

Integrating Theory and Practice in MPA Education: The Delaware Model

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For close to fifty years, the dichotomy between theory and practice has haunted the field of public administration. At a practical level, the dichotomy is manifest in differences between academics and practitioners. For example, practitioners refer to academics as living in "ivory towers," being out of touch with the "real world." Academics, on the other hand, sometimes describe practitioners as too concerned with the "nuts and bolts" of administration, unable to see the "big picture." At a theoretical level, the theory-practice dichotomy asserts itself in discussions of "basic versus applied research" as well as differences in epistemological approaches, some of which are claimed to relate more clearly to practice than others. It's not surprising that ASPA President Edward T. Jennings has formed a task force to examine the relationship between academics and practitioners in public administration.

In public administration education, the theory-practice issue is no less vexing. Practitioners and students have long urged academics teaching in graduate MPA programs toward greater relevance and practicality. In response, faculty have devised a number of standard approaches to providing a sense of "the real world" either in the classroom - through case studies and simulations, adjunct faculty, or practitioner visits - or in the curricula of their programs - through internships and service learning activities. For the most part, however, these efforts are seen as "add-ons" to the basic pedagogical approach of such programs, an approach which largely derives from the traditional social sciences.

In this paper, we want to explore one particular institutional approach to broadening the MPA student's understanding of and appreciation for the essential connection between theory and

practice. In our view, in order to build most effectively on the knowledge base of the discipline and to develop and refine the skills needed for administrative action in the "real world," programs must be attentive to the cumulative experience students have as members of an MPA program. Programs that themselves exhibit the values of integrating theory and practice will also contribute to students much more naturally integrating theory and practice in their work, both in school and in their careers. We will approach this issue by examining some of the problems with the traditional approach to theory and practice in public administration education, then described one program's response to this issue, what we call the "Delaware Model."

The Traditional Approach

In our view, the traditional approach to social science education and the traditional organization of programs training public service professionals both limit the capacity of those programs to prepare people effectively for careers in the public service. Historically, faculty in the social sciences have been primarily concerned with transmitting a particular body of knowledge to their students, hopefully in such a way that students also learn the skills and abilities needed to contribute to that body of knowledge themselves.

Even within the basic social science disciplines, there are several difficulties with the traditional approach. While the stated assumption underlying the approach is that better informed individuals will be better actors, many are skeptical. For example, an oft-heard critique of political science is that faculty only seek to reproduce themselves, that while the discipline produces an endless supply of budding political

scientists, it does not necessarily produce better political actors nor, in consequence, does it improve the operation of the political system. Incidentally, a similar critique can be made of social science research, which is usually oriented toward problems in the discipline rather than problems in society.

The reason that such an approach fails to improve action is, of course, that action requires more than knowledge; at a minimum, it also requires an appropriate set of skills and a level of moral and critical awareness. To know *about* leadership does not make one an effective nor responsible leader. Rather skills, and sensibilities in applying those skills, are needed. Interestingly, in terms of theory and practice, the skills that are needed are not just application skills but interpersonal and even intrapersonal skills. The effective political leader, for instance, must not only know about politics (and that is important) but must also be able to communicate effectively.

Obviously, all of these issues become even more important in the case of public administration education, where the stated purpose is preparing people for professional careers in the public service, careers in which they will be called upon to act effectively and responsibly in pursuit of public purposes. Public administrators must not only know what, they must know how. Moreover, they can't just know either what or how, they have to be able to do what is required and to do it in a way that will be both effective and responsible. In other words, we see public administration education as consisting of 1) learning a body of knowledge, 2) acquiring a set of skills (including both technical and interpersonal skills), and 3) developing a sense of maturity and self-esteem that enables the individual to do the right thing at the right time.

This last comment deserves brief elaboration. Many managers know the right thing to do. Many have even acted correctly on previous occasions. But under the stress, complexity, and uncertainty that define action in the "real world," some may fail to act appropriately. Just like the actor with "stage fright," the baseball player who succumbs to the pressure of the "big game," or

the writer who develops "writer's block," the administrator must have a level of confidence, maturity or self-esteem sufficient to enable them to act in accord with what they know to be the correct course of action - even under pressures not to do so.

