Reflections about Public Affairs Education as the Journal of Public Affairs Education Turns Ten

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My term as J-PAE editor-in-chief ended with volume six, so it has been more than three years since I left the editor's role. My term started just as the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) became publisher for J-PAE and the journal shifted from three to four issues a year. Since leaving the editor's role, I have had the good fortune to stay close to the journal by virtue of continued membership on the editorial board.

As I thought about Ed Jennings's charge for this tenth anniversary reflection, I could not resist going back to read what I had written as editor of a relatively new journal. I was struck by several observations as I reviewed my editorials from the 1998-2000 issues. My recollection was that I had covered many substantive issues in the editorials. But the truth is that I devoted almost equal attention to process—for example, introducing a new editorial team, reporting on a survey of J-PAE readers—as to substantive issues. Many of the process issues involved announcements of practices that J-PAE continues today—for example, refereed symposia and essays by winners of NASPAA's Teaching Excellence Award (now named in honor of Leslie Whittington, a recipient who lost her life on September 11, 2001, in the Pentagon crash).

The goals of this essay are modest. I begin by reflecting on trends in public affairs education. This serves to lead to a discussion of what I consider the most fundamental issue we confront as public affairs educators. I conclude with some heuristics for research about public affairs education.

TRENDS IN THE CONTEXT AND CONTENT OF PUBLIC AFFAIRS EDUCATION

It is difficult, even counterproductive, to divorce trends in public affairs education from the context in which we prepare our students. After all, ours is a field in which practice is often informed by and subordinate to the institutions and regimes for which we prepare our students. Thus, my
attention to trends will be brief, recognizing that today's trends may be overcome quickly by tomorrow's events. If we forget this lesson, we need do no more than turn the clock back five years to read headlines about peace and prosperity—remember the projected $6 trillion federal surplus—to recognize that the trends of today are transitory. Moreover, if we become too immersed in the future, we need to remind ourselves that only part of what public affairs education is about is prospective; we also are conservators of a rich heritage of democratic institutions and governance.

For some time now, the mega trends driving our concerns as educators have been well known. The first edition of the Handbook of Public Administration (Jossey-Bass, 1989), published fifteen years ago, highlighted several broad trends: changing demographic and social realities, global interdependence, rapid technological change. In its 2000 strategic plan, the U.S. General Accounting Office identified many of the same factors. Comptroller General Walker (Walker, 2001) listed nine in J-PAE’s symposium on Transformations in Public Affairs Education:

1. Increasingly global markets, information, and enterprises;
2. Changing demographics;
3. More diverse and new threats to the United States;
4. Rapidly evolving technologies;
5. Increasingly interest in government's role in enhancing quality of life;
6. Rising health care costs;
7. Conversion from an industrial-based to a knowledge-based economy;
8. Changing governance approaches and sourcing strategies; and
9. Citizens' increasing demands for government to focus more on results and less on process.

Our inferences about the implications of these mega trends have been relatively consistent during the course of the last decade. For instance, as a consequence of the cogent arguments presented by Comptroller General Walker and others in the 2001 symposium, I inferred "that old relationships and organizational forms are giving way to less hierarchical, multi-sectoral, and more geographically dispersed relationships and organizational forms" (Perry, 2001, 211). In the same J-PAE symposium, Don Kettl (2001, 213) summarized the challenges for future public managers around what have become familiar themes: managing in a world in which not all public service will be around government, more program implementation will occur through nonhierarchical relationships, more domestic policy will be shaped by global forces, and government will need to incorporate new forms of public participation.

The irony of our reflections about the context and content of public affairs education is that we are revisiting themes prominent when I was a graduate student more than thirty years ago. If you open the table of contents to Dwight Waldo's (1971) Public Administration in a Time of Turbulence, you find many of the same trends are addressed, as reflected in a sampling of chapter titles:

- Administrative Decentralization and Political Power;
- Turbulence and Technology: Public Administration and the Role of Information-Processing Technology;
- "Participative" Administration—Emerging Reality or Wishful Thinking?;
- "Organization and Administration for New Technological and Social Imperatives"; and
- "The Public Service in the Temporary Society."

My mentor, Charlie Levine, talked and wrote frequently about "coping with ambiguity," an expression we hear often today. Change has been part of our field far longer than some are prepared to admit, and others can remember.

To be sure, the world is much different today than in 1971 when Public Administration in a Time of Turbulence was published. The lesson I would like to draw from the continuity of "trends" in public affairs education is that we as scholars and educators must be routinely aware of the connectedness of the present and future to our past. Recognizing the multiple anchors for action help to give our work perspective. As Don Kettl (2001, 213) aptly noted in the
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2001 J-PAE symposium, “The challenge facing public managers is to frame new tactics to manage programs effectively while preserving basic processes of democratic accountability.”

