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Preparing leaders for a turbulent world

NASPAA Annual Conference
Thursday, October 11, 2018
10:45AM-11:45AM | Chastain H

We live in a turbulent world. This is not news. In 1971, Professor Donald Schön observed that the age of the 'stable state' was past, and that public servants should learn how to 'understand, guide, influence and manage . . . continuing processes of transformation.' But have we met that challenge? Do professional programs in public service provide the theory and skills needed to anticipate and respond properly to large-scale societal changes?

Online versions of these comments with links: https://bit.ly/2wSHJMa

Panelists:

- **Jennifer Brinkerhoff**, The George Washington University
- **Jennifer Murtazashvili**, University of Pittsburgh
- **Tina Nabatchi,** Syracuse University
- **Lan Xue**, Tsinghua University

Chair:

- **Alasdair Roberts**, University of Massachusetts Amherst

Why we should teach gray

by Jennifer Brinkerhoff

The more I reflect on the different components of my task for this panel, the more I find the relevance of a consistent message: Gray.

Whether it is for public service domestically or internationally, the leadership qualities I find most relevant are tolerance for and discernment in ambiguity, with that discernment fundamentally informed by a commitment to the spirit of "public" and "service" as it relates to the mission or mandate of one's particular agency.

Each one of those four words—public, service, domestic, and international—are inherently ambiguous in our turbulent world. This necessitates preparing students with far more than the standard NASPAA accredited curriculum as it looks on paper: skills and competencies devoid of context and the need for independent thought. We need to equip our students with the expectation, confidence, and commitment necessary to navigate not only intermittent turbulence, but also the more quotidian ambiguities that now define a public service life.

Unfortunately, many of our American students arrive with expectations of learning within a psychologically safe setting that is structured and predictable. They have been trained to believe in the importance of their individual experience and opinion. They thus view any challenge to their perceived identity as a primordial threat rather than an opportunity for learning and growth (Lukianoff and Haidt 2018). This structure-orientation breeds black and white thinking, which is reinforced by social media and our surrounding society.

How then can we equip our graduates to navigate in this society, where they are tasked with serving "publics" that represent their interpretations of black and white, as well as everything in between and

all of the colors of the rainbow? And to further complicate things, how can we best prepare them to do so in international contexts?

I have long advocated for more emphasis on teaching people skills to prepare students for public service careers. I have frequently lamented that "many of the skills required are often referred to as 'soft' skills, when in fact, they are the most difficult to learn" (*PA Times*, June 2004). Students and faculty alike seem skeptical about the value of dedicating course credits to motivation and teamwork, for example. Courses listed under the rubric of "leadership" often seem more appealing and more popular, but the content of such courses can vary a great deal. We would do well to closely examine what the required core for these topics includes, and to ensure that the foundational learning for organization behavior, teams, and leadership emphasizes tolerance for ambiguity, flexibility, and communication skills.

To illustrate the importance of these skills, I draw from one international public servant leader's analytic reflection of his experience in over 40 conflicts around the world.

In *Peace Works: America's Unifying Role in a Turbulent World*, Ambassador Rick Barton, former US ambassador to the United Nations, former Deputy High Commissioner for Refugees, founding director of USAID's Office of Transition Initiatives, and founding Assistant Secretary of State for Conflict and Stabilization Operations (among other posts), reflects on his experience to draw lessons for a more peaceful future. He emphasizes a focus on people, whether through transparency with the American public, or in making respect a foundation for negotiations abroad. In a recent talk about the book, he identified three qualities that define a great secretary of state. Paraphrasing, these are:

- Skills as a global spokesperson;
- An ability to lead and empower others; and
- Policy influence with the President of the United States.

Extrapolating, leadership in the public interest more broadly requires:

- The respect, integrity, transparency, and moral compass to be an effective communicator to audiences beyond one's own organization and national culture;
- Similar leadership and management skills aimed at empowering and appropriately trusting others to do the jobs for which they were trained and/or have comparative advantages owing to turbulent contexts (international or otherwise); and
- Ability to manage up, both within their organization and beyond.

These are teachable skills. Beyond re-examining the content of our competencies, we need to assess *how* we are teaching these skills and preparing students with the most effective attitudes to confront these challenges.

Through applied learning whenever possible, and through teaching cases, we need to provide our students with experience confronting ambiguity, exercising discernment informed by a commitment to public service, and absorbing the discomfort that comes when our worldviews —even our identities—feel challenged or threatened.

Whether for domestic or international public service, we need to ensure that our students leave us with the skills to navigate and with an accepted understanding and even an embrace of gray, appropriately rejecting the black and white thinking that marks simplistic understanding and response. We as educators, and they as public servants, have to do better than that.

Jennifer Brinkerhoff is a Professor of Public Administration and International Affairs at George Washington University.

Sources

Barton, Rick. *Peace Works: America's Unifying Role in a Turbulent World*. Lanham, MD: Rowan & Littlefield, 2018.

Brinkerhoff, Derick W. and Jennifer M. Brinkerhoff. "Preparing for Public Service Careers: The Service Choice Spiral." PA Times, Vol. 27, №6 (June 2004).

