

Article

Start with the Problem: Establishing Research Relevance with Integrative Public Administration

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Abstract

A key question of each Minnowbrook has been how public administration scholarship can be relevant to practice (Carboni and Nabatchi 2019; Nabatchi and Carboni 2019; O’Leary, Van Slyke, and Kim 2010). This question remains salient today, as public administration scholarship is increasingly distant from the challenges identified by practitioners. Academic research agendas are often disconnected from the social issues and challenges of public governance. Field norms incentivize and exacerbate this cleavage. As a result, past calls for more practice-oriented scholarship lack widespread implementation. In this essay, we propose modest shifts in how academic research is conducted to link it with problems, issues, and opportunities identified by the public service practitioners and professional communities. We refer to this shift as Integrative Public Administration. We also identify and make suggestions about how to change some field level conditions that hamper the shift to Integrative Public Administration.

Introduction

Is public administration research relevant to practice? Are social issues and challenges of public governance adequately incorporated in the public administration research agenda? In recent decades, public administration scholars have grown increasingly rigorous in their approaches to research, with more theoretically informed questions and systematic use of sophisticated empirical methods (Ricucci 2010). This approach seeks to ensure that researchers are building theory and pushing our collective knowledge-base forward. However, it may neglect the lived experience of practitioners who develop and implement public policy and may have keen insights for research questions and research design. Consulting with practitioners in the process of inquiry and problem solving can make academic

research more useful to practitioner audiences without sacrificing theoretical or empirical rigor (Dewey 1938; Van de Ven 2007). This is especially important for an applied field like public administration.

Some have cautioned that a “great schism” in public administration is approaching between those focused on individual behaviors and micro processes and those focused on systemic shifts and macro dynamics (Milward et al. 2016; Moynihan 2018). Motivating the schism is a growing frustration with the narrow questions that tend to dominate public affairs journals. These questions tend to focus on individual behaviors at the micro level rather than tackle “big questions” about the role of government in society. Others argue that narrow questions are the product of a limited set of rigorous methods that drive the research questions in

public administration. Questions that lend themselves to quasi-experimental designs, survey experiments, or laboratory tests allow for the isolation of causal mechanisms, and thus are more likely to be published. Indeed, it is true that there has been a growth in behavioral public administration, which tends to emphasize experimental designs (Grimmelikhuijsen et al. 2017). This is not necessarily a problem. In fact, behavioral science has been at the very core of public administration since Herbert Simon's (1947) book, *Administrative Behavior*. Instead, the problem lies with well-executed research that is driven by irrelevant questions. We propose to address this problem through Integrative Public Administration.

The Integrative Public Administration approach re-frames and expands the role of the public administration scholar as integrator and connector of research and practice. Integrative Public Administration is rooted in a strategic approach to improving the social contract, governance, and policy implementation that puts scholars at the nexus of scholarship and practice. Instead of emphasizing whether the scholarship-practice divide is abysmal or necessary, we call for public administration scholars to understand their unique position to help address complex puzzles related to public values and the administrative state. The three pillars of professorship—research, teaching, and service—should be built on a foundation of pragmatist principles focused on understanding and solving problems in the spirit of inquiry that acknowledges that none of these pursuits—even research—is value free (Ansell 2007). Furthermore, as a field that draws upon many disciplines including political science, psychology, political economy, history, law, and economics, among others (Fry and Raadschelders 2013), we see Integrative Public Administration as integrative in the sense that it pulls knowledge from disciplines and applies it to practical problems and vice versa to integrate theory and practice in a wide ranging fashion. By shifting from a siloed multidisciplinary field to an integrative field, we will improve the relevance of scholarly work to the practice community without sacrificing rigor. In Integrative Public Administration, there is room for those who heed Waldo's call for big questions and for those who are inspired by Simon's focus on micro level behaviors and meso level consequences. Both have a purpose and both should be incentivized.

