# Beyond Budgeting: Public-Service Financial Education in the 21st Century

Robert M. Purtell
*State University of New York at Albany*

James W. Fossett
*State University of New York at Albany*

Abstract
This paper addresses a growing mismatch between the business problems confronting public and nonprofit employees, and the financial analysis and management skills commonly taught in graduate programs in public administration and policy. Put simply, it argues that public-service financial education should move beyond its traditional focus on public-sector budgeting and provide a broader range of financial-market, analytic, and management tools that are appropriate to meet the demands of the current public and nonprofit workplace. To assist programs in making the transition, we offer a model for assessing stakeholder needs and designing a 21st-century finance curriculum.

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| *Cecil Graham:* | *What is a cynic?* |
| *Lord Darlington:* | *A man who knows the price of everything and the value of nothing.* |
| *Cecil Graham:* | *And a sentimentalist … is a man who sees an absurd value in everything, and doesn't know the market price of any single thing.* |

*— Oscar Wilde*
*Lady Windemere's Fan*

## Introduction

This paper addresses a growing mismatch between the business problems confronting public and nonprofit agencies, and the financial analysis and management skills commonly taught in graduate programs in public administration and policy. Put simply, it argues that public-service financial education should move beyond its traditional focus on public-sector budgeting and provide a broader range of financial-market, analytic, and management tools that are appropriate to meet the demands of the current public and nonprofit workplace. Public and nonprofit employees frequently have to prepare or review budgets, evaluate investments in personnel or equipment, negotiate the financial terms of contracts for provision of public services, borrow or invest money, propose or set rates to be paid for particular services, regulate financial institutions, and make a variety of other decisions with financial consequences for their organizations and citizens at large. Techniques for evaluating the alternatives and consequences of these decisions are well-established and taught in other professional programs, but are only slowly finding their way into public administration or policy programs. While more than a few programs are beginning to broaden their course offerings beyond budgeting, more than a few have no financial-management requirements at all, and there is little convergence as yet around a definition of the appropriate skill sets that should be required in the public and nonprofit sectors.

This mismatch is well-documented. Beginning with Grizzle (1985), several studies —most recently Moody and Marlow (2009) — have found that the majority of public administration programs continue to focus on budgeting as the dominant topic in their core finance course offerings. Public affairs education has addressed some of the needs of the field, but the types of management challenges facing public affairs graduates have grown more complex and are outstripping the pace of curriculum development.

This paper presents a modest first step toward addressing this deficiency. It makes a more detailed case for enhanced attention to financial analysis and management in the training of both pre-service and in-service students, outlines the topics that might be addressed in such training, and suggests how these topics might be integrated in a curriculum that enhances the financial management skills of public affairs graduates.

## The Case for Financial Analysis

Government accounting and budgeting systems historically have been designed to maximize central control and prevent theft through the use of fund accounting, line item budgeting, and central budget agency control over allocations and transfers (Tyer & Willand, 1997; Mikesell, 2003). The prototypical public manager must finance the activities under his or her supervision from a large number of small “pots” of money dedicated to personnel, equipment, travel, space, and other categories of expenditures. Further, spending in each of these pots is subject to externally imposed ceilings and managers must often obtain external approval to transfers funds between categories. Important elements of program cost may not even be appropriated to agency budgets — fringe benefits, for example, are typically appropriated to a central personnel agency or retirement system. State human service programs that are financed by Medicaid frequently are scored under the Medicaid agency's budget criteria rather than those of the operating department (Fossett, Ebon, & Brier, 1996). Under such a system, it is difficult to identify what these programs actually cost, let alone relate their costs to any reasonable rendering of potential program benefits. Budget reformers repeatedly have called for deregulation of public financial management by (a) dramatically reducing the number of separate appropriations, (b) giving more flexibility to managers, and (c) focusing attention on program results or performance (National Performance Review, 1993; National Commission on State and Local Public Service, 1993). The result of these admonitions — widely labeled as *New Performance Budgeting* — has been to increase reporting for a variety of performance measures without any simplification of the underlying appropriation structure (Forsythe, 2001). Most public budgeting structures and processes do not reward investments in financial analysis and management, and the traditionally short-term focus of political processes may passively discourage the types of analyses needed to measure and manage financial risk.

