The Public Service of the Future

This essay articulates a vision for public service in 2020. . . . [W]e face new influences on all of the fronts that [Leonard] White identified in his essay—“global or national, economic, political or managerial, racial, community, ideological.”


This article seeks to identify the status and infrastructure of public service in 2020. It first examines Leonard White’s early effort at predicting a future search for public service, written in 1942, but with an eye toward the 1950s and 1960s. The authors assess the subsequent structural and ideological development of public service to lay a framework for their own projection of the public service of the future. They anticipate important foundational shifts that will lead to a revaluing of public service and opportunities to reinvigorate public work. The authors conclude with a list of six specific public service infrastructure changes that they anticipate will become manifest by 2020.

White’s Vision: A Broader and Stronger Administrative Apparatus

White intended his essay to be descriptive rather than normative, with his projections resting on “contemporary trends and probable tendencies” (1942, 216). The essay’s forward-looking gaze is all the more intriguing with White’s firm grounding in the history of public administration. That White would pen this particular essay to honor Charles Merriam is significant: Merriam’s participation on the Brownlow Committee dramatically reshaped the nature of public service and certainly influenced White’s thinking about it.

The post-Brownlow focus on administrative management ushered in an era of “government by administrators” (Mosher 1968, 79). This was reflected in White’s
anticipation of a strengthened administrative apparatus at all levels of government, and a repositioning of administrative powers involving growth in federal influence at the expense of states and localities. He also envisioned the postwar public service milieu to include an extension of merit system principles at all levels of government, the further development of public service careers, and the increased importance of civil service unions. These initiatives, he argued, would be driven by a heightened professionalization of the public service, including ever-more focus on science, technology, and management. All of this would require greater discretionary judgment by public administrators.

White expressed cautious optimism about this broadened administrative purview, describing an inherent tension between an expansion of the “responsibility of officialdom” with the need to commensurately increase the “responsiveness of officialdom” (1942, 213). While the former theoretically could enable more effective execution of public policy, the latter must serve as a check against expanded power and authority in the hands of public servants. In this way, White contributed an early extension to the now-classic—but then ongoing—debate between Carl Friedrich (1940) and Herman Finer (1941).

How did White foresee the tension between increased discretion and the need for greater responsiveness in the public service being relieved? Formal steps, such as improved public relations techniques, could enable officials to better ascertain the public’s preferences. However, these steps remain insufficient: the needed responsiveness must be found “deep in the spirit of the public service as a social organism. . . . [being] strengthened by example; hence the invaluable contribution of the wise and tempered deans and guardians of the public service ethos, who are gathering in increasing numbers as the fruits of the merit system and of a career service ripen” (1942, 215). Interestingly, White’s early recognition of the role of public service ethos in fostering responsiveness preceded by 50 years the recent growth in empirical research about public service motivation (Perry and Wise 1990).

How Far Have We Come Since White?
Many of White’s projections came to pass, some later than anticipated. The right of federal employees to engage in labor negotiations, for instance, was not recognized until 1962, when President John F. Kennedy signed Executive Order 10988. Collective bargaining had previously been used by some state and local governments, but change at the federal level dramatically altered labor-management relations in the public service. Similarly, other hiring and salary reforms during this period aimed at greater equality for public service personnel and extending merit principles within the civil service.

Major advancements during the 1960s also fit White’s predictions for a shift to more federal influence in social programs and an altered relationship between the federal government and state and local governments. Meanwhile, a sense of idealism toward public service grew early in the decade. In his 1961 inaugural address, President Kennedy fostered enthusiasm for greater engagement in public causes. A growing number of policy initiatives sought to expand civil rights and reduce poverty, effectively reframing the public service as a front line for achieving greater societal equality. Broadly speaking, it was a time of tremendous direction setting and expansion of the federal public service, with significant legislation passed toward many of the government’s most important missions (Light 2008).