Most of the efforts those in public administration have made to connect theory and practice in MPA education address the first two concerns, knowledge and skills. In terms of knowledge, we have moved beyond simply transmitting a body of knowledge to a new focus on how that knowledge might be applied and even on the skills needed to use that knowledge. (Case studies and field projects are very helpful in this regard.) Similarly, we have broadened the scope of our programs to include skill-based learning, especially in management and organizational behavior. (Simulations and exercises are especially helpful here.)

These advances have, for the most part, occurred at the level of the individual course, as instructors have tried one technique or another for integrating theory and practice in their classrooms. With the significant exception of internships, in which the maturity of students can increase dramatically, the design and organization of most programs have done little to support the psychological grounding needed for consistency and integrity in administrative action. Until these more comprehensive issues are addressed, students will only marginally be able to integrate theory and practice. The full integration of theory and practice in public administration education requires a full integration of knowledge, skills, and values.

We think this can only be done when the MPA program is viewed as more than a set of courses loosely tied together in something called an MPA curriculum. Rather learning should be considered in terms of the total experience students have in the MPA program. The "real world" in which students live - not just their individual courses but their whole experience in the MPA program - impinges on the educational process and must be taken into account. What students see the program and its faculty value, they will value also; those things faculty take as

successes will be models of success for students as well.

The Delaware Model

The University of Delaware College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy has developed a model of public administration education that seeks to build upon the student's total experience in such a way that theory and practice are fully integrated. This effort is based not only in the curriculum, which seeks to integrate theory and practice in many of the same ways that other progressive public administration programs do, but also in the design and operation of the college itself.

The College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy is organized around three academic programs and five centers. The programs include a Masters in Urban Affairs, a Masters in Public Administration, and a Ph.D. in Urban Affairs and Public Policy. The centers include the Center for Applied Demography and Survey Research, the Center for Community Development, the Center for Energy and Environmental Policy, the Center for Historic Architecture and Engineering, and the Delaware Public Administration Institute. As we will see, the experience of working with faculty and staff on current public issues is an essential and invaluable part of graduate education in public administration at the University of Delaware.

While many university programs in public administration draw careful distinctions between faculty positions, focused on teaching and research (meaning primarily publications in national and international journals), and staff positions in centers or institutes, positions that emphasize practical and applied research and public service, the University of Delaware College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy quite consciously avoids this separation of roles. Faculty and staff appointed to positions in the college may either have a primary appointment in one of the academic programs or in one of the centers. Yet regardless of their primary appointment, everyone in the college is expected to fully participate in teaching, research, and service.

While the expectations of "tenure track faculty," generally appointed to the academic programs, are higher with respect to traditional academic publications, such as publications in books and refereed journals at the regional, national, and international level, the expectations of "professional staff" are higher with respect to applied policy-oriented research based in the centers and affecting state and local government in Delaware. On the other hand, regardless of one's primary appointment, some involvement in all aspects of the college's endeavors is expected. Tenure track faculty are not exempt from involvement in applied policy-oriented research, most likely occurring through the centers, nor are professional staff exempt from an expectation that their work will occasionally be published in leading academic and professional journals.

All faculty associated with the MPA program, whether their primary appointment is in a tenure track position or in a professional staff position, participate in teaching MPA classes, in advising, in the design of the curriculum, and other traditional areas of faculty decision making. All are considered members of the MPA program faculty and have a responsibility for the education of students in that program, both in the classroom and elsewhere.

The rationale for such an approach obviously is that this way of organizing the college models an integration of theory and practice from the outset. Rather than distinguishing faculty as concerned with theory and professional staff as concerned with application or practice, the Delaware model suggests that both faculty and staff are equally and fully involved in both theory and practice and both are equally involved in the educational program. (Note that such a way of organizing is in direct contrast to other schools that have consciously maintained a separation between the academic program and the work of centers or institutes. The highly respected University of Georgia MPA program and its excellent Institute of Government come to mind as an example.)

The next element of the Delaware model contributes even more directly to shaping the

student's total experience in the Delaware program. In addition to their internship requirement, pre-service MPA students are involved in research assistantships in the college's centers (or directly with faculty), off-campus research assistantships or on-campus agency placements, and state legislative fellowships. In each case, an effort is made to involve students *with faculty and staff* in developing and executing projects of substantial benefit to state and local government in Delaware.