Reclaiming Relevance in Integrative Public Administration Research

The antidote to irrelevant research is not a shift away from micro processes, nor is it to relax standards for methodological rigor. Rather, the antidote is to start with the community that stands to benefit from the

research being produced. Public affairs practitioners are in the business of addressing problems—many of which are wicked problems that lack simple solutions—on a day-to-day basis. An integrative approach to public affairs research is thus fundamentally **problem-centered**. In this vein, an integrative approach to public administration puts questions of relevance at the forefront. Rather than starting with rigorous scholarship and translating it to be relevant, an integrative approach to research begins with relevance—starting with the very questions to be asked—and then requires a rigorous, contextually grounded approach to inform the questions. By design, the audience for such research is both the practice community specific to the research question at hand, and the scholarly community on which the evidence base is grounded.

A call for problem-centered research that engages interdisciplinary perspectives harkens back to the Lasswell's (1951) hopes for a “policy sciences of democracy.” Yet, rather than calling for research that informs the design of policy, the ambitions here are more pragmatic—to conduct research that is useful to those in the business of solving public problems. As noted by Carol Weiss (1989) decades ago, such usefulness need not be measured by whether research is cited in legislation or used to shape administrative procedures. Instead, the usefulness of public affairs research is often one input in a stream of possible resources and alternatives that can be leveraged to frame problems, shift perspectives, and activate innovation. As public affairs scholars, we create implementation resources (Hill 2003) that can be leveraged by those in the practice community to tackle their everyday problems.

Identifying problems begins by being embedded in or linked to practice. What are the challenges and opportunities facing those engaged in public service on a day-to-day basis today? What are the critical problems in a particular policy or governance area with which legislators, administrators, service providers, and constituents wrestle? How can skillfully designed and strategically positioned research help inform and ameliorate these problems? We recommend engaging with a community of practice, which may be more willing to engage with scholarship on a regular basis. See figure 1 for types of practitioners you can be associated with. By being engaged with a community of practice, researchers can learn about the issues and challenges that are important to practitioners, and then frame specific research questions within a broader scheme of theoretically informed inquiry. This engagement will not only produce relevant avenues of inquiry, but will also lead to a ready-made audience for scholarly work, thereby resulting in greater impact.

Communities of practice are “groups of people informally bound together by shared expertise and passion

	What's the purpose?	Who belongs?	What holds it together?	How long does it last?
Community of practice	To develop members' capabilities; to build and exchange knowledge	Members who select themselves	Passion, commitment, and identification with the group's expertise	As long as there is interest in maintaining the group
Formal work group	To deliver a product or service	Everyone who reports to the group's manager	Job requirements and common goals	Until the next reorganization
Project team	To accomplish a specified task	Employees assigned by senior management	The project's milestones and goals	Until the project has been completed
Informal network	To collect and pass on business information	Friends and business acquaintances	Mutual needs	As long as people have a reason to connect

Figure 1. Types of practitioner groups. Reprinted with permission from “Communities of Practice: The Organizational Frontier” by Etienne Wenger and William M. Snyder. Harvard Business Review, January 2000. Copyright 2000 by Harvard Business Publishing; all rights reserved.

for a joint enterprise” (Wenger and Snyder 2000:142). Communities of practice differ from formal working groups, teams, and informal networks, though all four are complementary. Community of practice members are self-selected and are passionate about their area of expertise, as opposed to members of other groups who are there because of their job, a team project, or other mutual goal or need (see figure 1) Alternatively, scholars can work directly with practitioners on interactive research (Ansell 2007). Again, this is not a new topic, but deserves further discussion (Moynihan 2015).

Productive, mutually beneficial relationships with policy and administrative communities take time and effort to build. Identifying relevant groups and engaging with them throughout one’s career needs to be a purposeful commitment for Integrative Public Administration researchers. If we make a long-term commitment to working with and learning from, these communities of practice, we will build trust, and can become experts with them.

Situating the Research in Context

Integrative Public Administration research must, by definition, be contextually embedded. This stands in contrast to studies that are broadly generalizable to an amorphous public organization or policy field. In some cases, the only reason a study is considered public administration research is because it takes place within a public organization: The public organization is simply a laboratory within which a particular behavior or phenomenon is examined. Research that is conducted without knowing the context not only fails to inform practice, but also leads to a poor understanding of the very mechanisms being tested.