As the decade waned, the public paradigm began to shift. While it is impossible to designate a single tipping point, 1968 certainly was a pivotal year. A sense of disillusionment toward public service grew as citizens questioned the country’s escalating involvement in Vietnam, civil unrest and race riots spread throughout many cities, Martin Luther King, Jr., and Robert Kennedy were assassinated, and the so-called counterculture gained influence. In the academy, a “New Public Administration” emerged from the Minnowbrook conference (Marini 1971), and a leading scholar of the field proclaimed public administration’s “crisis of identity” for the inability to articulate its own set of theories and methods (Waldo 1968, 3). These developments had profound impacts on peoples’ desire to enter public service and on the professional preparation of those who did.

The training of the public service also garnered increased scrutiny in 1968, in Frederick Mosher’s influential book Democracy and the Public Service. Historically, civil service reforms based on merit principles centered largely on the core value of neutral competence. However, as Mosher pointed out, public servants are not neutral automatons, but rather use their training and backgrounds to shape the direction of public actions. The vital need to understand this aspect of the professionalized public service and concerns regarding responsibility and accountability greatly expanded the discussion begun earlier by Friedrich, Finer, and White.

The 1970s brought arguably the most dramatic civil service reforms since the Pendleton Act in 1883. The federal Civil Service Reform Act of 1978, whose impetus was state and local reforms, embodied President Jimmy Carter’s efforts to improve management and hinged on the desire to extend and uphold merit principles. The reforms introduced merit pay for mid-level managers, established the Senior Executive Service, and replaced the U.S. Civil Service Commission with the Office of Personnel Management, the Merit Systems Protection Board, and the Federal Labor Relations Authority. More than previous reforms, the Civil Service Reform Act focused attention on linking human resources and performance more directly. Despite the reforms, public service continued to be devalued in the public eye.

Civil service reforms were not the only important development of the period. A significant change in our conception of public service began to emerge in the early 1980s, driven by structural and ideological shifts. Historically, “public service” meant government employment.1 Yet new service provision arrangements that began to take hold in the early 1980s—driven by efforts to introduce market and quasi-market incentives into government—expanded conceptions of the public sector. These efforts gained momentum in the 1990s, driven by notions of “reinventing government” (Osborne and Gaebler 1992). Some scholars observed that the increased use of private contracting and not-for-profit service provision was leading to “third-party government” (Salamon 2002), or “government by proxy” (Kettl 1988), enabling politicians to claim reductions in the civil service while masking the government’s true size (Light 1999b).
The Pendulum Swings: Revaluing Public Service

We previously described the descent of the standing of public service from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. Circumstances began to shift after the election of George H. W. Bush in 1988, when rhetoric and reality once again began to accord public service a more central role in national life. We believe that public service careers (2003, 29). In their normative view, the new public service should be guided by a focus on democratic theory and aim chiefly to be responsive to citizens, a view that stands in stark contrast to the New Public Management’s economic model, which treats citizens as customers.

The election of an African American president almost 50 years after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 marks a significant passing in American history. We expect that this new political reality will affect public service not only nationally, but in state and local governments and the voluntary sector as well.

The Public Service of 2020

Like White before us, we fix our projections on current trends and developments, with the intent to predict rather than prescribe. Although the benchmark year of 2020 is only a decade away, our future search allows the possibility of—even anticipates—some foundational shifts in the intervening years. Our discussion begins with the broadest of these shifts—revaluing public service—followed by a description of what we believe is an emerging infrastructure that both facilitates and reinforces public service in the future.

The Pendulum Swings: Revaluing Public Service

We previously described the descent of the standing of public service from the late 1960s to the late 1980s. Circumstances began to shift after the election of George H. W. Bush in 1988, when rhetoric and reality once again began to accord public service a more central role. We believe that public events and personalities are precursors to improved standing of public service in 2020. The election of an African American president almost 50 years after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 marks a significant passage in American history. We expect that this new political reality will affect public service not only nationally, but in state and local governments and the voluntary sector as well.