In Wilde's nomenclature from *Lady Windemere's Fan* (Wilde, 1893), public and nonprofit managers are seen as "sentimentalists" who are focused on their public-service missions, and who regard financial management matters as an unwelcome diversion at best. Investments in sophisticated financial management software, and data collection and auditing for performance- and risk-management systems, typically are seen as low priorities because they are expensive purchases that compete with program services for scarce resources. Requirements for such investments frequently are seen as attempts by budget offices or higher management to find excuses for cutting budgets or building empires. As such, they are viewed as control devices that should be evaded or gamed, rather than taken seriously.

While these structural and cultural obstacles are real, they do not detract from the need for public and nonprofit employees — both inside and outside budget and finance offices — to have a working knowledge of the basics of financial analysis and management. Adequate financial resources are essential to accomplishing almost any public-service mission, and even generalist managers need to have skills for making sensible decisions about where and how to spend money. More particularly, several recent developments place a premium on financial sophistication among those who are managing and delivering public services.

One example is the increasing ubiquity of contracting as a means of delivering a wide range of complex human services, including health care, mental health, child care, job training, and services to the mentally retarded and developmentally disabled. Public agencies increasingly are relying on nonprofit organizations to deliver these services, rather than providing them directly. The contractual arrangements that govern service delivery require considerable financial sophistication by both parties to the contract. Public officials need to know what it costs to deliver services and how to relate spending to the quality of services being supported. Rates need to be reasonable enough to attract an adequate supply of providers who can deliver services of a specified quality at those rates. Nonprofit managers need to know how much it costs their organizations to deliver services and whether it makes sense to commit to particular service standards, given what public agencies are willing to pay for them.

These contractual arrangements steadily have gotten more complex. Contracts that set a specified rate for such easily measured services as hours of contact time or provider qualifications increasingly are being replaced by contracts with payment mechanisms that are more complex and demanding to manage. Nationally, the majority of Medicaid clients are enrolled in some form of managed care, where payments for individual services are replaced by a single capitated payment that covers a large number of services. Other programs are making use of vouchers, or other *consumer-directed* payment mechanisms, where providers must attract enough clients to cover their costs. Still others are moving to *pay-for-performance* contracts, where a portion of payment is contingent on whether contracted agencies meet specified program, process, or outcome goals. In order to achieve the advantages that advocates have claimed for them, these payment mechanisms require both contractors and contractees to have more sophisticated financial understandings than would be needed for traditional contracts. Regrettably, there are numerous examples of programs failing to realize these advantages because of a lack of financial sophistication. More than a few states, for example, set rates for Medicaid managed-care that were too low to attract sufficient interest from managed-care plans to achieve their program goals. As a result, many plans dropped out of Medicaid, and states had to limit the enforcement of service standards in order to keep remaining plans in the program.

A second development that requires more governmental financial sophistication than was the case in the past is the increasing reliance on complex financial instruments and transactions to address a variety of public purposes. In addition to traditional activities such as managing the assets of retirement plans or borrowing money (which in themselves have become more complex), state and local governments more frequently are relying on *securitizing* a wide range of income streams — such as tobacco-settlement income or delinquent loans — and are participating in or overseeing complex financial transactions such as hospital closures and conversions of not-for-profit insurance companies. Evidence of growing complexity also can be seen in the use of sophisticated financing tools such as floating- and auction-rate securities by state and local governments without — some might argue — paying sufficient attention to the risks that these instruments have proven to carry. Other examples are the risks assumed by governments through the use of municipal options and interest-rate swaps. In today's environment, one need not look beyond the performance of pension and endowment funds to see how financial decisions affect the operating environment of governments and nonprofit organizations. By early 2009, public pension plans and nonprofit endowments were reporting losses of 35 percent or more. For governments, this could lead to substantial increases in required annual plan contributions at a time when resources are scarce. Similarly, losses experienced by the endowments of private universities are restricting their ability to sustain historical levels of student support, while portfolio losses are causing nonprofits to struggle to maintain service levels (Zezima, 2009; Seeking Alpha, 2009; Moore, 2009; Hechinger & Levitz, 2009).

