From the Guest Editor—Undergraduate Education in Public Administration: Looking Backward, Going Forward

A long time ago, back when I was working on two undergraduate degrees in the mid-1970s in what feels like a galaxy far, far away—although it was only at the University of California—my impression and experiences were that the public administration field was coalescing around a pattern not dissimilar to that found in business administration. That is, there was support and room at the public administration table for everyone—from practitioners working in the field to those who sought to improve the professionalism of said practitioners to those working with its students from the community colleges and the undergraduate bachelor’s programs as well as the master’s and the doctoral programs.

Today, I find myself in a world where we find the field is defined by the MPA. Our national association is dominated by a handful of large research universities with full-time day programs, even though most of its members (and their students) are smaller schools with part-time, in-service night programs. Undergraduate education itself has even been listed as inappropriate (NAASPA, 2011), as the association wavers between indifference and downright hostility toward the whole concept of undergraduate education in public administration, not to mention the programs and schools involved.

The whole idea of this special issue is to focus on undergraduate education in public administration, in large part to try and understand where we are, and how we got here.

And where are we today? At a recent undergraduate open house attended by a gym-sized sea of eager high school seniors and their parents, I asked, “How many of you have heard of business administration?” Virtually every hand went up. “How many are thinking of it as a possible major?” A third to one half of the hands arose. So far, so good. Then I asked, “How many of you have heard of public administration?” A smattering of parental hands went up, but no students’ hands were raised.

According to recent U.S. Census data (2011), the federal government employs about 2.8 million people while the nation’s 89,000-plus state and local governments employ around another 16.6 million, for a total of over 19 million people. Add another third as many again in various quasi-governmental agencies and nonprofit organizations, and you have 25 million people in total working in the governmental and nonprofit sectors across some 120,000 entities. To support this public and nonprofit management sector, our current approach to public management has led us to less than 100 bachelor’s programs turning out a couple of thousand students each year. Over on the business management side of things, some 2,000-plus programs graduate over 335,000 new undergraduate business majors each year, or some 20% or so of all college graduates in the country.

Now, no one is saying business management education is perfect at either the graduate or the undergraduate level. In fact, the Carnegie Foundation for the
Advancement of Teaching has been studying the state of undergraduate education in business. A book about their findings, out in June, is titled *Rethinking Undergraduate Business Education: Liberal Learning for the Profession* (Colby, Ehrlich, Sullivan, & Dolle, 2011). A key point is the authors’ premise that an undergraduate degree in business is a form of professional preparation, on a par with that of other professions such as engineering, medicine, and the law; their aim is how to improve it. Here on the public administration side of the house, we see public administration/management as a profession only for those who wandered one way or another into a career in public or nonprofit service with some degree or another and then, somehow, come knocking on the door of an MPA program.

Let’s take engineering as an example. Engineers of all types, whatever their area of expertise, practice their profession somewhere. In recognition of this, business schools have worked with engineering schools to offer a dual major in both business and engineering and also to create a minor for their students. An example of the latter is the University of Virginia’s School of Engineering and Applied Sciences. Its faculty see providing both engineering and for-profit management to their students as being of high value, stating: “This minor provides students with the opportunity to learn how modern business organizations function and to acquire the concepts and language they will need to be effective in the corporate world” (University of Virginia, 2011). At the same time, while hundreds of thousands of engineers work in the public sector, the public administration profession has not seen any value in a double major or even a minor in public administration to provide students with the opportunity to learn how modern governmental organizations function and to acquire the concepts and language they will need to be effective in the public sector. The same, of course, is true for virtually every other profession we know; their practitioners are found working throughout the public sector, yet never do we consider how an undergraduate major or minor in public administration would have benefited them and their employers.

Undergraduate students today, whether in business or public administration, are frequently some of the best and most widely educated students on any campus. They complete the same breadth of general education, communication, humanities, and science courses as do other majors. They are involved in the same wide range of campus activities, travel, and study abroad. Like other professionals, they learn to be good decision makers, problem solvers, and communicators. They are also taught to use the qualitative and quantitative tools our professionals in the for-profit, not-for-profit, and governmental sectors use on a daily basis. They learn to study and analyze the world around them; they develop situational awareness and the ability to work as part of a team. And, perhaps more so in public administration/management, they are taught to think ethically and to see their work as part of the bigger whole that involves the well-being of our society and our nation altogether. In the end, the quality of their education, as with every undergraduate major, is no lower or higher than the standards we set for them.
This special issue thus begins with a piece by Eleanor Laudicina. Eleanor is well known as one of the foremost stateswomen in our field. From her firsthand experiences, she walks us through how things have changed over time in her piece, “Remembrance of Things Past: NASPAA and the Future of Undergraduate Education.” As we find ourselves and our programs today doing more with less, running just to stay in place, this article gives us a chance to learn about our roots and take a moment to stop and look back.