New political realities and rhetoric. To be clear, we do not envision the American people abandoning their historically ambivalent relationship with government and the people who embody it (Morone 1990). We anticipate, however, that the contributions of public service will yield greater acceptance of the centrality of government to national survival and achievement. To some extent, growth in acceptance is event-driven. The 1995 bombing of the Alfred P. Murrah Federal Building in Oklahoma City was the first in a series of events that have altered the American psyche. The terrorist attacks of September 11, 2001, have had even more profound influences on highlighting government’s legitimate roles and the nobility of public service. When the story of the “Great Panic” of 2008 is written and digested, we believe that the actions of the U.S. Federal Reserve and Treasury Department will further reinforce the standing of public institutions (Wessel 2009).

Another event—nonviolent but likely no less influential than 9/11—is the election of Barack Obama. Obama’s election crossed both racial and ideological divides, and it is likely to contribute to how we value public service in 2020. The election of an African American president almost 50 years after the Voting Rights Act of 1965 marks a significant passage in American history. We expect that this new political reality will affect public service not only nationally, but in state and local governments and the voluntary sector as well. Furthermore, it creates the prospect for opening new paths to social change, stimulating greater involvement of previously unengaged Americans, and igniting new hope among disenfranchised and alienated groups.

The shifts in rhetoric accompanying Obama’s election are of lesser historic novelty, but they are nonetheless significant for how Americans will view public service over the next several decades. Obama’s 2008 speech to the Democratic National Convention at the time of his nomination is instructive about a shifting public mood:

That’s the promise of America—the idea that we are responsible for ourselves, but that we also rise or fall as one nation; the fundamental belief that I am my brother’s keeper; I am my sister’s keeper. . . . [W]e must also admit that fulfilling America’s promise will require more than just money. It will require a renewed sense of responsibility from each of us to recover what John F. Kennedy called our intellectual and moral strength.

Although the slumping economy has no doubt contributed to the increased attractiveness of public work, many people involved with admissions in public affairs programs attribute recent robust increases in both applications and enrollments to President Obama’s call to public service (Mangan 2009).

As further evidence of a profound shift in rhetoric about public service, one needs to look no further than the British Conservative Party, the home of Margaret Thatcher, whose rhetoric was closely embraced by Ronald Reagan. George Osborne, a Conservative Party leader and now Chancellor of the Exchequer, gave a speech in 2009 about which David Brooks (2009) wrote,

In a party conference address earlier this month, Osborne gave the speech that an American politician will someday
have to give. He said that he is not ideologically hostile to government. "Millions of Britons depend on public services and cannot opt out," he declared. He defended government workers against those who would deride them as self-serving bureaucrats: “Conservatives should never use lazy rhetoric that belittles those who are employed by the government.”

Perhaps the British are again the precursors of what we will hear from conservatives in the United States in the not too distant future. Osborne’s perspective certainly supports our contention that public service is being revalued.

Some readers may perceive our prognosis as overly optimistic in light of recent developments in public opinion, which suggest a growing antipathy toward government, as reflected in the tea party movement and partisanship surrounding issues such as health care reform. As one perceptive observer of national politics observes, however, “Just because voters aren’t happy with government doesn’t mean that they don’t want government to play a role in their lives. . . . What they are saying is that they want government to do a better job” (Walter 2010). Despite frequent shifts in the winds of public opinion, we anticipate the overall trend in the next decade will contribute to revaluing public service.

Generational transformations. A second wave of change involves shifting patterns of public-regardingness across generations, as reflected in several recent trends. Tracking indicators of civic engagement during the past decade show an upward shift among the Millennial Generation, typically classified as those born between 1980 and 2000. It is from members of this cohort that the public service of 2020 will look to replace large numbers of retiring Baby Boomers and aging members of Generation X.

The first Millennials entered college shortly before 2000. A snapshot of attitudes and behaviors among this group demonstrates increased public-regardingness in a number of areas, according to annual surveys of college freshmen conducted by the Higher Education Research Institute (HERI) at the University of California, Los Angeles (UCLA). For example, the number of college freshman who reported that within the last year they had participated (frequently or occasionally) in organized demonstrations rose to an all-time high of 50.2 percent in 2006. In 2007, 10.9 percent of respondents had participated in local, state, or national political campaigns, up from previous decades, but still not reaching pre-1970 levels. Volunteering has increased steadily since the 1980s, up to 83.3 percent in 2007. Not only are more freshman volunteering, but also they are doing it for longer periods of time than respondents from 10 years prior, as illustrated in table 1 (Higher Education Research Institute 1997b, 2002c, 2007d).