The work of students in the college's centers and institute is noteworthy in terms of providing a total experience for students that models a complete integration of theory and practice, as well as an integration of faculty, staff, and students in work on important policy and management issues. But such an approach has several more immediate implications for students in the MPA program. First, students are given the opportunity to work directly with faculty, staff, and agency personnel on important public programs. Their educational experience in the MPA program is not limited to their classroom activities but includes daily involvement in the world of government, in researching important policy issues, in preparing training and development programs for those in public agencies, and in interacting with significant public officials at all levels of government and in non-profit organizations of all types. Second, students are fully involved in the projects they undertake - helping to design research projects, developing training programs, gathering and analyzing data, organizing conferences, and writing and presenting reports containing policy recommendations. Third, in many of these activities, the various centers are supported by grants and contracts and, in turn, students are supported through assistantships of various types. *Currently all pre-service students in the MPA program receive funding of some type and about ninety percent are funded internally through the college's centers. In 1994-95, over \$1 million in aid was awarded to students in the college.*

The types of projects that students have completed during the course of their MPA

education are impressive. Recently students have worked on projects for the World Bank, the Chinese Academy of Science, the U. N. Development Program, the U. S. Department of Energy, and the National Endowment for the Humanities. Closer to home, students have been involved in developing a tourism strategy for the State of Delaware, in helping organize the state's newly redesigned planning function, in exploring the implications of telecommunications policy for the state, in presenting material on Total Quality Management to officials at both the state and local level, and in organizing conferences on topics ranging from women's leadership to affordable housing to quality management.

We should note that while all students are not directly funded through the centers, those who are not are supported in other ways. In all cases an effort is made to assure the student of a practical involvement in government or non-profit work. For example, some students have taken positions within the administrative units of the university itself, with one student recently serving as an assistant to the senior university vice-president for administration. Others are placed in agencies seeking research or other project assistance on an ad hoc basis, for example, engaging in a study of energy conservation in a public agency or helping to connect non-profits to the information highway.

One special opportunity available to help students make a connection to the "real world" during their academic program is the Legislative Fellows Program. In the early 1980s, the legislature of the state, in an effort to add some research capability in the face of limited full-time professional staffing, worked with the university to design a Legislative Research Program, what is now commonly called the Legislative Fellows program. The program places ten or so students a year in paid staff positions with the Delaware state legislature, operating in session from January to June of each year. The university's Delaware Public Administration Institute recruits and selects the students from a variety of public affairs disciplines on campus, then trains them for their work with the legislature. Supervision of the

fellows is shared by both the legislature and the university, again emphasizing the joint operation of the program and its connecting of theory and practice.

The legislative fellows have worked on a variety of important issues over the years. In one recent term, fellows helped to develop legislation to provide alternative financing for public housing as federal subsidies decreased. Others worked to create buffer zones for farmlands and waterways, to analyze options concerning drug-testing in the workplace and revisions of the state code concerning unlawful sexual conduct, and to develop statewide land-use legislation.

The legislative fellows experience has been a fascinating one for students in the Delaware MPA program and has provided a glimpse of the political side of public affairs that few students in public administration programs around the country receive. Students are involved in the hectic pace of legislative activity, they experience first-hand the political dynamics that affect public policy, and they find themselves very much at the center of the "action." Particularly given the fact that they are taking MPA classes at the same time, many find the experience frustrating, while others seem to thrive in the legislative arena. All seem to agree that the program provides a unique opportunity for concrete, "hands-on" experience in the legislative process.

We should make it clear that the work students undertake in conjunction with faculty and staff involved in center based research projects and other related activities are not considered a substitute for a full-time experience working in a governmental or non-profit agency. Consequently, students in the Delaware MPA program, like those elsewhere, are involved in paid internships as a major component of their professional training, indeed they participate in an internship program that has been recognized as a national model by NASPAA and ICMA.

The internship is an integral part of the MPA program, one in which students try out the ideas and the skills they have developed in their academic courses, but also one that provides

students with a wealth of experience to bring back to the classroom in the remaining year of their program. A full-time professional staff member coordinates the internship program, connecting potential interns with agencies needing assistance. Typically, a match of student and agency interests is achieved.