FOCUSING ON FUNDAMENTALS

Don Kettl’s articulation of the challenge facing public affairs educators serves as an appropriate transition to what I see as the fundamental issue before our field today. This issue is civic engagement. During my term as J-PAE editor, I devoted two editorials to aspects of civic engagement. Whether or not you buy into Robert Putnam’s evidence about the erosion of the social capital that has distinguished public life in America, you can believe, as I do, that the quality of American civic life is an important matter and that we may be at risk of qualitative changes that imperil the public in American society.

It might be better to refer to civic engagement as a bundle of issues that confront public affairs educators because it is, indeed, multi-faceted. It includes:

- the preparation of our students for professional lives in democratic systems;
- the nature and experiential character of pedagogy; and
- the extent to which our scholarship is engaged;

Each of these dimensions of civic engagement deserves comment.

Preparation of Students for Professional Lives in Democracies

At the 2003 National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) conference, noted political scientist Benjamin Barber’s plenary address focused on the erosion of the political in our programs. Many factors help to account for the decline of politics in our programs. One is the changing focus of our curricula. As the technical content of public affairs has become more complex, we have responded by adding new technical courses to our curricula, sometimes at the expense of softer subjects like politics. Our programs have also evolved to serve different target audiences (Light, 1999) with inevitable changes in our curricula. A more fundamental change may be the perceived decline in the civic education of students before they reach our undergraduate and graduate programs (Lutkus, Weiss, Campbell, Mazzeo, and Lazer, 1999). The consequence of these and other developments is that our graduates are both less motivated and less adept in the political realm than they once were.1

As public affairs educators, we can contribute to reversing trends that potentially undermine the foundations of our democratic system. One role involves how we prepare our students to engage citizens. Citizen participation is one of the hallmarks of American democracy. Administrative institutions can be formidable obstacles to citizen engagement, and the public officials that populate these institutions may, intentionally or unintentionally, be viewed as antidemocratic. We need to develop a better grasp of how government institutions can engage citizens, how we balance expert and popular concerns, and how government and voluntary organizations build and destroy trust.

We also need to explore how our curricula and program climate, de facto, shape future public affairs professionals. What signals do our programs send about citizen engagement? Furthermore, we need to explore strategies for teaching public affairs students about citizen participation that are effective for shaping future administrative behavior.

Another avenue we should explore is how to increase the civic and political content of the more technical parts of our curriculum. For example, if our statistics courses are now taught primarily as a series of formulas, how can we reconnect these courses to civic and political content so that students appreciate the larger institutional identity of our profession?

Some of our colleagues have thought carefully about these issues, and we should give their ideas attention. Harry Boyte, codirector of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship at the University of Minnesota, argues that we should reconceive our understanding of politics to realign it with a classic Aristotelian meaning rather than the modern meanings it has acquired. His forthcoming book (Boyte, 2004), Everyday Politics, provides a foundation for how we might approach politics in our classrooms.
and how we might attach politics to a skill set that we can transmit to our students. Scholars at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching (Ehrich, Colby, Beaumont, and Stephens, 2003) are studying pedagogies of civic and political engagement for insights into how we can reconnect our students with the civic and political. We need to join these reformers in the search for ways of remediating the disengagement and political illiteracy of our students.

Nature and Experiential Character of Pedagogy

As I embarked upon my career in the early 1970s, I was impressed by a biography of the great historian Frederick Jackson Turner (Billington, 1973). Turner was a contemporary and colleague of Woodrow Wilson, William Rainey Harper, and other prominent academics of his era. Although Turner was the most influential historian of his era, he did not retreat to the ivory tower. He would routinely join students he was supervising in the field. This was not only in an era before Motel 6, but before the automobile as well. Although my admiration for the hardships Turner endured as a teacher was colored, no doubt, by the modern standards to which I was accustomed, his dedication and hands-on involvements with both his students and their subject matter struck me as desirable relationships among teacher, students, and subject matter.

What is the status of our relationships today with our students and our subject matter? Although I have not formally studied the relationships of public affairs faculty with their students and subject matter, my sense is that this is an arena in our field that has been quite stable for an extended period of time. I attended my first NASPAA conference in 1977 and have returned to these conferences regularly. My personal experience of the discussions and presentations at the conferences is that pedagogy and faculty-student relationships are a very stable area, one in which the field has changed only incrementally in the past quarter century. One indicator of stability is that the Public Service Internship Guidelines adopted in the year I attended my first NASPAA conference remain the guidelines that appear on the NASPAA (2004) Web site.

In the wider academy, pedagogy and the role of faculty has been the object of ferment and debate during the past fifteen years (Boyer, 1990; Bringle, Games, and Malloy, 1999; Schön, 1995). How shall we interpret the calm and stability in public affairs education amid the turmoil in the academy around us? Have we reached an ideal state long before our peers in other fields, or are we just slow to respond to a changing world around us? As a field, we should begin to discern answers to these questions so that we are prepared for our roles and pedagogies.