Table 1 Hours per Week College Freshman Report Volunteering, 1997, 2002, 2007

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Hours Per Week in the Last Year Spent Volunteering</th>
<th>1997b</th>
<th>2002c</th>
<th>2007d</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>None</td>
<td>31.5</td>
<td>27.7</td>
<td>25.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Less than one</td>
<td>24.1</td>
<td>24.3</td>
<td>23.7</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>1–2</td>
<td>23.3</td>
<td>24.9</td>
<td>26.6</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3–5</td>
<td>13.1</td>
<td>14.0</td>
<td>15.1</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6–10</td>
<td>4.7</td>
<td>5.2</td>
<td>5.3</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>11–15</td>
<td>1.5</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>1.9</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>16 or more</td>
<td>1.8</td>
<td>2.2</td>
<td>2.2</td>
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Robert Putnam (2008) has gone so far as to suggest that the Millennial Generation, whose members have been shaped by both 9/11 and the 2008 election, may be the new “Greatest Generation.” World War II was the formative event for the original Greatest Generation. Putnam’s thesis is that 9/11 triggered a civic-mindedness among Millennials, but their political involvement, foreshadowed in the elections of 2004 and 2006, reached full flower in their influence and success in the 2008 campaigns. Putnam concludes, perhaps with some hyperbole, but consistent with the sweep of arguments here, “The 2008 elections are thus the coming-out party of this new Greatest Generation. Their grandparents of the original Greatest Generation were the civic pillars of American democracy for more than a half-century, and at long last, just as that generation is leaving the scene, reinforcements are arriving.”

Public–private dialectic. The political and generational changes rest within a larger historical sweep. H. George Frederickson called attention to the historical dialectic in the National Academy of Public Administration’s 2008 Elmer Staats Lecture. He envisions the pendulum swinging away from a private era toward a new public era: “We are witnessing the beginning of the end of the long era of bureaucrat bashing, of tearing down the managerial capacity of the national government, and the beginnings of reregulation” (2008, 6).

Frederickson’s contention that we are moving toward a “public era” as a natural counterforce to an earlier era of public decline and bureaucrat bashing gets support from noted economist Albert Hirschman. In Shifting Involvements: Private Interest and Public Action (1982), Hirschman argues that shifts from private action to public action and back are quite normal in the larger historical sweep. The public–private dichotomy that Hirschman posits has at its core a very simple preference dynamic: “Acts of consumption, as well as acts of participation in public affairs, which are undertaken because they are expected to yield satisfaction, also yield dissatisfaction and disappointment” (1982, 10).

The Public Service of the Future
As Frederickson notes in his Staats Lecture, *New York Times* columnist David Brooks also contends that we are in the midst of an episodic shift driven by three changing epochs: economic, political and generational. Brooks’ argument parallels elements of the case we build here, but we refer to his argument as further evidence that revaluing public service may, in part, be an outgrowth of recurring historical processes. Echoing Hirschman’s view from a quarter century earlier, Brooks (2008) wrote at the time of Obama’s election, “So today is not only a pivot, but a confluence of pivots. When historians look back at the era that is now closing, they will see a time of private achievement and public disappointment.” Many Americans defined their well-being in recent years by growth in their stock portfolios, home equity, access to second homes, dream vacations and other acts of private consumption. These pursuits may have produced satisfaction temporarily, but risky decisions by bankers, Wall Street financiers, and mortgage lenders (not to mention citizens themselves)—the very institutions responsible for creating so much private wealth—have now generated widespread disappointment and dissatisfaction. We believe that more Americans will seek to remedy their uncertainty and disappointment by turning to public affairs to find satisfaction, which will serve to further the revaluing of public service.

