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To cite this article: Brandi Blessett (2018) Embedding cultural competence and racial justice in public administration programs, Journal of Public Affairs Education, 24:4, 425-429, DOI: 10.1080/15236803.2018.1520383

To link to this article: https://doi.org/10.1080/15236803.2018.1520383

Published online: 15 Oct 2018.

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INTRODUCTION

Embedding cultural competence and racial justice in public administration programs

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Public administrators are stewards of democracy and therefore, must develop competence in order to address the needs of a diverse constituency. Programs of public affairs, administration, and policy are foundational in helping students learn about and manifest a public service perspective. As graduates of these programs, students take their education and begin to apply the values learned across any number of public institutions at the local, state, or national level. Many times, public affairs, administration, and policy programs are the only orientation many public servants get that empower them to understand their role as not only public servants, but actors that can either promote or dispose of justice for individuals and communities. When administrators are interacting with individuals and groups at the margins of society, it becomes even more clear why education and training should encourage an awareness of difference and the development of appropriate skills, knowledge, and behaviors. Cram and Alkadry (2018) argue that there are more than 20 million public servants across the United States, however, membership in the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) is less than 10,000. This means that a negligible faction of the public service workforce is aware of the ASPA Code of Ethics or has been oriented to the public service values that drive the discipline. This is problematic because public service is not like business where the sole focus is the bottom-line. Citizens are not clients, but rather have rights and privileges that should be respected and acknowledged by public servants. There are distinct differences between the public and private sector, and public administration programs should be clear in their intention to help students (who will go on to be administrators) be keenly aware of their responsibilities to pursue the justice, fairness, and equity for all members of society.

Such a responsibility requires that public administration programs integrate concepts that help students interrogate issues related to injustice, disparity, and inequity; juxtapose the “classic” public administration texts with counter narratives that consider history, the environment, and social, political, and economic contexts; challenge normative assumptions of people, place, deservingness, and worth; understand the ways public policies and administrative decisions can play in facilitating injustice for vulnerable
people and communities; and introduce the idea of becoming life-long learners as it relates to developing cultural competence. Facilitating such conversations mandates that professors and instructors have the knowledge and language skills to facilitate difficult dialogues and create brave spaces in the classrooms. Bell (hooks 1994) argues “the classroom remain the most radical space of possibility in the academy” (p. 12). Therefore, if we expect to graduate students that are cognizant of and responsive to the diversity that exists in society, it requires that as educators, we “shift the way we write, think, and speak” (hooks, 1994, p. 11). The ability of educators and students to confront long-standing personal bias, which is often unconscious or taken for granted, is the first step toward inclusion and the development of cultural competence.

In this special symposium, the Journal of Public Affairs Education has published several articles designed to meet that objective. Jensen and Butz examine interventions designed to enhance student diversity through an internet-assisted synchronous model. In order to reach a broader array of students, many MPA programs offer multiple modalities for which students can receive course instruction. Online and hybrid courses, along with the traditional face-to-face classes have been popular strategies to make graduate education more accessible to adults who juggle education, work, and family responsibilities. Through a variety of data collection strategies, the authors find that diversifying the student body can influence student opinions on diversity, erodes intolerance, and enables students to challenge conscious and unconscious beliefs, knowledge, and desires. To determine the effectiveness of internet-assisted modalities, the authors recommend programs be clear about their goals, develop measurable outcomes, and evaluate specific diversity-related initiatives to demonstrate impact.

Diversity in the classroom is important. However, once in the classroom, students need to be exposed to various ideologies, perspectives, and narratives that differ from normative PA curriculum. Lopez-Littleton, Blessett, and Burr argue for the incorporation of race-conscious dialogues within PA curricula as a way to improve service delivery, and ultimately promote racial and social justice. The authors identify various ways that racism has manifested itself within the United States through institutions, policies, and customs, which has had detrimental effects for Black people and their communities. Additionally, such actions have undermined the legitimacy of the administrative state. Therefore, an explicit examination of race within public administration curricula prepares students to be aware of and responsive to the myriad ways in which injustice has occurred, but also ways to mitigate it from future practices. Lopez-Littleton, Blessett, and Burr conclude by identifying a number of strategies to help address race as a “nervous area of
government” with the hopes that public administration practitioners can become change agents in the pursuit of justice, fairness, and equity for all.