There is an ongoing conversation in public affairs research around engaged scholarship, including the role of “pracademics” who sit on the border between the scholarly and practice communities (Ospina and Dodge 2005; Perry 2015). Indeed, coproducing research with practitioners is one approach to situating research in context (Buick et al. 2016; Bushouse et al. 2011; Orr and Bennett 2012; Rynes et al. 2001). An integrative approach to public administration research, however, does not require all scholarship to be conducted jointly with practitioners. Rather, it requires public affairs researchers to take seriously the importance of *problem specific expertise*, even when conducting “generic” studies of public organizational behavior or management.

Integrative Public Administration scholarship can be characterized into four broad groups developed by Van de Ven (2007) in his work on engaged scholarship—*informed basic research*, *collaborative basic research*, *design and evaluation research*, and *action/intervention research*. *Informed basic research* is closest to the objective social science called for by Simon (1947) with the exception that researchers obtain advice and feedback from stakeholders affected by the research. *Collaborative basic research* entails increased involvement among researchers and stakeholders including selection of research questions and sharing responsibilities. *Design and evaluation research* involves evidence based research of policies and programs that includes opportunities for stakeholder guidance of a project. *Action/intervention research* is about developing specific actions and interventions to address client needs. In each type of research, stakeholder involvement is key to make sure we are asking the right questions and situating the research in context. Involvement of

stakeholders in research will also improve relevance, relationships with the practice community, and provide opportunities for scholars to bring real world cases into the classroom.

For example, if a public affairs scholar is conducting an analysis of contracting that happens to take place within a local community food network, it is essential to draw from expertise about more than contracting. The way that contracting is enacted within the community food network may be very different than in a mental health network, or a network of defense contractors for the federal government. This enactment of the generalizable “contracting” phenomenon cannot be understood without context-specific expertise. While it is possible that a public affairs scholar with expertise in contracting also has expertise in local food networks, this is not commonly the case. This is where the interdisciplinary theme of Integrative Public Administration comes to life—the public affairs contracting expert can source expertise in local food networks by working collaboratively with a scholar who is an expert in local food networks, but may know nothing about contracting. This simple example seems rather obvious. Yet, it is not the way that we as public affairs scholars are trained to approach our research.

Assessing a Research Project

No matter the original impetus for any particular research project, an Integrative Public Administration approach entails accounting for the range of stakeholders that are or could be involved in or affected by a particular project. The critical question is: “Who is going to care?” We advocate answering this question initially in the broadest possible manner. An initial “big tent” approach ensures that the implications of Integrative Public Administration projects are fully thought through at the outset. Quite possibly, a project could integrate both a theory-inspired and community-of-practice-inspired approach. Or if not, initial consideration of the relevance of a potential Integrative Public Administration project to both academic and practice communities will help ensure that opportunities to integrate practice are not left on the table.

We propose an intentional “Go/No Go” decision process, in which a decision is made to either (a) move forward with an Integrative Public Administration approach or (b) decide that a project is not suitable for an Integrative Public Administration approach. A relevant parallel is NASA’s “launch status check” in which various critical systems are polled and must all affirmatively check in as a “Go” before any space mission launch can commence (NASA 2013). Without an intentional Go/No Go decision process, a project may creep forward and miss important opportunities to

apply a more integrative lens regarding the engagement of additional academic or communities of practice.

If a researcher is a member of multiple communities of practice and scholarship, the research project is likely to be derived from that experience, and already incorporate—at least to some extent—an Integrative Public Administration approach, and is a “Go.” However, even if the project already incorporates an Integrative Public Administration approach, the research team may want to take another look for additional engagement opportunities. For example, consider a hypothetical research proposal that would be conducted by a partnership of academics and food justice advocacy groups examining blind spots in the United States Department of Agriculture (USDA) Supplemental Nutrition Assistance Program (SNAP) benefits program. Even though the USDA would be identified as a stakeholder who would care about the research, the final decision may be to proceed with this Integrative Public Administration project without fully integrating the USDA’s views into the design and conduct of the research. To be sure, there could be ample opportunity to engage the USDA later on in the process when results are disseminated and discussed and possible policy paths forward mapped out. The widest possible integration and stakeholder involvement in every stage of the project is not necessarily better, nor is it what we are advocating.