**Building Infrastructures for the Twenty-First Century**

Although we believe that public service is being revalued, the long-term attractiveness of public service and the sustainability of the shift depends on bringing infrastructures—job designs, compensation systems, and other concrete artifacts—into alignment with the social reconstruction that is under way. Longtime observers, such as Paul Light (1999a, 2008) and John Donahue (2008), believe that the infrastructure supporting public service is more in tune with industrial America of the 1950s—the world White was predicting—than 2020. This state of affairs is the result of a variety of factors, not the least of which is a decline in the status of public service that led to its long-term neglect. What new infrastructures do we see as pivotal for reinforcing public service? We discuss six infrastructure components that will significantly influence the long-term status of public service.

1. **Reinvigorating public work.** For all the attention historically given to the meaningfulness of public service jobs, we have given the issue almost no serious attention in the new governance era (Salamon 2002). Inattention to the attractiveness of public work has had predictable consequences—many potential, high-quality employees perceive that it is easier to find satisfying work outside government, often in the nonprofit sector.

Erosion of the attractiveness of government jobs has many causes, and reinvigorating public work will require concerted action as we move toward a new public era. Among the steps that can be institutionalized to reinvigorate public work are,

- Find ways to make jobs at all levels of government more challenging. Scholars (Buchanan 1974) pointed to the low challenge of entry-level government jobs well before Light called attention to it in *The New Public Service* (1999a). Changing the mind-set about and management of entry-level work in government is one step in the right direction. Another step would be to find ways to reinforce the task significance of public jobs (Grant 2008). Government jobs still have potential for unique access to intrinsic motivations linked to the significance of the tasks job incumbents perform. These jobs need to be designed and managed to activate this potential.
- Mitigate systemic dysfunctions of public–private partnerships. The design and management of public–private partnerships—among them contracting and service delivery collaborations—in recent years has strongly signaled the attractiveness of private over public jobs. The status of public jobs will languish if outsourcing decisions are made primarily on ideological and efficiency grounds (Mulgan 2005). The specter of outsourcing raises equity and psychological concerns (Pearce 1983) that must be remedied for public jobs to recover their luster.

If these changes in public work can be institutionalized, then the prospects for sustaining the value of public service for the longer-term increase significantly.

2. **Recalibrating wage and salary structures.** The decline in the status of public service during the last third of the twentieth century has taken a toll on the relative financial valuation of public versus private work. The financial valuation of public work is more acute for higher- rather than lower-paying jobs, which are often better paid in the public sector (Miller 1996). Higher-paying professional, administrative, and managerial jobs have historically been better compensated in the private sector. George Borjas (2003) studied sector switchers and arrived at compelling findings about wage structures and the sorting of workers. Borjas suggests that as public–private wage structures have evolved, the relative skills of “marginal” persons who moved across sectors also changed significantly. He concludes that the substantial widening of wage inequality in the private sector and the more stable wage distribution in the public sector increased the prospect that high-skill workers were more likely to end up in the private sector. These wage inequalities “created magnetic effects that altered the sorting of workers across sectors, with high-skill workers becoming more likely to end up in the private sector” (Borjas 2003, 52). Macro wage structures are consequential for the public sector’s ability to attract and retain a quality workforce. The effects of macro structures, however, are poorly understood and have had little or no influence on public policy, especially the dispersion and structure of government wages.

John Donahue (2008) infers from Borjas’s research that we need to pay more attention to dispersion in wages between the public and private sectors. Donahue’s solution is quite simple. He proposes that the distinctiveness of the public labor market be changed by “pushing down the low end of the public labor market, and lifting up the high end” (2008, 147). This entails more than depressing lower-level wages and increasing upper-level wages; benefits and job security also need to be fundamentally altered.
Donahue’s proposal is intriguing, but we have reservations about the advisability of pushing down lower-end wages and reducing job security across government, a course of action pursued in some recent state-level reforms (Battaglio and Condrey 2006). Not only do we believe that it will be politically difficult to push down lower-end wages, but also we are concerned about the human consequences for lower-level workers. Reducing salary compression by modestly increasing salaries for professional, administrative, and managerial employees at the upper ends of salary schedules is a more politically acceptable and constructive first step. Increasing the slope of the salary line for public employees would help attract and retain higher-skill workers. Reducing salary compression could also pay dividends for lower- and middle-level employees who must make choices about where they pursue their careers. Regardless of the specific details, we believe that a recalibration of wage structures in line with the options identified here is under way and will continue for the foreseeable future.

