Emergency Management, Homeland Security, and Public Administration—from the Field to the Classroom: An Introduction to the Symposium

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Emergency management, and lately homeland security, is at its core public management. The skills forged in the crucible of crises are well suited to a broad range of public management situations and career paths other than that of Emergency Manager (or Homeland Security director). An appropriate career path for an emergency manager is to move “upward” to positions of more responsibility such as city manager or chief administrative officer (CAO). In some communities, city managers and CAOs eventually seek elected office, bringing with them a deeper understanding of how communities can mitigate, prepare for, respond to, and recover from disasters.

“Emergency management is the management of risk so that societies can live with environmental and technical hazards and deal with the disasters that they cause” (Waugh, 2000, p. 3). The lessons brought from field research can play an important role in educating future public managers, even those who do not seek to specialize directly in emergency management or homeland security.

For many years, the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) Section on Emergency and Crisis Management (SECM) has actively fostered a nexus between disaster-related scholarship and mainstream public administration theory and practice. A quick review of the programs at recent ASPA, Southeastern Conference of Public Administration (SECoPA), and Northeastern Conference of Public Administration (NECoPA) conferences shows a broad range of papers related to emergency management and homeland security and panels directly related to public administration theory and practice. The 2013 ASPA national conference has a hazard/disaster-related overall conference theme of “Governance & Sustainability: Local Concerns, Global Challenges.” All are indicators of the long-term success of SECM’s efforts to tightly integrate emergency management and public management.
Many public administration courses have integrated lessons learned from disasters even though not specifically directed at emergency management students. They offer appropriate lessons for a broad range of public managers. Before 9/11 and Katrina, many of us read or used “The Blast in Centralia No. 5: A Mine Disaster No One Stopped” by John Bartlow Martin, included in Richard Stillman’s classic public administration overview textbook (Stillman, 2010). “Crisis management” and “disaster policy” can be offered as modules in leadership or policy courses respectively, or even as entire courses within a public administration program. Education in decision making can be honed through real-world examples of uncertainty and ambiguity. Intergovernmental relations courses can include lessons from disasters, or can be offered with a single focus on the complexities of intergovernmental relations during and post-disaster. The service-learning requirement of public administration programs can be linked closely to emergency management and homeland security.

In late 2011, SECM invited a group of active members to present their views of how they moved important lessons from their field research to their classrooms. A broad range of proposals were submitted, and the top ones were selected for presentation at an SECM-sponsored panel at the 2012 national ASPA conference in Las Vegas. The three articles in this symposium provide cutting-edge examples and practices from scholars whose research focuses on emergency management and homeland security issues, but also integrate the lessons from their research into their mainstream public administration courses.

Stewart and Vocino begin the issue by addressing the role of higher education in meeting the demands of a rapidly increasing market for public managers skilled in securing the homeland and managing the consequences of attacks and disasters. In the wake of 9/11 and Hurricane Katrina, homeland security and emergency management programs enjoyed exponential growth across the spectrum of community colleges, baccalaureate, and graduate programs. However, this explosive growth has been characterized by the failure to identify common competencies within the broad fields of homeland security. Although this lack of common competencies has been long identified as a problem in the field, only recently have scholars and practitioners been systematically meeting to identify and agree upon basic standards for program graduates at all levels of higher education. The authors provide some important and sorely needed research-based guidelines for the establishment of common standards for disaster and hazard-related programs.

Kapucu and Knox continue with a discussion of the integration of service learning into emergency management education programs. Their research shows that a significant number of emergency management programs incorporate service learning into their curriculums, yet many face challenges in doing so. The authors capably support the importance of service learning as a pedagogical tool, and they
provide a framework for integrating service learning into emergency management degree and certificate programs throughout the United States. They conclude with several sound recommendations for effectively implementing service learning into emergency management and homeland security curricula.

Comfort and Wukich conclude the symposium by examining the important challenge presented by trying to “teach” students to make effective decisions under conditions of uncertainty. They argue that the ability to comprehend a process for making sound decisions requires the student to move beyond the traditional learning paradigm. The authors stress that students must understand, recognize, and minimize risk, a challenge for the classroom environment. They suggest a system for identifying the skills needed to make such decisions through a curriculum that focuses on elements of administrative process and provide suggestions for their delivery.

As the symposium’s authors have noted, special skill sets are often required of those teaching in such specializations due to the unique problems presented by decision making under conditions of uncertainty. The authors have clearly outlined the most important problems that must be overcome to provide meaningful experiential learning for public administration students.

This symposium addresses many of the important challenges that have emerged due to the rapid growth of emergency management and public administration programs over the past two decades. Academic and professional organizations such as ASPA, NASPAA, IAEM (International Association of Emergency Managers), EMI (Emergency Management Institute), SECM, HSDEC (Homeland Security Defense Education Consortium), and others have started the process, but much work remains to be done to identify and agree upon common standards for homeland security and emergency management specializations.

In early 2011, then ASPA president Erik Bergrud convened an ASPA task force to make recommendations to ASPA as to accrediting homeland security and emergency management programs. I’ve had the privilege of chairing that task force, and we’ll make our recommendations to the ASPA National Council at the 2013 national conference. Still, there are significant obstacles to overcome. Once core standards and competencies have been crafted, it will be essential to examine the best ways to measure those special competencies. For public administration programs, this effort will likely evolve into a role for NASPAA, much like the already existent requirements for specialization in nonprofit management/leadership. It remains to be seen how well homeland security and emergency management programs not based in public administration departments and schools will respond to and accept the new standards. We welcome the challenges, and look to the broadest participation as we move forward.
John J. Kiefer is the director of the Master of Public Administration program at the University of New Orleans, and an associate professor of political science. He is also the immediate past chair of ASPA’s Section on Emergency and Crisis Management. His research and teaching focuses on the development of outcome-focused collaborative networks to create disaster resilience in organizations and communities. He is or has been either principal investigator or a research team member for projects that include elderly evacuation, children’s readiness for disasters, technology initiatives for vulnerable populations, repetitive flood loss mitigation, disaster resiliency studies, and a disaster-resilient university. He has published in numerous journals, including *Public Administration Review, Public Works Management and Policy*, and *Journal of Emergency Management*. His first book, *Natural Hazard Mitigation*, co-edited with Alessandra Jerolleman, was recently published.