If the project does not obviously emerge from links with practice or multiple theoretical fields, the research team should consciously decide if applying the Integrative Public Administration approach may make sense for the project. They can do this by identifying related communities of practice, stakeholders, or academic fields as an initial step. If there are multiple communities of scholarship and practice with stakeholders who will “care” about the project, we recommend holding a purposeful conversation about how such participation could look and whether it makes sense. If we want the field to truly be integrative, encouraging conscious reflection of these issues facilitates these important considerations by building them in to the research or project design phase. As laid out above in our description of four types of research, not all projects will entail joint academic-practitioner research, but many research agendas could apply this same decision making structure to reflect on their avenues of research.

In sum, we believe a commitment to Integrative Public Administration means learning from both communities of theory and practice, and making a defensible “Go/No Go” decision, which we summarize in figure 2. An Integrative Public Administration approach is not a predetermined model or design of what a “good” project looks like, but a willingness to reflect and, where appropriate, incorporate communities

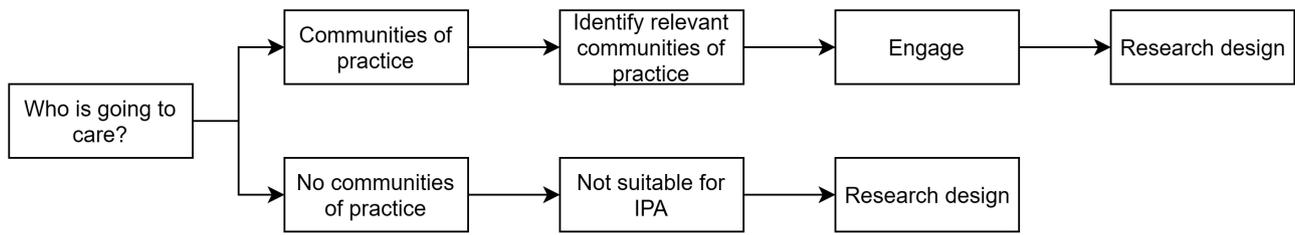


Figure 2. Decision tree for integrative public administration research projects.

of theory and practice at the outset instead of at the end of a project. Public Administration is an academic field that serves as a custodian of the principles of governance and administrative systems that are based on the rights and responsibilities of active citizenship. Involving stakeholders in the design and execution of research is supportive of this custodian role. However, we know that real institutional barriers to conducting research as Integrative Public Administration exist. We turn to these issues in the next section.

Creating Field Level Conditions for Integrative Public Administration Research

Our approach to Integrative Public Administration research is more modest than previous calls for relevance, with the intent of making research more pragmatic and implementable by scholars. However, we acknowledge that there are field level conditions that may hamper scholarly efforts to pursue this type of research. How can we create positive field level conditions that encourage Integrative Public Administration? Integrative Public Administration can only flourish when institutionalized norms around what is legitimate and worthy of attention allow it to flourish. This entails rethinking how we train and incentivize scholars. To move in this direction, it is first important to focus attention on the mechanisms that drive field development.

Neo-institutional sociologists note that all fields have sources of authority that shape what actors understand to be legitimate and worthy of attention (Fligstein and McAdam 2012; DiMaggio 1988). Through examining these factors, we become more aware of how they actually operate and what outcomes are created. Through an analysis of these factors, the contradictions between the results and what is actually desired become more visible, and changes in these mechanisms of authority become possible. The signifiers of legitimate action can alter what is legitimate within the field (Meyer and Rowan 1977; Scott 1995).

We identify and discuss four key mechanisms currently shaping views of what constitutes public administration scholarship excellence: doctoral admissions, doctoral student training, academic publishing and conference formats, and standards for promotions and

tenure. These mechanisms largely determine how individuals are socialized into the field and rewarded throughout their careers. We discuss how these mechanisms are sometimes misaligned with Integrative Public Administration, and how modest changes could better support the development of Integrative Public Administration and improve the custodial role of public administration scholars. Certainly, our list of four mechanisms is incomplete: We welcome identification and attention to other mechanisms that shape our field. Attending to this fundamental process—how we define, identify, and invest in excellence—is central in how the scholarly field of public administration operates because it sets the stage for scholars to shape the processes and outcomes of their work.