Recent steps to improve student loan forgiveness provisions reflect the trend toward recalibrating wage and salary structures that we project. The College Cost Reduction and Access Act of 2007 and the Health Care and Education Reconciliation Act of 2010 create the potential to influence sector selection among college graduates. With education costs continuing to rise, many graduates find themselves encumbered with daunting student loan payments. The prospect of having the remaining loan balance forgiven after 10 years of public service employment may provide just the type of financial relief and incentive to attract quality employees who otherwise might chase higher salaries in the private sector to repay their student loans.

3. Redesigning public retirement systems. A long-expressed justification for giving public employees lower wages is the lucrative retirement benefits that many public employees receive. If demonstrable changes are made in public wage structures as suggested earlier, then retirement system designs could be rethought as well. Public jurisdictions have taken small steps in this direction during the last quarter century. We foresee changes in public pension systems as a natural outgrowth of both the fiscal stress that states will confront over the course of the next decade and the need for states to reduce unfunded pension liabilities (Pew Center on the States 2010).

A rethinking of retirement systems could entail two obvious changes. One would be to shift more of the burden for defined benefit retirement systems to employees. The introduction of the Federal Employee Retirement System in 1983 to replace the Civil Service Retirement System, which was originally created in 1920, was the first step down the path of greater employee responsibility for funding retirement.

A second change would be to convert defined benefit plans to defined contribution plans. Fiscally stressed states such as Michigan, for example, are considering converting teachers’ defined benefit plans to defined contribution plans. The movement of public pensions toward defined contribution designs is likely to reduce long-term financial obligations and increase governments’ credibility for establishing new wage bargains with employees. This may prove to be a pivotal shift in public infrastructure.

4. Reemphasizing public service across organizational systems. Given the foregoing attention to wage and retirement systems, you might get the impression that what matters is money. Although money is important, the effort to build infrastructures must, as Paul Light argues in A Government Ill Executed, “involve the right motivations for service” (2008, 233). Indeed, public leaders and executives have given some attention to the motivational equation and the unique call of public service. The U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM), for example, includes public service motivation among its list of six fundamental competencies for federal senior executives. The OPM defines public service motivation as follows: “Shows a commitment to serve the public. Ensures that actions meet public needs; aligns organizational objectives and practices with public interests” (OPM 2010).

We foresee public leaders making progress during the course of the next decade to enhance and align public service values across organizational systems. Research on altruism, public service motivation, and prosocial behavior (Paarlberg, Perry, and Hondeghem 2008) has begun to make headway in suggesting how infrastructures can be modified to strengthen reinforcement of other- and public-regarding motivational orientations. The evolving research has begun to identify a number of infrastructure changes that might put governments in better position to reap the power of public service. Among them are,

- Assessing applicants’ past public service behaviors in selecting employees to improve fit with public service values and accountability
- Providing formal opportunities for newcomers during on-boarding (Partnership for Public Service 2008) and early socialization experiences to learn about organizational values and expectations related to public service values
- Developing performance appraisal and performance monitoring systems that include observations of behaviors that manifest public service motivations
- Identifying beneficiaries of jobs; establishing opportunities for direct contact between employee and beneficiary; and providing clear channels for service beneficiary feedback
- Interpreting organization goals in ways that allow employees to connect their work tasks to broad, positive public service missions
- Designing compensation systems to emphasize long-term attractiveness to employees and avoid extrinsic incentives that crowd out intrinsic motivations

5. Repositioning training and development as a routine element of the employment contract. A June 2009 White House proposal to set mandatory spending levels for employee training (Kauffmann 2009) focuses attention on a historical limitation of public service infrastructure. John Berry, director of the OPM, observed in announcing prospective federal reforms: “The president really sees this as a legacy opportunity, and he gets that this is a once-in-a-generation chance to get this right” (Kauffmann 2009).