Over the years, most internships have been in Delaware. Of those about half have been with state government, a quarter with local governments, and another quarter with non-profit organizations. However, students have also worked on projects that extend well beyond the state. Recently, interns have assisted with the overseas audit of the U. S. Mission in Manila, Republic of the Philippines; revised the analyst's handbook and analyzed data for the preliminary budget in the Office of Budget and Management in the City of Chicago; and worked with a client to develop an Enterprise Zone for Coopers and Lybrand in Cleveland.

History and Development

The Delaware model seeks to bring together theory and practice through the professional and psychological integration of full-time students into the implementation of the college's and the MPA program's applied research and service mission as a critical component of an experientially-based educational program. Achieving this model came about over a decade or so as the result of a series of conscious philosophical decisions, as well as a number of actions fueled by necessity.

The early history of the college was guided by the university's traditional land grant model and a commitment to applied interdisciplinary urban research and action that emerged in the late 1960s and 1970s. Many of the early members of the college held joint appointments with cooperative extension and were expected to serve urban areas in somewhat the same way that extension agents in other states serve rural areas. In fact, the term "urban agents" was used to describe faculty who played this role and what has since become the Center for Community Development was known for many years as the Division of Urban Agents. As the college moved aggressively into the

development of broad scale programs in urban affairs and public administration, it was natural that a commitment to bridging the university and the community would be at the center of the college's development.

Three stories illustrate the way in which that orientation became such a central part of the culture of the institution. At the beginning of the MPA program, a grant was obtained to hire a full-time internship director. The first person to hold that position was not an academic but a professional staff person with some work experience in government. The next coordinator was an academic, but one who quickly recognized the conflict between the demands of the internship program and the traditional academic understanding of graduate education. For example, interns needed certain skills and work habits to be viewed positively by outside agencies, but these skills were not necessarily viewed by more traditional faculty as appropriate for graduate courses. Basing their argument on emerging work in skill-based and experiential education, the coordinator and other faculty argued for a more professional orientation to developing the internship experience.

The argument came to a head when the internship coordinator left for another position and faculty were faced with the decision of hiring a traditional academic or someone skilled in professional development. The eventual hiring of the professional development candidate helped to establish the place of experiential education in the program and the legitimacy of skill-based training as a complement to more traditional academic content. Eventually, the internship program was moved from the dean's office to the Delaware Public Administration Institute, a move which reinforced the notion that the internship is anchored in professional public administration, but still an essential element of the students' professional education.

A second story derives from the necessity to find support for full-time graduate students in the MPA program. As the program's initial fellowship support declined and the number of applicants grew, funds were required in order to

attract and support outstanding candidates. The college's applied research and public service centers were asked by the dean and program director to try to find funds and projects to support MPA students. Center directors had mixed feelings about this move, for hiring full-time professional staff was usually more attractive in terms of stability, etc. But as university positions became tighter and the dean continued to encourage student funding, the centers built their research assistantship commitments. The need to generate funds for students dovetailed with the expansion of the college's applied research and public service efforts and student involvement in significant research and service projects became the norm.

A third incident indicative of the choices being made in the college occurred when the college was asked to develop a plan for remodeling an old elementary school for its teaching, research, and service. During these discussions faculty and staff agreed that students should not be isolated (as is the case in many institutions) but should be fully integrated into the building. As a result student offices are fully integrated into the centers and faculty offices so that students even more naturally work side by side with faculty and staff.

Conclusion

The University of Delaware College of Urban Affairs and Public Policy has achieved a significant integration of theory and practice in its educational programs based on a similar integration in its structure and organization. Students are fully involved with faculty, staff, and agency personnel in applied policy research, executive development, and management improvement efforts for state and local government. Faculty and professional staff share in the instructional program and bear equal responsibility for the success student's achieve during their stay at the university. The result, in our view, is a student body well-prepared to enter into responsible positions in the public service and to make a substantial contributions from the outset. More importantly, however, in the long run, the integration of theory and practice that students experience during their MPA program is likely to make them more

effective in learning and adapting to change over the course of their careers. Such a perspective, we feel, is of great value, both to individuals and to the public service generally.

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