Doctoral Admissions

The institutions that serve as the gatekeepers to identify potential students and grant (or deny) membership into the field are critical drivers of field norms. As in many scholarly fields, the current practices in public administration and policy hinge upon individual self-selection through application to doctoral programs. Compared with other disciplines, these programs are relatively small, and interest is often driven by undergraduate or masters level exposure or professional experiences. Rarely do programs make purposive efforts to identify and recruit potential scholars from racially or economically under-represented groups. The current approach limits our ability to ensure that field members reflect the diversity of society, and thus reduces the potential relevance of our scholarship to real world problems. By diversifying our population of public administration researchers, we hopefully will deepen our collective ability to understand and work with many communities of practice.

Other scholarly fields have faced this problem and have tried to address it head on. For example, professional associations in political science, sociology, economics, and anthropology have fellowship programs that identify promising undergraduates and enable them to attend national research meetings where recruitment can occur. There is movement in our field to diversify the student population within our master’s programs, such as the Public Policy and

International Affairs (PPIA) program that provides summer-training in public policy analysis and management for undergraduates who have been historically under-represented. Additionally, the national nonprofit research association ARNOVA has invested for a decade in a fellows program that enables people from historically under-represented groups to attend their annual meetings. The terminal nature of our masters programs, however, may prevent under-represented groups from thinking about pursuing PhD programs. We advocate that these programs, as well as undergraduate public affairs programs, build in exposure to potential doctoral level pursuits.

Doctoral Student Training

Once individuals apply to and are accepted into doctoral programs, their scholarly training is often idiosyncratic. Unlike other fields where there is agreement about core bodies of knowledge, doctoral training in public administration often hinges upon the expertise of specific faculty at a particular institution. As a result, topics in required curriculum can emphasize the historical legacy of public administration rather than just the current challenges. While the past is certainly important, there is evidence that in this era with new information technologies and vocal challenges to the legitimacy of the state (Fukuyama 2014; Schweik et al. 2011), public administration must respond to increasing complex public problems by being forward thinking. We must encourage the analysis of current and future challenges.

Alternatively, doctoral programs can be heavily methods-oriented, favoring analysis over problem definition, or they can lack adequate methods training or exposure to theory. This is not to say that history, or methods, or theory should or should not be emphasized, but rather that programs need to have a balance and need to train students to take on an Integrative Public Administration approach, one that is problem oriented and that seeks purposeful engagement with communities of practice. This will encourage new opportunities for training platforms and curriculum sharing across institutional boundaries. It will also create more urgency for accreditation standards that reinforce the practices and skills of engaged scholarship, in which scholars learn how to grapple with the tensions inherent in scholarly rigor and practical relevance early in their career.

Academic Publishing and Conference Formats

A third mechanism concerns the process experienced by emerging scholars as they move through doctoral training and enter the larger field. Often, this process can be quite isolating, as individuals necessarily must narrow their scope of interest to complete a dissertation

and begin publishing. Many institutions emphasize the desirability of sole-authored publications and extramural funding is often secured by those with an individualistic agenda. In many institutions, single authored publications count more for tenure. Yet this emphasis on a solitary approach is not unescapable, and in fact, there are innumerable examples in our field of productive scholarly collaborations spanning decades that apply rigorous research techniques, generate meaningful theoretical frameworks, and work with communities of practice. One example is the work of H. Brinton Milward and Keith G. Provan. Their research advanced network scholarship considerably. Their work was influenced by communities of practice around mental health care networks and health care for children and adolescents in Canada. Evidence of this collaboration is present in publications (see Popp et al. 2014 for an excellent example of academic-practitioner collaboration).

New efforts to build informal networks both on social media and in-person at conferences, such as the Academic Women in Public Administration (AWPA, @awparocks), are emerging. AWPA provides spaces for networking and works to celebrate and promote the work of female public administration scholars. In addition to grassroots approaches, professional association awards, writing and practice groups, or sections within research conferences could emphasize the importance of scholars' abilities to integrate research from other fields and work with communities of practice in the pursuit of practical problem solving. In doing so—and creating settings where scholars can refine their own practices of doing integrative work in a community of practice—we can direct our collective attention to building more skill in the type of scholarly activity required for this new era.

Standards for Promotion and Tenure

The standards developed and used in universities to assess a scholar's dossier in relation to the awarding of promotion and tenure is final mechanism related to shifting the field toward an Integrative Public Administration approach. As in any profession, the standards and criteria are developed and maintained by peers. In the field of public administration, many—if not most—institutions stress research productivity defined according to quantity of publications, such as peer-reviewed journal articles, books, or book chapters. Many institutions also value teaching effectiveness, and sometimes to a lesser degree, institutional and professional service.