Some states are also making major investments to support embryonic stem-cell research, which requires attention to complex royalty finances and a variety of intellectual-property issues. Many states are pursuing aggressive economic-development programs that focus on biotechnology companies (Biotechnology Industry Organization, 2006). The financing structures of such initiatives frequently are complex, requiring states to attract both Federal and state funds as well as venture-capital financing to support their efforts. In some cases, states are choosing to provide loan guarantees and investing pension funds directly to support those efforts (Billingsley & Washko, 2006). States frequently have relied on specialized consulting firms to conduct the complex financial analyses that are required to carry out these activities, but if their staffs are not trained in these areas, governments may find it difficult to understand the level of risk they are assuming, or to evaluate the efficacy of a consultant's work.

To see the potential implications of missteps in this arena, consider the myriad of complex financial transactions involving government and nonprofit entities that have made news in recent months. Jefferson County, Alabama is on the brink of bankruptcy, as a result of what the New York Times described as a "series of exotic bond deals" (Whitmire & Walsh, 2008, p. 1) that government officials admittedly did not understand. Local governments in Florida found themselves cut off from short-term funds after a state investment pool suspended withdrawals — driven by a loss of market liquidity (Grynbaum, 2007). Numerous small towns in Tennessee and elsewhere have come under increased financial pressure due to their use of swaps and other derivatives, which many claim were not adequately explained by the investment banks who sold them (Van Natta, 2009). In late 2007 and continuing into 2008, 13 states announced their intentions to explore the sale of their lotteries to private operators, at the urging of Wall Street bankers. Still others have leased or are considering plans to lease their highways to private operators (Belson, 2008; Basar, 2007). Charities are considering mergers (Strom, 2007), and there is a long history of nonprofit conversions into for-profit enterprises — ranging from HMOs and Blue Cross/

Blue Shield operators, to public and nonprofit hospitals — without compelling evidence of fair-market pricing (Strom, 2007; Purtell, 2008). While none of these activities is inherently wrong, using complex instruments correctly and entering into transactions with significant long-term fiscal implications requires a level of financial sophistication and technical skills that schools of public affairs generally have not included in their programs.

Third, increasing interest in E-government and performance-management systems, among other developments, has created the need for public officials to become sophisticated purchasers of information technology and services. Medicaid agencies, for example, increasingly are relying on sophisticated data-mining techniques for anti-fraud efforts, while law-enforcement agencies are constructing multi-agency "fusion centers" to collate and analyze intelligence that is related to anti-terrorism activities. The amounts of money involved are large — one industry estimate projected that state and local spending on information technology would reach $55 billion by 2008, with a long-term annual growth-rate of 6 to 8 percent beyond 2008 (Merle & Witte, 2006). Governments chronically have underinvested in Information Technology (IT) and frequently are burdened with very old legacy systems that can be extremely expensive to replace. IT investments are difficult to evaluate — both financially and technically — and many government agencies lack the technical and financial skills to make appropriate assessments.

Fourth, non-profit agencies are likely to feel increasing pressure to adopt many of the financial-accountability measures that currently are in place for publicly-traded companies. Nonprofit agencies, for example, are being advised to consider or adopt many of the organizational and procedural reforms mandated for public companies by the Sarbanes Oxley Act (Board Source and Independent Sector, 2008). Nonprofit agencies have many of the same obligations and responsibilities toward donors and funders that private companies have toward their shareholders — assurances that resources provided are being used in a responsible manner— and it is to be expected that nonprofits will feel increasing pressure to adopt more sophisticated financial-reporting and auditing practices.

Governments and nonprofits often look to outside consultants such as investment banks, bond consultants, pension consultants, their accountants, and others to provide them with analyses and advice about these types of transactions. However, even the use of consultants comes with a management burden and the requirement for at least a generalized understanding of managerial and market finance. At the very least, public managers must have sufficient understanding of the processes being evaluated and the analytical techniques being applied, so that they can ask the correct questions, manage the process, and evaluate the quality of advice they receive.