The nature and experiential character of our pedagogy can also have telling consequences for civic engagement. Students learn about the civic and moral responsibilities of citizenship in our classrooms, in cocurricular experiences, and in the behaviors we model for them. How committed are we to the values we espouse in our classrooms? A direct indicator of personal commitment is the model we offer our students and our communities. What roles do we play in community life? We might not be expected to perform extraordinary acts, but we must model a credible commitment to what we teach. Closer to home, what signals do we send through our classroom conduct and organization?

Another dimension of pedagogy and civic engagement is where we spend our instructional time. Do we spend too much time in the classroom given what it is we need to accomplish with our students? Do we need to enrich our curricula beyond the traditional internships and projects to which we have become accustomed? Given the scope of the contextual trends referred to above, we may need to envision a far different public affairs education than the one with which we have been complacent for so long.

Extent to Which Our Scholarship Is Engaged

Our scholarship is integral to our civic engagement. Boyer's (1990) Scholarship Reconsidered identified not only the scholarship of discovery, which has been our standard for scholarship for so long, but also the scholarship of integration, application, and teaching. As a benchmark for our engagement, we might inquire about our attention to these alternative forms of scholarship. How comfortable are we
at putting knowledge into perspective, applying knowledge to problems, and transforming and extending knowledge in our teaching? Even if we confine our attention to the scholarship of discovery, to what extent is our research connected with and meaningful to audiences that make a difference in people's lives?

**Future Directions for Public Affairs Education Research**

If I were to develop a full-blown list of compelling research questions, then civic engagement would lead that list. Rather than regaling you with my list of “most compelling research questions,” I prefer to provide some heuristics, a meta-theory, to guide the identification of important questions and research strategies for public affairs education. My approach to defining and pursuing the agenda makes it relatively open-ended, but the approach is more reasonable than trying to define the question or limiting choices in a plural field. Aside from looking at my suggestions as heuristics for important research questions and strategies, you might look at some of these heuristics simply as “rules for good J-PAE articles.”

Let me begin with the definition of the building blocks for the meta-theory. These building blocks address three key questions for a research agenda: what, who and how:

- What are the units of analysis?—that is, learners, instructors, courses, programs, professions, society
- Who should pursue the research agenda?
- How?—that is, which methods are most appropriate?

**Some Heuristics**

*The most important research questions are those that involve the intersection of units of analysis.* I may be hard pressed to demonstrate this proposition empirically, but it appeals to me intuitively. Research that is confined to a single unit of analysis is typically descriptive. Studies geared to the single unit of analysis often focus on elementary questions, for example, what types of learners populate our programs or what types of information technology courses we teach. Although it is frequently helpful to know this information and such research may be necessary as a precondition for asking more sophisticated questions, many studies focusing on a single unit of analysis add little value to our missions as educators.

The most powerful questions we can ask involve the intersection of units of analysis. Assessment questions, for instance, typically involve the intersection of units of analysis. They focus on the influence of instructors on learners, programs on professions, professions on society. Issues of assessment range widely in our field, from mission-based accreditation to program reviews to methods to assess and facilitate student learning. We have a great deal more to learn about assessment.

As a field, we have reached the juncture at which we should be looking hard at the status or our profession in society. We know that the markets for our MPs and MPPs are much different from what they once were (Light, 1999). We also know that the discretion accorded our graduates may be much wider than the historic norm. But what are the larger consequences of these changes for the identity of our degree holders and, more generally, for public affairs professionals in society? Looking back again to my formative days as a young academic, I think of Frederick Mosher’s (1968) influential and illuminating *Democracy and the Public Service* and wonder where its contemporary equivalents are, particularly from members of our field.

A related, cross-unit issue about which we should be thinking carefully is the changing nature of faculty roles. *American Academic Culture in Transformation* (1998) charts changes in political science, economics, philosophy, and literary studies since World War II. It would be worthwhile for public affairs faculty to produce similar research and reflection about their roles. As a field, we need to move beyond the simple debates about the relative virtues of “academics” versus “pracademics.” In general, we should assess how academic life is changing and how we need to adapt so that academic life continues to satisfy both students and the professoriate.
Comparative research should be the standard for our scholarship. As editor of J-PAE, I continually struggled to find ways to shift research from single to multiple case designs. I recognize that, for research that uses our teaching or program content as grounding, the path of least resistance is to write up a good idea we implement or an innovation we introduce and submit the manuscript to J-PAE. We can learn far more, however, when we compare several units.

