

NASPAA PRESIDENT'S ADDRESS
Annual Meeting, Washington, DC
October 19, 2001

The Changing Public Affairs Community
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NASPAA is an organization that matters to me, so I am very pleased to have been asked to serve as President. I want to thank you all for coming to this conference and to acknowledge that traveling at all, let alone to D.C., is not easy for many of us these days. We aren't used to thinking about coming to a NASPAA conference as a high-risk activity (although in the past four years I've been through a hurricane in Miami and a traffic accident in Boise). Your presence is a real statement of your commitment to this organization and to the field.

I want to talk to you today about some of the challenges facing both the practice and the teaching of public administration and public affairs that have helped shape my priorities for the coming year and that are shaping the planning for next year's conference in Los Angeles.

I have been spending a fair amount of time thinking about two challenges and two concepts. One challenge is long term and ongoing: the changes in the role and structures of government world wide, roughly subsumed under the title "the New Public Management." The other, more immediate, challenge is the events of the past month or so. The two concepts are values especially public service values, and "value-added," which I use broadly to refer to the value-added of our programs both for our individual students and for the community.

First, the longer-term challenge. It is no news to anyone in this room that there has been a dramatic change, spanning over 20 years, that has led both to diminished popular support for government and to a reduced role for government. I could spend several hours dissecting the multiple causes of these changes, from the rise of public choice theory to the collapse of Communism. But it is clear that, at least at the national level in the United States, there is no viable "left." Even leaders of the Democratic Party now avoid being branded "liberals," and the Clinton administration only accelerated the process of shrinking the size of the federal government and outsourcing as much as possible. When we were facing the prospect of record budget surpluses, putting some of that money into rebuilding government or rewarding government workers was not even on the radar screen.

At the same time, within the United States, we have seen the growth of single-issue advocacy organizations, as well as lobbyists for industry, who appear at times to dominate the process for determining policy and allocating resources.

But while the federal government has been contracting out more, it has also been pushing more down to the level of the states, so the picture at the state and local level is more complex. One colleague recently pointed out to me that there are more governments in the United States now than there were 20 years ago, and we continue to make new ones at a fairly rapid rate. What is clear is that the responsibility for delivering and serving the public good is no longer the exclusive domain of government. Rather, the operative term is “governance,” in which governments at all levels, nonprofit organizations, and the private sector work together in partnerships that blur sectoral lines.

World wide, reformers have been following the models of Australia and New Zealand, changing radically the structures of government and the reward systems, especially for top leaders. And, in the international sphere, we are witnessing a diminished role of the nation-state, as power moves to supranational organizations, most dramatically the European Union, most controversially the World Bank and the World Trade Organization. At the same time, the rapid growth of the NGO sector and the development of transnational issue organizations or networks, aided by modern technology, have also changed the face of international policy making.

In fact, technology is changing so rapidly that it is very hard to assess its current effects on organizations, on culture and communication, and on our sense of ourselves as global citizens, let alone predict its possible future effects, positive and negative.

None of this is new. We have been tracking and analyzing these trends for years. But I’m not sure we have done as well as we need to in addressing the implications of these changes for our academic programs. What does it mean when, as Paul Light has shown, the majority of people doing “government work” at the federal level are not, in fact, government employees? Light talked about the shadow of government and documented convincingly its growing size and importance (Light, 1999a). We also know from Light (1999b), and from tracking the career paths of our own alumni, that one consequence of this new, more complex, political reality is that no longer are we just educating people for stable careers in public service. Our graduates go where the action is— not necessarily where the money is (although that’s sometimes the case), but where they feel the meaningful work is. That means they often pursue careers that cross levels of government and sectors. I, for one, don’t think that is a bad thing; it’s a logical trend that reflects the current reality. But what are the implications for our academic programs?

Implications for Our Academic Programs

That takes me to the value-added concept. We know that we compete not only with each other but with other professional schools, especially business and law schools, but we are far less known by the general public. And we are not a true profession, as law is, since neither formal training nor formal accreditation is needed for entry into our field. So how do we make the case for the MPA or related degrees, in this new, complex reality? Value-added at the individual level means our education provides students with what they need to succeed in this complex environment. And prospective students need to believe we

provide that added value, or they will go elsewhere. It also should mean, I believe, that we add value to society—to our communities and to the public good.

That challenge may be greater because of the changes I mentioned. Many of our programs were designed in simpler times to reflect the skills and knowledge needed for working within government. While many schools have added courses on nonprofit management, I have found surprisingly little research or teaching that explicitly crosses sectors or prepares students, in some formal way, for the experience of working in multiple sectors.

In making the case for our programs, I focus on three areas: skills, knowledge, and values.

Skills

I don't want to wade into the longstanding debate about whether management skills are generic or sector-specific. But many basic management skills, such as budgeting, planning, and human resources management, are, to a great extent, transferable across sectors. And the policy analysis skills we provide are often similarly transferable. But do future managers need different skills to prepare for managing contracts, rather than managing people—for coordinating rather than directly delivering public goods?