Finally, public-service financial-education should recognize the broader range of positions that program graduates can compete for, and in which they may serve during their careers. Financial education in public administration and policy programs historically has focused on government finances and on preparing students for government jobs — most frequently entry-level positions in budget offices. Some programs have recognized their increasingly important role in training students for careers in nonprofit agencies and have added financial management courses that are geared to nonprofit management. Additionally, credit-rating agencies and the municipal-finance arms of investment banks are turning more and more to graduates of public administration programs to staff their operations. Our program has instituted a concentration in financial-market regulation that has drawn interest and support from the financial community, as well as a variety of regulatory authorities. Further, anecdotal information (e.g., Finkler, 2009) suggests that movement across agencies and sectors also is becoming more common. Today's public and non-profit managers are less likely to spend their careers in one agency and more likely to move between public and non-profit sectors than they did in the past. Public administration students traditionally have not been competitive for positions in financial management outside of budget offices, but could become so with more extensive training. More investment in financial-analysis-and-management education could produce students who are familiar with issues and constraints on both sides of contract negotiations, and prepare students for a broader range of careers.

The case for moving beyond budgeting in public-service financial education seems clear. Public and nonprofit employees increasingly need what have commonly been thought of as "business skills" in order to efficiently manage programs and effectively perform their public-service missions.

We now turn to a detailed consideration of how institutions might identify the skills required by their constituents, and how those skills could be structured to form an integrated, stakeholder-focused curriculum where managerial and market finance are key components.

## Designing a Managerial-Finance Curriculum

In our opinion, a well-designed finance curriculum must build from its core course and contain sufficient integration to mitigate repetition across advanced course offerings. The idea that core courses should be the foundation for future subject-specific study is hardly a new or earth-shattering idea, but it does not appear to be the norm in many public-service finance curricula. Designing the core around a structured knowledge-base mitigates the need for faculty who teach advanced courses to return to the basics at the start of each course to make sure that students can access technical material that forms the core of advanced subject matter. This can significantly reduce redundancy in advanced courses, and enable faculty to extend their depth of coverage and deliver the skill sets that students need to meet real-world challenges.

Beyond providing a basis for advanced study, we argue that financial core-courses must fulfill two other purposes. First, they have to serve the needs of managerial generalists or policy specialists who are unlikely to take additional courses in managerial finance. For this audience, the core course must go beyond the budgeting aspects of managerial finance and include a broader array of planning and analytical tools. We need to prepare students to be informed users of financial information, prudent managers of financial specialists, and informed consumers of financial-advisory services. In essence, they need to be able to ask the right questions, interpret the results, know when to ask for assistance and, on occasion, complete a simple analysis for their own use. Although advanced courses primarily are aimed at students who elect to become finance specialists, experience suggests that a subset of generalists will elect to take select advanced courses. Linking core-course topics to advanced offerings makes that option feasible.

Second, the core course must introduce concepts that form the basis of advanced coursework for those who choose to concentrate their studies and careers in finance. Core courses that meet this objective should include the following components:

- Technical budgeting and budget analysis;
- Time-value–of-money concepts that form the basis for long-term resource and investment decisions, as well as cost/benefit analysis;
- Introductory financial market concepts;
- The elements of resource measurement and control; and
- Enough basic accounting to introduce students to both financial analysis and financial-condition analysis.

These subject areas cover the basics of managerial finance and map directly to the courses that typically are found in catalogues of advanced offerings in public service programs. Finally, at least in our case, the core course must be broad enough in content and focus to serve the needs of both government and nonprofit managers. From our perspective, texts like Finkler (2009),[1] with a minimum of additional readings and cases, provide coverage of the topics we want to cover.

In our proposed curriculum model, advanced coursework builds directly from the core and provides students with a more detailed, more in-depth understanding of the skills sets they will need to succeed in the increasingly complex world that public-service managers face. In addition, several of the skills elements that we include in the core course also provide a foundation for advanced economics coursework.

The curriculum we developed was based on a strategic assessment of our program and the needs of our stakeholders. That analysis indicated that the following advanced topics should be included:

- The politics and process of government budgeting;
- Technical accounting;
- Cost/benefit analysis;
- The structure and workings of bond markets with a special focus on governmental finance;
- Issues related to pension management, including the basics of portfolio theory;
- The application of corporate finance to government and nonprofit situations, including coverage of derivative products, risk management and structured finance;
- Financial analysis for nonprofit managers and financial-condition analysis for government analysts;
- The related topics of price/rate-setting, and techniques of cost measurement and management that provide the basis for both rate-setting exercises and a broad range of other managerial decisions;
- The allied issues of governance and financial control, including performance auditing; and
- An advanced nonprofit finance course that would include revenue generation, grant and contract management, and nonprofit financial reporting in order to comply with NASPAA's new nonprofit management guidelines.