Preparing for leadership in fragile states

By Jennifer Murtazashvili

Public affairs programs can do a better job preparing leaders in fragile states by focusing on the realities of these contexts, rather than simply teaching students about the role of states and development agencies. In most of our programs, students learn about the nuts and bolts of program design, project management, and important tools of monitoring and evaluation. They might even be exposed to the holy grail of experimental design and randomized controlled trials. Although students learn approaches to public administration and project implementation, this education does not tell students enough about the lived experience in societies affected by conflict.

Why do lived experiences matter for the way we teach public affairs? First, in these societies individuals are often most distrustful of governments because state action often sparked conflict. This implies that rather than teaching our students about building state capacity, we might help them think about how to limit its role—something that seems quite counterintuitive. Second, we must teach our students to keep an eye out for how communities devise solutions without the state —and how to build on these solutions—rather than assuming a blank slate.

First, too often our programs teach students to think about building state strength, but with insufficient consideration of how to limit of state power. Much of this comes not just from the ways we teach public administration, but also from the way we teach economics. Economics and policy analysis coursework focus almost exclusively on issues of market failure—considering the rationale for government intervention —rather than government failure (situations where government policies fail to achieve their intended outcomes). This focus on market failures implies that state intervention is what is needed to “fix failed states.”

This antidote is seems to come automatically, despite what we know about the causes of state failure. States fail because they are predatory and strong.

This creates a problematic mismatch: we train our students' eye on government intervention, but conflict initially flared in so many of these contexts because states were eager to intervene in society in all the wrong ways.

What is the implication of this? If states fail because of regimes that are unconstrained and even abusive, students trying to build and lead more effective states need to learn about how to create political space for citizens. But too often, we teach them about service delivery—what the state shall provide.

Alternatively, it is more important to define what the state shall not do that will help build legitimacy of new states more quickly than service delivery. After 15 years of state-building in places like Iraq and Afghanistan, there is very little evidence that providing goods and services wins hearts and minds. People will come to trust a new government it if can show that it can tie its hands and not steal from them. It can do this even faster if it treats them fairly.

Second, conflict zones differ from other contexts because people learn to cope without the state, sometimes for prolonged periods of time. People suffering from the worst violence and upheaval are surprisingly capable of devising solutions to problems without relying on outsiders. They come up with solutions in ways that make sense to them. Yet in the hours after the cloud of conflict clears, donors and local government officials often see these local solutions as somehow "second best." Our courses focus on building national-level institutions, implying that citizens should discard their messy local practices in favor of new state-building models. This teaches our students that conflict recovery and crisis response is about replacing locally-devised ways of doing things for solutions offered by nascent states—states that often have poor track records.

These state-centered solutions often miss important sources of local legitimacy that could be a building block of a new legitimate political,

economic, and social order. If we teach our students tools of institutional analysis and get them into the field, we can help guide them on the many ways to identify and map out self-governing solutions when they exist.

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Leading in turbulence requires soft skills

by Tina Nabatchi

How can public affairs programs prepare leaders for a turbulent world? We can start by acknowledging that the world is turbulent.

"Wait," you say, "nobody denies that the world is turbulent!"

Well, yes and no. Few individuals in public affairs would reject the proposition that we live in a turbulent world, and most might even agree that the world is *increasingly* turbulent. However, the curricula of public affairs programs generally do not reflect this reality. Rather, our programs implicitly suggest to students that the world can be contained, dismantled into discreet units of analysis, operationalized, and quantified.

"Wait," you say, "that's not true. Public Affairs programs strive to teach students how to make a difference through good governance!"

Again, yes and no. Most would agree that teaching students "good governance" is a goal of our programs. However, we invariably teach students how to "govern well" through series of courses that tacitly imply a predictable, measurable reality.

My quick review of the core curricula of five top US-based MPA programs showed a preponderance of required "hard skill" courses, coupled with one or two context-setting courses, and no "soft skill" courses at all. To be specific, the core curriculum in each of these programs required:

- At least one course (and often two) in research methods, statistics, microeconomics, *and* budgeting and finance, with several programs

also requiring additional “hard skill” courses such as policy analysis;

- Two (rarely three) context-setting courses, including some version of public management, public administration and democracy, and/or public administration and law, as well as an occasional personnel or organization theory/behavior course; and
- No courses (that’s right, zero, nada, nil) in any specific “soft skill” areas, such as communication, negotiation, conflict management, collaboration, or ethical reasoning.

Why is this a problem? Because, although important in some circumstances, “hard skill” courses ignore the reality of turbulence.

Let me explain. Turbulence means “(1) being in a state of agitation or tumult; (2) characterized by, or showing disturbance, disorder, etc.; [or] (3) given to acts of violence and aggression.” However, hard skill courses explicitly suggest that the application of systematic, logical, and methodical approaches can compel clarity and impose structure, order, and stability. Basically, these courses train our students to see the world in black and white (and occasionally shades of gray), when we actually live in a constantly changing kaleidoscope.