While these standards may be appropriate, fully embracing the ideas put forth here suggest that existing criteria should be made more flexible to incorporate and value research relevant to practice. Alternatively,

other criteria could also be applied. If we are interested in developing and reinforcing a field that integrates research knowledge to improve public affairs practice, then we must find ways of assessing how that ability is demonstrated in scholarly performance. The standards currently used to assess research quality involve a multitude of indicators of journal quality; some institutions use impact factors, others overall number of citations, still others focus on publications listed in repositories such as Scopus. Yet with the Integrative Public Administration vision described in this article, we might also consider scholars' citations from other branches of the social sciences as well as citations to relevant practitioner's publications, or the degree to which research has been translated for practice and/or used by practitioners on the ground. In essence, the goal is to reinforce the application of knowledge. We might consider other practices, such as soliciting letters of assessment from relevant stakeholders who may evaluate the utility of the research record for practical concerns.

In recounting these four mechanisms that shape our field and beginning to think about how they might be aligned to promote and support Integrative Public Administration, it is important to be explicit that current practices have all emerged from the decisions, both conscious and unconscious, made by field members. They have been, and continue to be, reinforced by the operational practices of recruitment and discussions about core curricular requirements for student training in PhD programs. They are maintained through expectations for academic publishing and conference formats, as well as through informal conversations, formal mentoring meetings, and the practices of promotion and tenure committees.

Beyond these four mechanisms, there are many other activities that could help promote Integrative Public Administration. As noted earlier, many social sciences have created pipeline programs to assure they identify and encourage young people from historically under-represented groups to pursue doctoral training. Doing so in our field would ultimately broaden our ability to connect with communities of practice. Open curricular projects are no longer uncommon and open-source textbooks are widely used in the hard-sciences. We could encourage such work in public administration as well. Solo authored publications or extramural grants, for example, are virtually unheard of in public health because it takes teams of people—including practitioners—and multiple types of expertise to develop, study, and answer questions relevant to public health. This is also true for most science fields.

Deliberate engagement of these mechanisms can promote engaged scholarship and help to move public administration scholarship towards more relevant and rigorous activities. We must practice what our research

shows is important in making institutional change. Effective public managers focus upon the desired results and understand the sources of authority—legal requirements, financial accountability, and professional ethics—salient in a field. As institutional entrepreneurs (Garud et al. 2007), they use their knowledge of this context and alter what is done to more likely create the desired results. Of course this agency is embedded within institutions and shaped by the very institutional structures we seek to reform (DiMaggio and Powell 1991; Giddens 1984; Gray, Purdy, and Ansari 2015). Yet history reveals that human agency has the ability to shift institutions over time (Emirbayer and Mische 1998). We advocate for a shift in field level norms toward Integrative Public Administration, which puts the relevance question at the forefront.

Conclusion

Integrative Public Administration research is intentionally problem oriented, contextually grounded, and interdisciplinary. There is no “one right way” to achieve these objectives, but there are multiple ways to miss the mark. In advocating for Integrative Public Administration, we are not calling for a relaxation of rigorous scholarship, or a pivot from quantitative or even experimental research designs. There is no rigor versus relevance tradeoff here. Rather, we are suggesting that rigorous research requires a focus on problems in public affairs and attention to relevance from the start.

Indeed, building and testing theory—a goal of quality research—presumes that one understands the problems being explored or tested. Understanding problems requires one to understand context. Being relevant is not an afterthought: It is an intentional practice that begins at the start of a research endeavor. Involving stakeholders and communities of practice can provide the relevant context and guidance about whether a research question is relevant. The role of the scholar is to make research rigorous after it has been deemed relevant.

We—as scholars of public administration—need to reframe and expand our role so that we become integrators and connectors and move beyond the values of neutral competence and a myopic focus on narrow research questions developed without connection to communities of practice. Integrating theory and practice is our best bet to assure that we are developing a cadre of future practitioners who are well equipped to meet tomorrow's public policy challenges. An Integrative Public Administration approach to research that is intentionally problem oriented, contextually grounded, and interdisciplinary will give scholars necessary knowledge and connections that will help us get there.

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