*Figure 1.*
Core Course Elements & Advanced Course Offerings

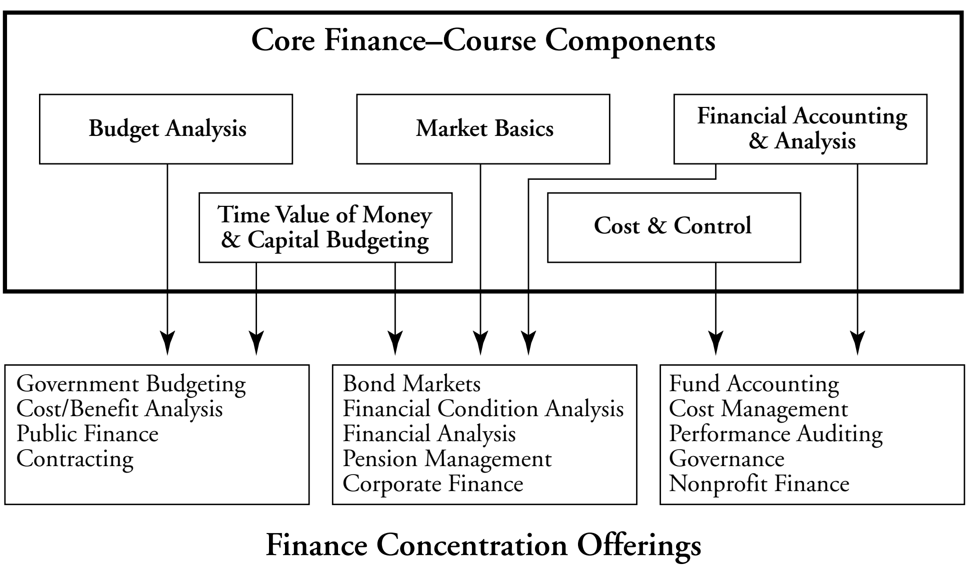


Figure 1 provides a mapping of links between topics covered in the core and those in more advanced courses. The top section of the figure shows the major components of our core course. Topics in each of the three boxes below represent either standalone course offerings — as is the case for cost-management and fund-accounting courses — or elements of courses, as is the case for our financial-market course. This course includes elements of corporate finance, pension management, and the mathematics and functioning of bond markets. Although a complete description of the core course components and how they relate to advanced course offerings would excessively lengthen this paper, it may be useful to illustrate these linkages for two broad topics.

One of the central concepts in finance is the measurement and management of resources. Cost measurement and management are critical skills on both sides of the contracting process. As noted earlier, contract managers should be aware of the rates required to attract sufficient providers of contracted services, and nonprofit service providers should be careful not to sign contracts that obligate them to provide services for less than their cost of providing those services. Resource management is introduced under the cost topic in managerial finance, and appears again in microeconomics courses. In our core finance course, we work through the major cost classifications and focus most of our attention on marginal cost exercises, which are central to non-routine decisions that many managers are likely to encounter. These include outsourcing analyses, break-even computations, contracting decisions, and a wide range of other managerial exercises. Time limitations in the core course restrict our ability to provide in-depth coverage of topics such as cost measurement, allocation techniques, statistical methods for cost estimation, and how cost and quality are related. We reserve these topics and others for our advanced course in cost measurement and management. Our two-pronged goal is (a) to train all students in how to manage cost-finding exercises and (b) to prepare finance graduates to design and carry out cost-finding exercises.

Because most cost-management texts focus on manufacturing, few are applicable to service organizations, and even fewer focus on governments and nonprofits. As a result, we assembled our course materials from a variety of texts and developed a set of governmental and nonprofit cases to relate the material to situations that our students might experience in their careers.