Knowledge

Where we start to diverge from business schools is in providing knowledge, or perhaps more correctly, understanding, of the political and legal environment in which we manage. It is here where we really need to make sure that our curriculum reflects the current reality of the complex interrelationships of government, business, and nonprofits, including issues of accountability and of ethics.

Values

Finally, we are very different from business schools in the values we espouse. I talk frequently about the value of public service, broadly defined. By that I mean that our graduates do work that is socially meaningful and that contributes to our communities, across sectors. I remember when I first came to the field of public administration, hearing colleagues speak with real disdain for business. The idea that we, or our graduates, are pure but poor, and that business people are only in it for the money and are willing to sell out the environment or the workers for a profit is a dangerous caricature at a time when we need to encourage partnerships of government, business leaders, and nonprofits to address a range of social issues.

At the same time, students do self-select into our programs rather than into the business schools in part because of values, because they already know that they want to make a difference. How we build on and reinforce those values, and the tools we give our students to help them live those values in a range of settings, will be a major factor in

determining the value-added of our programs, for our graduates, for the organizations that employ them, and for the broader community.

In all three of these areas, of skills, knowledge, and values, we need to look at our curricula and texts to make sure they are really relevant for the careers of today and tomorrow. I am helping to organize a conference this spring on integrating ethics into the curriculum, and so I pulled out several of the standard ethics texts, and the great majority of examples, both of individual ethical dilemmas and of the ethics of policy choice, focus on actors inside government. We aren't even doing a good job of explaining conflict of interest yet alone of addressing the tough ethical and values challenges in the new environment.

As we work to strengthen our curricula, I think we also need to find ways to make a better case for the MPA degree to our various constituencies, and I am appointing a committee to help NASPAA work with its member schools to get the word out about the MPA degree. NASPAA staff have already started to work on this, and we welcome your thoughts and participation in this effort.

Implications of 9/11

Let me turn to the current situation. It's hard to even know where to start in talking about the tragic events of the past month. I think we are still in the early stages of grief, and it's very hard to say what the longer-term effects will be both nationally and internationally. Certainly, there is a loss of innocence, of our sense of safety and security, which will not fade quickly. Nationally, we are already facing tough debates about the costs we are willing to bear in the loss of civil liberties as we fight terrorism. We should also probably be talking more than we are about the failure of our intelligence agencies.

It is too early to say with any certainty what the effects will be for our schools and programs. Are some of the things we are seeing short-term reactions, or are we really at an abrupt turning point? Surveys are showing a dramatic upsurge in trust in government and in support for the President. There are reports of a sharp increase in applicants for work at the CIA. And we see a new definition of heroism in our popular culture, not the pop music and sports stars, but public servants and citizens who acted altruistically in the face of danger. That may be the strongest possible antidote to the cynical assumptions of self-interestedness that have been pervasive in our culture of late.

Perhaps one of the most important reactions to the events, and one that I hope is a lasting trend, is a strengthening of the sense of community, both within our local or regional communities and nationally. We are focusing less on what divides us, politically, demographically, and socially, and more on the core values that we share as a nation. That is, on balance, a plus, and it may lead to some different conclusions about the meaning of social capital today. It may also lead to some different ways of thinking about diversity, in a world of international mobility of people as well as of ideas, and in a world where there are no majorities. And these should be reflected in our teaching about the nature of civil society.

That sense of community extends to the international context, as well. We have learned to what extent we are not an island. We have seen how our openness makes us vulnerable. But we have also come to understand how much we rely on the international community in responding to this crisis. It's important that we give our students an understanding of both the positive and negative effects of globalization and of the international community and our role in it.

The recent and ongoing events also pose a special challenge for us as teachers. It's our role to help students to understand these events, to place them in perspective, and to approach them analytically, and not just emotionally. That's not easy. It requires in-depth knowledge in a range of fields in which most of us are not expert. And it isn't always easy to stand back from our own emotional responses. At the conference I mentioned about incorporating ethics into the curriculum, we are planning a workshop on how to teach to current events—in effect, how to use a breaking issue as a case for analysis.

One of the ways we can address this and other current issues is by learning from practice. In addition to case analysis, that may include bringing practitioners into the classroom as guests or as adjuncts. It may also, in some contexts, include service learning activities. And the internship requirement for our programs becomes particularly important for understanding how organizations respond under stress and uncertainty.

We are all doing our best to cope in this rapidly changing and uncertain environment. NASPAA provides a wonderful place for us to come together as an intellectual community committed both to teaching and to research, and to learn from each others' experiences. I have asked Kathleen Beatty to chair the Program Committee for next year's convention, which will take place in Los Angeles, and to help create the forum for discussing some of the issues I have raised. I look forward to working with all of you in the coming year.

References

- Light, Paul. 1999a. *The True Size of Government*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.
- Light, Paul. 1999b. *The New Public Service*. Washington, D.C.: The Brookings Institution.