Moving from broadly promoting a race-conscious curriculum to adopting race-conscious pedagogy, Starke, Heckler, and Mackey present a model for public administration programs to respond to ethical dilemmas dealing with race and racism. The Administrative Racism Cycle, the authors conceptualize, clearly articulates how the inadequate focus on oppression and social equity in PA journals and education exacerbate racism. Through the incorporation of counter-stories, self-reflection exercises, and honest classroom dialogues, educators can begin to understand their own racial identities and how it relates to the race of others. Starke, Heckler, and Mackey argue that antiracist pedagogy can help students “rehumanize the mind with a new understanding of POC” (p. 485). Within this context, students are better able to combat race and racism in the role as public servants.

Gooden, Evans, and Pang examine a case of three African American led nonprofit agencies as a way to promote cultural competency education within nonprofit specializations. As mentioned previously, traditional public administration curriculum is often devoid of history, context, and culture. Therefore, a focus on the experience of African American nonprofit executives illuminates the different needs, experiences, and resources these leaders face when compared to their white counterparts. This case study adds to the literature, the experiences of nonwhite people who are in leadership positions within the nonprofit sector. These perspectives and experiences have garnered little to no attention in the studies of public and nonprofit administration. This invisibility equates to an inability to collectively understand the successes and challenges that may exist for organizations serving primarily African American communities, having strong ties to the local community, and the effects of including African American culture in programming. Inclusion of such analysis is an important knowledge-building resource and can facilitate the development of cultural competency within nonprofit studies.

Cram and Alkadry argue the integration of virtue ethics into public administration programs can help facilitate the development of cultural competence for public administrators. Virtue ethics specifically is highlighted because it recognizes that decisions are not always binary, but fall along a continuum, which requires administrations to be able to appreciate difference and understand the nuance required to address the needs of a diverse citizenry. Specifically, the authors argue that educators should help students make connections between the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of a culturally competent and virtuous administrator. Case studies, role playing, team-based learning, and using a dialogic model are some of the strategies identified to help supplement a virtue ethics approach. MPA and MPP programs are at the forefront of the educational experience for a good
number of public servants. Students exposure to and ability to have interactive scenarios related to ethical dilemmas will help cultivate their skillsets and thus, encourage behaviors that align with being a virtuous public administrator.

Finally, Haupt and Knox assess emergency management and homeland security programs to determine their level of cultural competence. Both professional programs are of fundamental importance to the quality of life and livelihood of all communities. However, professionals who are not culturally competent and/or lack knowledge and training could actually exacerbate inequities and marginalization for socially vulnerable communities during disasters. Using Cross' cultural competence continuum, Haupt and Knox categorize programs based on 10 cultural competence characteristics. The survey instrument allowed programs to self-report their status along the Cross' continuum. Findings suggest a great number of programs identify as either cultural pre-competence, cultural competence, or culturally proficient. Programs still experience problems with the measurement of learning objectives, lack of resources, and insufficient buy-in. The authors advocate for reliable and valid assessment tools as a way to create a common understanding of cultural competence, its characteristics, and ways to incorporate it into program curricula.

The articles in this issue identify specific resources and strategies to help programs address and be more mindful of social equity and justice. Additionally, the articles offer key insights into effective ways to develop cultural competence. Moving the needle on these issues will require programs to invest in training, resources, and infrastructure to demonstrate a long-standing commitment to inclusion, racial justice, and cultural competence. Educators must recognize their responsibility to facilitate difficult conversations, create brave spaces in the classroom, and expose students to new ideas and perspectives. PA programs, through their educational curriculum, can help bridge the gap between theory and practice for future administrators. For the communities being served, this could encourage trust and legitimacy. Considerable vulnerability exists for people and communities at the margins of society. For the field and practice of public administration to be relevant to the broader society, issues of justice and equity have to be part of the education, training, and values system that guide the profession. The inability, unwillingness, or lack of concern for these issues does not absolve the field from outcomes that are detrimental to some and not others. More than anything, silence and inaction will be viewed as being complicit in the maintenance of the status quo. Public administration must be the example and lead society toward a future that is inclusive and considerate of all its citizens.
Notes on contributor

Brandi Blessett is an associate professor and MPA Director in the Department of Political Science at the University of Cincinnati. Her work prioritizes issues related to social justice, cultural competence, and administrative responsibility. She examines the role public institutions and administrative actions play in facilitating disadvantage for vulnerable communities. Dr. Blessett hopes her work will lead to better engagement between public administrators and the diverse constituents they serve.

References