Fundamental changes in the public sector’s human capital investment policies are vital if gains in the public services’ status are to be reinforced and maintained. And a number of factors are aligned to make the legacy opportunity of human capital investment in governments a distinct possibility. The first factor is sheer demographics—and the imminent wave of retirements and generational
changes in public service. Investments in current and new public employees may be essential to retain capacity in the face of retirements. A second factor is that public work is increasingly knowledge work. Add to this the public’s high expectations for reliability and performance. It is hard to imagine that leaders will not eventually come to the conclusion that human capital investments in public employees are both efficient and effective investments. A third factor is the shifting institutional rules where more employees are attached to public service in ways quite different from traditional, lifetime career systems (Perry 1994, 2007). New governance arrangements call for new skills and competencies (Salamon 2002). These institutional changes militate for more training and development.

6. Rethinking accountability structures that accommodate performance, but legitimize autonomy and competence of public servants. That public servants wield substantial administrative power is not new knowledge (see the previous discussion regarding Friedrich, Finer, and White). The potential to influence policy through discretionary judgment in service provision has been a significant area of research (Lipsky 1980). Because of this, the need to understand and develop accountability structures has also been a focus of much research, particularly in the literature on political control of the bureaucracy (Wood and Waterman 1991).

Much of the control research is steeped in an economics-oriented tradition of principal–agent models, with a focus on securing compliance through supervision (Brehm and Gates 1997). While this output-oriented approach may make sense in a private sector setting, the nature of the public sector holds some important distinctions. John Brehm and Scott Gates aptly note,

[B]ureaucratic policy output is notoriously difficult to monitor. Public sector policy output typically does not lend itself to piece-rate production. Ultimately, public sector organizations are inherently infused with ambiguity. There is almost never a bottom line, but rather many overlapping and competing goals. All organizations, even small private sector firms, face problems of ambiguity, but public sector organizations must overcome more fundamental issues of ambiguity—ambiguities in terms of goals, design, and organization. (2008, 12)

What is needed are accountability structures that encourage public servants to achieve high levels of performance, but also provide opportunities to exercise a degree of autonomy in their duties. Brehm and Gates (2008) suggest that appropriate training, the cultivation of trust, and improved task management can improve accountability structures in the public sector. Steps in this direction will help make the public service a more attractive career choice for those who seek to use their creativity in solving challenging public problems.

Conclusion

So what will the public service look like in 2020? Our review of White’s future search reveals the importance of a healthy respect for historical developments in attempting to cut through the clouds of global and national economic, social, and political influences that shape public service. At the crossroads of the historical progression of public service and current developments, we find fertile soil for a revaluing of public service.

To accommodate and sustain a revalued public service in 2020, we envision that public service infrastructures will be modified in six key ways.

The replacement of the Baby Boom generation will, by itself, create public service demand and opportunities that have not existed since the 1970s. The changes are less the result of growth as they are the exit of masses of job incumbents moving to another stage of their lives. This transition alone will change the public service. We can hope that the next generation of public employees will enter a revalued and restructured public service. We are optimistic that demographic, social, political, and technological changes will trend in that direction.

Notes

1. Two semantic issues deserve comment. One involves the precise scope of “public service.” As we note, public service traditionally has referred to government employees. As nonprofit and even for-profit organizations have been enlisted as instruments of public action, however, we believe it is appropriate to envision public service more broadly. We use “public service” in that spirit here, but, for the most part, the people to whom we refer will be government employees. A related issue is our reference to public- or other-regarding behavior, in which we include civic engagement, community service, and volunteering. We choose to connect these behaviors to our discussion of public service because a variety of forms of civic engagement are indicators of public-regardingness in the society. We believe that shifts in public-regarding behaviors have a direct bearing on the status of public service in society.

References