I have no solution for eliminating the convenience that we inevitably attach to the single case study. We need to reflect, however, on how antiquated our reliance on a single case study has become in light of the Internet, email, and two-way interactive television, not to mention older technologies like long-distance telephone. Inertia is obviously one reason why we have not undertaken more cross-program studies, consortia projects, and the like; however, there is more to our failure to get beyond our own surroundings than inertia. I am struck by the irony of our current interest in networks—that is, the less hierarchical, multisectoral, and more geographically dispersed relationships and organizational forms to which I referred earlier—and our own inability to change our modus operandi. One way to change the way we operate would be to take seriously the next heuristic.

The research agenda is not merely the domain of individual scholars, but the responsibility of programs, schools, and associations. The burden for most public affairs education research has fallen to individual researchers. Only in recent years have we seen the obligation (I use this word intentionally) spread to programs and schools—in the form of assessment activities—and associations. NASPAA now supports a research journal on public affairs education. NASPAA has not yet defined a larger role for itself, as have some peer associations. The American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB), for example, has from time to time facilitated large-scale studies of the direction of business education.

We need to find new champions for important research about public affairs education. One obvious champion, as I imply above, is NASPAA. We can add other associations to this list. The Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management, which has about 100 institutional members, is another candidate for playing a larger institutional role in public affairs education research. The American Planning Association (APA), the Urban Affairs Association (UAA), and the Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs (APSIA) are also candidates for sharing this obligation, either individually or, perhaps more appropriately, collectively.

The associations that represent faculty and schools could play an important role in finding support for important education-related research. They can do much more, however. NASPAA, for example, with the help of the U.S. General Accounting Office, is seeking to resurrect its Fellows Program, which for many years was an important instrument for civic engagement and university-government partnerships.

Schools and programs must also take up the task of helping to build knowledge about public affairs education. Public affairs faculty and their leadership must ask themselves what they are doing as academic units to support important research about the field. Schools and programs must ask the question: How do our rules, rewards, and organizational practices support or impede the advancement of knowledge about public affairs education?

Methodological pluralism should be the norm, but investigators must choose more rigorous methods over less rigorous methods if they are feasible. As editor of the Journal of Public Affairs Education, I frequently encountered manuscripts that cried out for more rigorous research. What was disconcerting was that the investigator's confidence in his/her conclusions could have been enhanced with small investments in more rigorous methods. We do ourselves a disservice if the standards we apply to our research about education and teaching are lower than the standards for our other research endeavors. That mindset is a sure formula for marginalizing the scholarship of teaching and education. At the same time, we need to accept a wide variety of research methods. Rigor is not the only criterion for making methodological choices, but it should be one of them.
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Research questions that address issues peculiar to the field should be preferred to those shared with other fields and disciplines. The implication of this generalization is that we not reinvent the wheel. If good research is being done in other fields, then we should try to put it to use in our own. The replication of research done elsewhere can be valuable, but it may also be unnecessary.

All stakeholders in public affairs education, regardless of their technical research skills, can embrace Donald Schön’s model of the reflective practitioner. I want to conclude on a point that affirms all of our roles, whether we formally do research or spend most of our academic lives in alternative pursuits: regardless of how we differentiate our roles among research, teaching, and service, we can pursue these roles as inquiry.

In an assessment of the implications of Boyer's (1990) new scholarship, Schön (1995) acknowledged the conflict between prevailing norms of technical rationality in the academy and what he considered the imperative of the new scholarship. Schön associates the new epistemology closely with Lewin's action research in which both reflection-in-action and reflection on reflection-in-action are precursors for generating practical knowledge. Schön (1995, 34) describes the epistemology in these terms:

The epistemology appropriate to the new scholarship must make room for the practitioner's reflection in and on action. It must account for and legitimize not only the use of knowledge produced in the academy, but the practitioner’s generation of actionable knowledge in the form of models or prototypes that can be carried over, by reflective transfer, to new practice situations. In order to legitimize the new scholarship, higher education institutions will have to learn organizationally to open up the prevailing epistemology so as to foster new forms of reflective action research. This, in turn, requires building up communities of inquiry capable of criticizing such research and fostering its development.

My earlier call for methodological pluralism means my position differs from Schön’s, but I appreciate the value of an alternative epistemology and the communities of inquiry that accompany it. I believe that both the alternative epistemology and the learning communities that support it can add a great deal to our search for knowledge about public affairs education. My hope is that J-PAE will have continued to be an important contributor to the search for knowledge in public affairs education when we look back again on the occasion of its twentieth anniversary.

NOTES

1. Although I do not develop the case here, I believe that political skills and analyses are important requisites for effective action, regardless of context. Businesses look upon politics as a dirty word, but political skills are as important in commercial organizations as they are in public and nonprofit settings. See Porter, Angle, and Allen (2003).

2. George Frederickson (2004) noted in his essay in the April issue how rare serious reflections about the state of public affairs education have been over the years, citing the 1967 Honey Report as the primary such undertaking in the history of the field.

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