers, engineers, doctors, foresters, scientists—who are responsible for the public’s business. Is there a convergence in the values espoused by most public service professions? How does the normative order of public service professions converge? What are the obligations, the responsibilities, to which all public service professionals should be attentive? Is there a lowest common denominator? Is there a high standard to which all public service professionals should aspire?

**2. What metrics can be developed to assess professionalism and public service professionalism?** The literature on the importance of public values has grown significantly, but we have little agreement on how to define, identify, and prioritize such values (Bryson, Crosby, and Bloomberg 2014; Moynihan et al. 2011; Nabatchi 2012). Metrics to measure both professionalism and public service professionalism need to be developed to advance this agenda, including assessing the incidence of public service professionalism referred to in the first proposed research item.

**3. Oaths, codes of conduct, and accreditation.** The oath of the Athenian City State has been associated with Syracuse University’s Maxwell School, the first U.S. public administration program, since its founding in 1924. The ICMA code of ethics is enforced as an embodiment of stewardship for good government in local governments around the globe. The American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) first adopted a code of ethics in 1984 (Svara 2014). What do we know about the symbolic and instrumental value of such oaths and codes? Can we employ these codes and rules in systematic ways to improve the public standing and performance of public service professionals?

**4. How can the professions and professionals be developed for public service?**

Professionalism as a research agenda highlights the divide between those who are educated within our public affairs and administration programs and those who serve in government and quasi-governmental organizations. The number of MPAs and MPPs that graduate each year and enter government is dwarfed by the number of new professionals graduating and entering government. The numbers of joint JD/MPA and similar joint degrees has grown over recent decades, but the proportion of total public affairs graduate degrees is still quite small. How suitable are our models of professional education for developing public service professionals?

**5. Does the idea of public service professionalism resonate internationally?** The idea of and consciousness about professionalism in American public administration is fairly recent. If profession is relatively new to the American context, what is its status around the globe? Does public service professionalism have universal attributes or is it an example of American exceptionalism? Given the global reach of some professional organizations, like ASPA and ICMA, it is reasonable to expect that professionalism would resonate internationally (see Dahlström and Lapuente, 2017).

**How Does This New Direction Help to Position PA for the Future?**

Taking professionalism seriously provides answers to critical questions posed for this 50<sup>th</sup> anniversary Minnowbrook Conference.

- Is PA in a time of revolutions, and do we need to rethink the administrative state? The truth is that the roots of PA lie with the professions (especially civic service professions—e.g., city management, social work—arising during the Progressive period), but as a field we have been unable to focus on a professionalism agenda. Embracing professionalism would be revolutionary and at the same time it would take us back to our roots. Understanding professionalism would also put us in a position to rethink the administrative state because it would provide PA a necessary intellectual foundation that we now lack.
- How can we balance Simonian visions that seek a “science of administration” with Waldonian visions that seek to understand administration through big questions addressing normative values, cultural settings, and larger societal shifts? As I argue above and elsewhere (Perry, 2018), professionalism offers a solid path for establishing a balance between two one-time divergent directions in the field.
- How do we make public administration research more inclusive, more international, and more responsive to the forces of globalization? There are many reasons to believe that a research agenda about professionalism (e.g., its ties to meritocracy, global reach of

professions and professional organizations) will travel, that is, resonate internationally and globally (Neshkova and Kostadinova, 2012).

- Is public administration relevant, and if so, why is it so difficult for scholarship to have an impact on the world of practice? Making professionalism central to PA would create the nexus for bringing scholarship directly into the world of practice. Scholars' failure to engage in research questions with a direct bearing on the lives of practitioners has been a major failing of the field during its recent history. Engaging a professionalism research agenda would help to make PA scholarship relevant.

## References

- Bryson, John M., Barbara C. Crosby, and Laura Bloomberg. 2014. "Public Value Governance: Moving Beyond Traditional Public Administration and the New Public Management." *Public Administration Review* 74:445–456.
- Dahlström, Carl and Victor Lapuente. 2017. *Organizing Leviathan: Politicians, Bureaucrats, and the Making of Good Government*. Cambridge, UK: Cambridge University Press.
- Jos, Philip H., and Mark E. Tompkins. 1995. "Administrative Practice and the Waning Promise of Professionalism for Public Administration." *The American Review of Public Administration* 25(3): 207-229.
- Mosher, Frederick. 1968. *Democracy and the Public Service*. New York: Oxford University Press.
- Moynihan, Donald P., Sergio Fernandez, Soonhee Kim, Kelly M. LeRoux, Suzanne J. Piotrowski, Bradley E. Wright, and Kaifeng Yang. 2011. "Performance Regimes amidst Governance Complexity." Supplement 1, *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory* 21: i141–55.
- Nabatchi, Tina. 2012. "Putting the "Public" Back in Public Values Research: Designing Participation to Identify and Respond to Values." *Public Administration Review* 72(5): 699–708.
- Neshkova, Milena I. and Tatiana Kostadinova. 2012. The Effectiveness of Administrative Reform in New Democracies. *Public Administration Review*, 72: 324-333.
- Perry, James L. 2018. The 2017 John Gaus Award Lecture: What If We Took Professionalism Seriously? *PS: Political Science & Politics*, 51(1), 93-102.
- Svara, James H. 2014. "Who Are the Keepers of the Code? Articulating and Upholding Ethical Standards in the Field of Public Administration." *Public Administration Review* 74(5): 561–569.
- Waldo, Dwight. 1968. "Scope of the Theory of Public Administration." In *Theory and Practice of Public Administration: Scope, Objectives, and Methods*, ed. James C. Charlesworth, 1-26. Philadelphia: American Academy of Political and Social Science.
- Waldo, Dwight. 1988. *The Enterprise of Public Administration: A Summary View*. Novato, CA: Chandler and Sharp.