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Contract Management:
A PA Education for Boundary Managers

M. Ernita Joaquin

Graduates of public administration programs might reasonably be expected to accurately spell their names, even in their sleep. POSDCoRB. After all, it was Luther Gulick’s rock-hewn formulation of the skills involved in public administration, “circa 1916.” Almost seven decades later, in their book Governing by Network, Stephen Goldsmith and William Eggers called for a cultural transformation in the way we build capacity in the public sector, and, as I see it, crafting a new POSDCoRB for our time.

The authors drew up a list of 11 competencies necessary for personnel in networked governance. Contract management prominently joins this list. The authors saw a disconnect on several levels in contract management in government: between senior agency leaders and low-ranking contract administrators; between those who perform contract management and those who are most adept at it; between agency approaches to outsourcing and use of existing organizational resources; and between the government and the academy in equipping public service personnel. Education and training can play a role in addressing some of those gaps.

The actions happening at the boundaries of the government-private sector interface and their consequences appear to be one of the major success issues of public administration in our time. Reports of waste, weak integration and leaky accountability in this area are spawning an image of governance that muffles through relationships and begs a vision while unbridled market forces threaten to make governments less effective. What does public administration education have to do with these challenges, and what can we glean from the current environment?

We can begin by looking at the public administrators involved. The public has recently become aware of the explosion of contracts under the Bush Administration and the burden it has placed on acquisition personnel, as Representative Henry Waxman’s investigations uncovered. With the ongoing retirement of a large number of senior contracting officers, the workforce involved, according to Waxman, has mushroomed over the last decade.

Kettl wrote about the academic perception that management issues are “less sexy” than policy analysis and Cooper found that traditional courses rarely go beyond a narrow purchasing approach to include administrative law.

The training of public administrators headlined to or already in this field is spearheaded by the Defense department’s Defense Acquisition University, business schools, big consulting outfits employing former government officials, and several purchasing workers’ associations found regionally that eater to the needs of procurement managers in the private sector as well. The DAU has endeavored to make its programs more accessible to federal employees and its menu of courses range from sophisticated contract management procedures to introductory online courses that even members of the public can be certified for. Proximity to the capital and the agencies steer universities like Virginia and George Mason to tap often DC-based institutes and practitioners to teach certificate programs in contracts management and procurement, exclusively.

Outside the beltway, many business schools offer procurement and contracting courses that teach costing techniques, bidding procedures, and financial management, as one of the concentrations in business administration. Purchasing and supply management associations, meanwhile, pick up the slack and conduct regular seminars that state and local government contract managers take advantage of.

Missing in this picture is that of public administration departments and programs incorporating the needs of the new boundary and those who are most adept at it; between agency approaches to outsourcing and use of existing organizational resources; and between the government and the academy in equipping public service personnel. Education and training can play a role in addressing some of those gaps.

With the ongoing retirement of a large number of senior contracting officers--“hemorrhaging” is how the Navy calls it, according to a 2007 study by the General Accountability Office--in federal agencies, the pressures of indefinite war abroad requiring contractor support, and bureaucracty bashing policies at home that farm out jobs performed in-house, contract managers are thrown into a complex and growing role in modern public administration, but absent sufficient support.

Rep. Waxman is pushing his “Clean Contracting” initiative to mandate that agencies pay at least an additional two percent of their service contracting budgets to contract oversight, planning, and administration, which includes shoring up staff number and competencies. A “contingency contracting corps” is also envisioned to facilitate rapid contracting in the event of a national emergency. Whether or not this becomes a law, this is a direct call for more training and career prep.

For the purposes of this article, a cursory inspection of privatization or contract management courses offered as part of public administration or public policy programs in particular (not for business administration or tailored procurement and contract management degrees), including my own for the University of Nevada that have their syllabi posted on the Internet yields the following observations, which cannot be generalized as only a handful of syllabi are online and I am sure that each instructor adds something to the course that can never be gleaned from a course syllabus: The courses are mostly elective or covered under “special problems/topics in public administration,” rather than being core to the public administration curriculum.

The courses are often theory, issue, or politics-based as Kettl and Cooper have found, or they start out that way, and a quarter or up to half of the meetings in the semester may be devoted to discussing management procedures and processes. In addition, the courses are often described as within the ambit of public administration reinvolution or reform efforts, with pros and cons compared and students encouraged to review their assessment of public bureaucracies vis-a-vis private organizations. Those in public policy who frame the course within an economic regulatory framework or public and intergovernmental finance approach it from a decision making perspective, and they evaluate particular cases. The staple readings or instructional materials include classic and contemporary theoretical writings on privatization, public finance, and bureaucracy, as well as case studies of government contracting successes and failures, in book form or journal articles.

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Contract Management Courses Need Improvement

From CONTRACT MANAGEMENT, pg. 7

Actual documents or templates used by local or federal contract managers from bidding to evaluation are also tapped. In some cases like in my course, management practitioners from national or local governments are invited to speak to the class. They might bring copies of their own contracts, official forms, or copies of rules and regulations followed in purchasing and contract management. Because the courses are often issue-based, current events and legislative initiatives in privatization are usually examined by the courses found online.

I believe that contract management is taught more commonly now than can be gleaned from the Internet but only as part of the traditional courses in public economics, budgeting, or nonprofit management in public administration programs, not as stand-alone. In public budgeting, contracting is a big topic because of the very practical considerations of division of in-house versus vendor responsibilities and costs, performance standards, and budget transparency. However, this topic is huge and a night’s discussion during the semester may cover most of the politics but never enough of the process.

Would we in public administration change the way these courses are taught today?

Public administration as a discipline may have distinguished itself from political science in its promotion of the civil service but it appears to be struggling still to craft its own tools apart from business administration. To put our mark on the brand we usually framed topics within organization theory, neutral competence, and bureaucratic reform.

But as contract management is one of the most relevant skills we need now, and if it requires an understanding beyond theoretical frameworks and political dynamics, then this is just one of those bridges we constantly have to build to make the profession more relevant for its members. Collaboration between universities and local governments, long the foundation of reforms in public administration, underlies this effort. This is already happening in some parts of the country to make the courses available, for example, to county social workers, as Goldsmith and Eggers found, and should be pursued more.

My students at UNLV, who attended two Saturdays of lecture-discussions with sharing by two practitioners from Las Vegas, have suggested we tailor the topics more to the local governments and their subdivisions, how each one conducts its business and under what rules.

More actual case studies, hands-on cost-benefit analysis and simulation of the process from the decision to contract out to contract evaluation would improve any basic course. Advance courses in the field may be left in the hands of the DAU but schools can collaborate with DAU’s trainers or partner with regional associations of purchasing managers to promote year-round programs and frame it within a changing public administration milieu.

Beyond rules and techniques, however, courses should still pay attention to those internal bureaucratic dynamics that can inhibit even the most skillful acquisition personnel. Again, practitioner views should shore up academic perspectives and plans and neither party should hesitate to reach out to the other, or nobody wins in the process.

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