We took a similar tack with topics in market finance. As previously noted, even small governments need the ability to evaluate complex market instruments, so a basic understanding of market finance should be part of a core course in financial management. In our core course, we introduce the relationship between risk and reward in a market context, and then we go on to cover bonds and their valuation in some detail. We reserve detailed discussions of equity markets, measures of return, derivative securities, and more advanced topics central to the design and pricing of fixed-income securities, for our advanced market finance course. The advanced course also illustrates how these topics relate to pension and endowment management, the use of financial markets by governments and their implications for market regulation and the current financial crisis. Again, we were unable to find texts that met our specific needs. To address this problem, we combined texts from two publishers and created a customized introduction to equities and portfolio theory that included the specific fixed-income and derivative-securities topics we felt our students needed to master. Here again, we had a two-tiered goal. We wanted to prepare our finance students to be able to sit across the table from bond advisers and bankers as informed consumers of advisory and financial services. We also wanted all of our students to be familiar with the ideas of risk and reward, and to understand the basics of the bond market.

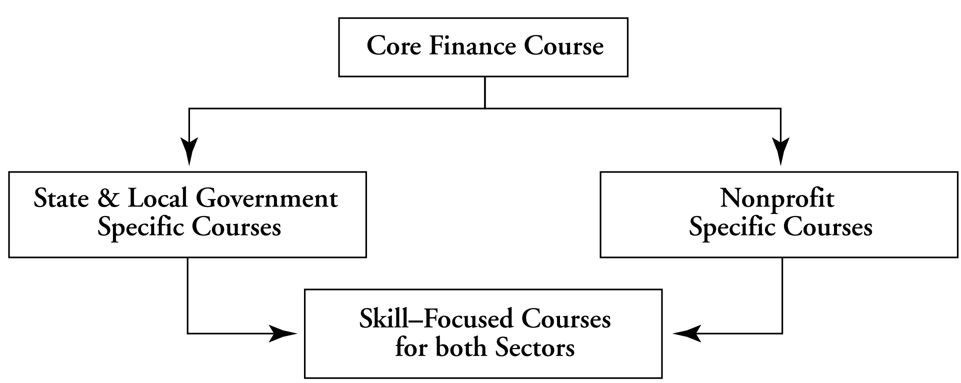
The remaining topics in the core-to-advanced course mappings follow analogous models. For example, we follow basic cost and contracting concepts in our core with advanced course work in negotiations and contracting. We extend budgeting and control material from the core to cover fund-raising, grant management and reporting, and control in a nonprofit context. We continue our students' education in governmental accounting with a technical government accounting course that focuses on Government Accounting Standards Board (GASB) pronouncements designed for local government managers and graduates who are interested in technical positions in such agencies as a comptroller's office.

Increasing the scope of financial-management curricula creates several logistical challenges. First, all public-service-management schools operate in a tight labor market. Well-qualified faculty candidates with backgrounds in managerial and market finance are in short supply. One strategy for managing this shortage is to concentrate full-time faculty on the core to maintain quality control, and use practitioners to teach sector-specific courses — where students will benefit most from coursework that is tailored to the needs of stakeholders. This is a common strategy in major business schools, which make judicious use of adjunct faculty for subject areas where they bring specialized expertise to the classroom. Finally, programs can leverage offerings in allied fields such as economics to set a base for the finance core course and for advanced managerial-finance offerings. In our case, for example, we included contracting, cost-benefit, and public-finance course options that were taught by our economics faculty within the managerial-finance course sequences, in order to (a) provide students with a more complete set of evaluation tools and (b) integrate the issues of tax and spending equity into the educational model.

By encouraging students to enroll in courses offered in other schools and departments, public administration programs also can take advantage of the broader capabilities offered by their universities. However, leveraging the value of courses outside the public administration discipline involves a conscious tradeoff between (a) offering courses specific to the needs of a program's stakeholders within a public administration program, and (b) the recognition that allowing students to study outside the program will require providing mechanisms to help students bridge the gap between the legitimate for-profit focus that business schools take and the need to apply the core principles from those courses to nonprofit and governmental settings. In our experience, students find cross-course and cross-market translation challenging, even when subject areas are within a single school or program.

