Overcoming Problem Solving Myopia
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It was an honor to be invited to participate in the Biden Challenge at the University of Delaware. I was delighted to meet the Vice President and the Biden Institute staff, and to engage with a host of distinguished strategic thinkers, policy makers, academics, and students, who all care deeply about the future of our country. What was clear from the day’s discussions is that there is considerable work to be done to revitalize the middle class and many paths to get there.

The ways in which we each approach this issue are shaped by our myriad experiences and our mindsets. While we may recognize the importance of bringing a variety of perspectives to the table to address complex issues, we may inadvertently box ourselves into categories of those who are designated problem solvers for the given issue and everyone else. For example, before the start of the Biden Challenge, I chatted with one of the policy-oriented participants. After hearing about my background, this individual asked me, “so what brings you here?”

I come to the issue of revitalizing the middle class from a public management perspective. To ensure effective policies, I believe that we need competent and committed public servants to implement them. The interface between citizens and public employees is one of the fundamental connections between people and their government. Public policy and public management are both essential and rely on one another. Looking at complex public problems with only one lens (policy or management) is myopic, or shortsighted.
In the context of revitalizing the middle class, a key management and policy issue that has been largely overlooked is that of public employment. Government jobs are public goods that have traditionally provided a path to the middle class, especially for women and minorities. The lasting contraction of public service jobs in the wake of the Great Recession is an often-neglected explanation for the shrinking middle class.

My presentation focused on these issues, including what I see to be an emerging new hollow state that challenges our ability to revitalize the middle class and meet our communities’ most pressing needs. Lasting reductions in public employment have had impacts on critical public services such as corrections, fire, police, health, and education. And despite their valuable daily contributions, there is not a climate of support for public employees. Rather, core elements of the public service employment compact are eroding and the capacity for managing the workforce is under threat. This context raises concerns but also provides opportunities for action.

To effectively address issues like this, we need two lenses: public policy and public management. To extend the metaphor, we need a complete set of glasses, ideally bifocals, to help us see both the short-term and the long-term. To see an issue fully and clearly, we need problem-solvers with broad perspectives. I greatly appreciate the conference organizers’ efforts to include diverse voices in this discussion. There is no shortage of talented people in both the management and policy communities. We need more convening events like the Biden Challenge to bring them together in meaningful ways so that they may lend their energy and insights to the problems we face as a nation.

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