Next up, George Dougherty builds on the topic of undergraduate education, looking at how it compares to graduate education today, how it fits into the grand design of public administration as a profession, and how it is deserving of a field of study and degrees in “A Place for Undergraduate Public Administration.”

The remaining three pieces each offer interesting insights into varying aspects of undergraduate education in public administration:

Mete Yildiz, Mehmet Akif Demircioğlu, and Cenay Babaoğlu add some international flavor as we see how things are being done in Turkey, which has been greatly influenced by American instruction, in “Teaching Public Policy to Undergraduate Students: Issues, Experiences, and Lessons in Turkey.” These authors also talk about how the study of public policy has evolved in Turkey and where they think Turkish policy studies should go.

In “Public Service and Social Responsibility: A Role for Public Affairs in Undergraduate Business Education,” Aimee Williamson shows the linkage between public administration and undergraduate business education, something the business schools have been promoting for a long while.

Finally, Menno Fenger and Vincent Homburg, in “The Studio Approach in Public Administration Teaching: Bringing Coherence and Practice Into the Curriculum,” discuss a major curriculum redesign in a large European public administration program. They talk about the rationale for the redesign and describe their efforts to link the course content with professional practices.

I have been a major supporter of JPAE since the concept of a NASPAA-sponsored journal was first discussed some 20 years ago. JPAE came about, in the words of James Perry, “to legitimate the scholarship of teaching and make a public case about [faculty] pedagogy, experiences and insights.” My academic origins stem from a business school background where the idea of discussing management education at the graduate and undergraduate levels was a given. I was also fortunate to have been at a place, the University of Washington, that housed excellent schools of both Business and Public Affairs and that allowed me to compare, contrast, and complete doctoral studies in both areas.

To this day, sharing andragogical experiences and insights in its contents, is in my view, one of the greatest values of JPAE. But, from time to time, we also need to look at the bigger picture of what we are doing as a field and as an association, and why; there is much we can learn from looking at what other professions are doing in terms of undergraduate education, including business—hence this
special symposium. I also believe that the pieces we have assembled here do an excellent job in focusing our attention on the overlooked and underappreciated part of not just our past, but our present and our future.

Our current situation vis-à-vis undergraduate education has largely marginalized the field of public administration and its impacts on public and nonprofit organizations, let alone the nation as a whole. The groundswell of support for public service that followed September 11, and to a lesser extent the election of President Obama, have come and gone; and we did nothing. Only a concentrated effort by a new generation of academic leaders can bring a brighter and more engaging future for public administration/management, and it will start or stall based on what we do at the undergraduate level.

Finally, two groups of people must be recognized for all their hard work on the journal. First are those on the editorial staff. The concept and approval of an issue looking at undergraduate education began under the help and guidance of then editor Heather Campbell. When Heather stepped down, Kristen Norman-Major and David Schultz ably took over. But we should not forget Jeffrey Callen, who had remained as editorial assistant and served as the bridge between the two camps in keeping the journal moving forward. Lisa Dejoras of Hamline University is the new editorial assistant taking Jeffrey’s place.

Also due much credit are those who have slogged with me in the trenches of NASPAA’s Section on Undergraduate Education for many years. Always overworked, usually overlooked, my comrades in arms through the 7:00 a.m. meetings, last conference day panels, and broken promises who have helped to keep the flame of undergraduate education in public administration burning through some torrential administrative rains: People like Carolyn Ball, George Dougherty, Ken Nichols, and Bob Roquemore, thanks to you all.

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References


Craig Poulenez Donovan has been the director of the BA/MPA Honors Program at Kean University since 1994, where he serves as a part of the College of Business and Public Management. Recognized as Teacher of the Year in 2003, Professor Donovan has a long history as an advocate for public service overall and for public administration at the undergraduate level. He has served in a variety of roles with the American Society for Public Administration and NASPAA. The author of numerous academic and practitioner oriented books and articles, his doctoral work in both Business and Public Affairs was completed as a University of Washington Presidential Scholar. He earned a master’s at San Francisco State University, where he also completed a graduate program in College Teaching and Administration.