Second, all public-service schools are constrained by program limitations. The vast majority of students in public administration schools are limited to five or fewer elective courses in their concentration areas, and many want to leave graduate school knowing about more than just finance. Fitting a complete managerial-finance program into that constraint requires flexibility in course design. A generic design for a structure that provides this flexibility is provided in Figure 2. By broadly focusing the core as an introduction to the specific subject matter in second-level courses, we believe that a significant portion of skill-specific topics can be packaged as half-semester courses. This strategy enables students to expand subject coverage, without running out of either time or credits. We believe that technical accounting, budget process, and financial-condition analysis courses, among others, are good candidates for half-semester treatment. Alternatively, schools can fit advanced coursework into their programs by integrating finance content into area-specific courses. One example of this in our program is a local-government-management elective that divides its focus between managerial concepts and related finance topics. A third strategy that many business schools and a few public-service management programs have adopted is to require students to enter the program after taking courses that traditionally have been part of the public administration core. The subject areas most often selected for this strategy are microeconomics, financial accounting, and a first course in statistics.

*Figure 2.*
Curriculum Structure



As previously noted, there are few managerial- and market-finance texts that focus on training public service managers. Extending the finance curriculum beyond the core required us to cobble together materials that met the unique needs of public management students. Most finance texts, especially in the market area, are targeted to business school students. To meet the specific need of our students, we adapted materials to our specific needs, and asked for the assistance of academic publishers to produce customized texts that drew from multiple sources. We also have written cases, problems, and exercises focused on the types of situations facing nonprofit and governmental organizations. Finally, all programs are constrained by financial reality. Few schools can afford to offer classes with less-than-minimum levels of enrollment. It stands to reason that enrollments drop as courses become more specific with respect to either subject matter or target markets. One approach to managing this constraint is to focus courses on subject matter while broadening their market focus. Cost-management and capital-market courses are good candidates for this approach. For example, a cost-management course can easily concentrate on service-focused resource measurement and management concepts while broadening the range of examples and exercises to meet the needs of both nonprofit and government audiences.

## Conclusions

We argue in this paper that there is a clear and growing mismatch between the business problems facing stakeholders who rely on public-service management programs for staff and the financial-analysis and management skills commonly taught in public-service management programs. Part of the problem is a result of the resistance that financial management meets in governments and nonprofit organizations, and part arises from a failure of many public-service management schools to keep pace with a rapidly changing financial world. In a climate characterized by shrinking resources, rebellious taxpayers, increased market exposure, and the use of complicated financial instruments, it seems reasonable to assess public-service programs for market fit. To us, the case for moving beyond budgeting in public-service education is clear.

The finance curriculum we developed to meet the needs of our program easily can be adapted to match the specific financial-management focus of most public-service management programs. Each program may service different markets with varying challenges and needs, but the process is designed to accommodate those differences. Further, the finance curriculum we outlined must fit within the broader management curricula where managerial finance is only one component.

Finally, public-service management programs need to mitigate the labor-market constraints that limit their ability to recruit qualified finance faculty. Doctorate-granting institutions need to actively recruit students who can fill the growing need for managerial-finance teachers in public-service programs.

In addition, we must produce scholars who can generate the research necessary for developing a public-service managerial-finance literature that is as robust and as practical as the work our colleagues in business schools produce for their stakeholders.

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## Footnotes

1 Robert M. Purtell wrote several cases and problems and developed the first version of Microsoft Office PowerPoint slides for the Finkler text. However, he receives no royalties or other financial considerations from the sale of the book.

2 Since the design of courses — and decisions about what to include in them — are dynamic, the supplemental material used in courses is subject to frequent changes. Those interested in discussing course design, and available cases and readings that are appropriate for advanced finance course work or in getting

copies of cases the Rockefeller College faculty have written for course offerings are encouraged to contact Robert Purtell at rpurtell@albany.edu.

Robert M. Purtell is Assistant Professor of Finance and the Director of the MPA Program in the Department of Public Administration at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy, in the University at Albany of the State University of New York. He holds a Ph.D. in Public Administration from New York University. Dr. Purtell's research and teaching interests focus on the managerial- and market-finance issues facing public and nonprofit managers as well as the regulation of financial markets.

James W. Fossett is Associate Professor of Public Administration and Public Health in the Department of Public Administration at the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs & Policy, in the University at Albany of the State University of New York. He holds a Ph.D. in Political Science from the University of Michigan and has written extensively about state health policy, as well as public budgeting and finance.