So much of public affairs—and particularly public affairs in a turbulent world—is unsystematic, illogical, and haphazard. Structure, stability, and clarity and cannot be imposed, prepared or planned for, or coordinated and controlled. The hard skills with which we train (dare I say indoctrinate?) our students are insufficient for leaders who must operate in a turbulent world, one where meaning is emergent and interpretive, developed through sense-making, and continuously shifting.

Instead, leaders in a turbulent world need well-developed soft skills, including among others:

- *Interpersonal communication skills*, such as advocacy and inquiry, active and reflective listening, and assertion.

- *Negotiation skills*, such as problem analysis, identifying and responding to positions and interests, and persuasion.
- *Conflict management skills*, such as de-escalation, brainstorming, problem-solving, mediation, and caucusing.
- *Collaboration skills*, such as meeting design, setting ground rules, convening, facilitation, and agreement development.

So how can public affairs programs better prepare leaders for a turbulent world? We can start by acknowledging that the world is turbulent. This means asking students—and getting students to ask—the big questions: questions that have no right answers or have answers that are inherently ambiguous, questions that require higher-order ethical thinking and reasoning, questions that unreservedly demand students deal with normative issues, values, and their tradeoffs.

Then, we can educate and coach them in the use of a nested set of soft skills that center on accessing and employing emotional intelligence, developing and managing interpersonal interactions, and fostering effective relational communication.

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We need a new kind of public administration

By Lan Xue

A major source of the turbulence in today's world is underdevelopment, which is prevalent in developing countries and manifested in the form of violence, poverty, unemployment, pandemics, and so on. After years of frustration with existing international development paradigm and assistance programs, improving public administration has been seen as a hope to help developing countries to improve their governance system and consequently, their economic development. Public administration programs are flourishing in many developing countries, which are also sending their best and brightest young people to study public administration in the West, and in developing countries with rapid economic development such as China.

However, are the existing PA programs, based on theories and methods developed over the past century from the experiences of developed countries, the right recipe for these countries? My own teaching and administrative experiences in a public policy school in China over the last 20+ years have led me to question the universalities of existing PA theories and methods in these new governance settings.

For example, I have been teaching policy analysis course for our MPA program for many years. My favorite text book has been *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice* by David Weimer and Aidan Vining. The book builds the rationale for policy interventions from a careful analysis of market failures and government failures. Then, various policy tools are designed to address these failures with attention to the implementation issues.

While my students from China and other developing countries like this neat framework and analysis in general, some occasionally question the

relevance of such analysis to the reality of the development context in their countries. For example, in many developing countries, the real challenge is not traditional market failures but serious market underdevelopment. The same is true when the real challenge is serious underdevelopment of governing institutions and capacities instead of traditional government failures. In these cases, the basic rationale and context is so different that the entire framework needs to be re-examined.

In the field of economics, known for using sophisticated theories and models, there is a branch called development economics, which deals with economic aspects of the development process in low income countries—real issues faced in developing countries such as agriculture development, health, education, and etc. Maybe it's time for us in the PA field to think about a branch of Public Administration, developmental public administration, that can focus on how to develop governing institutions and capacities in a development context.

For the field of developmental public administration to grow in a healthy way, we need to take an interdisciplinary approach to mobilize support from colleagues in development studies, international relations, and other relevant disciplines. Such effort will be helpful in the long run not just for developing countries, but may also be helpful for developed countries where government renewal and innovation is also needed.

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Teaching for turbulence

by Alasdair Roberts

Programs in public affairs (PA) can learn something from programs in international relations (IR) about preparing students for a turbulent world.

Both types of programs offer a professional education for public service. But they take different approaches. IR programs often start with an overview of theories of international relations. (Example. Example.) Students learn about the state system, its dynamics, and strategies for advancing vital interests abroad. The approach is long-term and comparative. And it takes turbulence for granted. It assumes that national strategies are fragile and that the system is constantly evolving.

Few PA programs begin with a similar overview. Many focus on meso- and micro-level questions of policy design and management. Granted, some programs examine the "political and constitutional context" of policymaking. But they usually do not survey the large forces that drive policy or the strategies by which leaders govern within national borders. When it is offered, the big picture is likely to lack a long-term perspective, and a sense of fragility and dynamism. It is usually focused on the United States alone.

PA programs need an introductory course that matches the overview course in IR. It should set the scene at a high level: explaining the state system, the main goals of leaders at home and abroad, the forces that constrain their actions, and the strategies they use to advance their goals.

Is this too abstract for a professional education? Many IR programs do not think so. In the realm of domestic affairs, public servants also need to know something about overall strategies for governing. Reaganism, Clintonism, and now Trumpism—each of these philosophies have defined the boundaries of the possible for public servants at all levels of government.

Such a course should also be comparative. The age of liberal-democratic triumphalism is over. Governance strategies of major states are diverging sharply once again, and PA students should understand the variations—Xi Jingping Thought, Putinism, Modi-ism and so on. A big-picture introductory class, in the IR style, could achieve that goal too.

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