Public Management Research: A Twenty Year Perspective

by Stuart Bretschneider

This paper includes some facts but mostly my observations and opinions about how the field of Public Management research has changed over the past 20 years. I will organize these comments into four sections. First, I will talk about how key institutions have changed and their effects on the overall capacity of the field to produce and disseminate high quality public management research. Then, I will discuss how the focus of research has shifted during this same time period. Next, I will try to characterize broad areas where we have accumulated new knowledge. I will then conclude with some thoughts about the future of public management research.

Changing Institutions and Capacity

Let me begin this section by identifying several broad trends that have influenced changes in our institutions. First, it is almost universally acknowledged that globalization has led to greater internationalization of all institutions. The process of growing interactions across international borders has broadened the focus of our scholarship as well as those who participate in our institutions. A second important trend begins in the 1980s, where as a society we began to view government as more problematic in social problem solving, or as Ronald Reagan put it, “Government is not the solution to our problems. Government is the problem.” This shift in popular thinking decreased the stature of public administrators and directly led to major shifts in how we tackled social problems. A third important trend has been the slow but steady merging of traditional public administration, public management and public policy and to a lesser extent, international relations. We can observe this process in how we train individuals, producing more and more scholars doing research in both management and policy, as well as in how programs and departments have grown to become schools and col-
Leisha DeHart-Davis has been promoted to Associate Professor at University of Kansas. She is also a recipient of the 2009 Kemper Fellowship for Teaching Excellence.

Robert B. Denhardt, Janet V. Denhardt, and Maria P. Aristigueta have published the second edition of their book *Managing Human Behavior in Public and Non-Profit Organizations* (Sage).

Robert B. Denhardt has published the sixth edition of *Theories of Public Organization* (Thomson/Wadsworth).


James H. Svara has published *The Facilitative Leader in City Hall* (CRC Press), which includes a chapter on Phoenix mayor Phil Gordon by Janet Denhardt and Martin Vanacour.

Joe Cayer and others have published *American Public Policy* (9th ed.), (Wadsworth, Cengage Learning).

Jennifer Brinkerhoff has been promoted to full professor, and published *Digital Diasporas: Identity and Transnational Engagement*. (Cambridge University Press).

Leges, that include aspects of all these formally separate fields. Examples of this include University of Georgia’s School of Public and International Affairs, the Trachtenberg School of Public Policy and Public Administration at The George Washington University, and The Ohio State’s John Glenn School of Public Affairs. Finally, I must also point out that changes in information technology are also relevant as they have fueled globalization, but more importantly are changing how and what forms of research on public management are disseminated. Most research papers are available via the internet long before they are completely vetted through peer review processes. The internet is also the home for many third party groups that collect research and redistribute it such as Ideas (http://ideas.repec.org/) MPACT (http://www.ils.unc.edu/mpact/) and Amazon.com. These changes have major implications for the future of print journals and the peer review process. A recent edition of Nature provides a valuable perspective on the peer review process and how new information technology is already having an effect (http://www.nature.com/nature/peerreview/debate/).

Given these broader trends, how have our institutions changed and evolved over the past 20 years? First, let us look at the array of professional organizations available to public management researchers. In the late 1980s ASPA was the main professional organization for researchers and provided the main if not only high quality research journal in the field. Several other professional organizations attracted small but active public management researchers, but in almost all these situations they were outsiders to the main focus of those organizations. These included, The Academy of Management Public and Non-profit Section, APPAM and APSA. Since that time, the main organization, ASPA, has experienced dramatic declines. In 1990 ASPA reported that its main journal PAR had a circulation of 21,000 including libraries and individual memberships. In 2007 the count was slightly over 8500! These losses are not all due to academic defections but rather the general trends in the US that de-emphasized the role and stature of public administrators and government in general. Nevertheless, in the late 80s many public management researchers felt un-welcome at ASPA.

Over the next 20 years the growing success of the Public Management Research Conference and the JPART led to the birth of the Public Management Research Association. APPAM’s conference began to routinely attract a growing number public management research papers. An informal and eventually formal subgroup within APSA on public administration emerged and strengthened. Finally in the late 90s, the International Public Management Network (IPMN) was formed and increased the international connections for many of us in the field. Parallel developments occurred with regard to public management research journals. JPART began in 1991. Several older journals, such as the American Review of Public Administration (ARPA), improved their quality. Internationalization of the field led to the new print journal, International Public Management Journal (IMPJ), and the new e-journal International Public Management Review.

Along with the growth in organizations and journals for public management research scholars, changes in research methods in general have also
had a positive impact on the field’s capacity. Facilitated by changing information technology we now have tools at our disposal that permit us to do a much broader array of methodologies within and across the spectrum of qualitative and quantitative approaches to public management research. For example, in the area of qualitative methods we now have computer based tools like NUDIST and Atlas TI that allow researchers to do both theory development and hypothesis testing work based purely on qualitative data. We also have a wider array of tools for doing more and more complex theory testing from quantitative data. For example, packages like STATA make it possible to estimate and test extremely complex theoretical frameworks. We are also starting to see more small group experiments and field experiments on public management topics. Along with the growth in capacity associated with tools, we have also generated a large number of shared empirical datasets that have also spawned a wider use of research teams. Examples of this are the NASP studies, the Texas School District Studies, a number of survey datasets jointly produced by ICMA and public management researchers, and a number of studies coming out of the United Kingdom that focus on local governments. Finally, there is evidence at the program level that public management has been successful in attracting more resources than in the past. In the late 80s there was only one endowed chair, that I am aware of, that was devoted to public management; The Edwin O. Stene Chair of Public Administration at the University of Kansas. Today, there are many more such chairs such as the Howard G. and S. Louise Phanstiel Chair in Strategic Management and Leadership and The Louis A. Bantle Chair in Business and Government Policy at the Maxwell School and the Frances R. and John Duggan Distinguished Professorship in Public Administration and C.C. Crawford Chair in Management and Performance at USC. Faculty salaries, even the non-endowed chairs, have grown relative to other fields. Starting public management faculty salaries rival those for basic management in businesses schools, though still are below those in specialized areas like business finance or information systems. Program sizes have grown, resulting in approximately 14,000 to 16,000 graduates annually with degrees in either public management or public policy.

Changing Focus of Research

Clearly, as a field we have a broader set of institutions and greater capacity to generate and disseminate high quality research in public management. While these changes were occurring, a number of shifts in the focus of our research also began. In the broadest sense, many of these changes in focus have de-emphasized the normative nature of the field with regard to the overall nature of the political environment and stressed those aspects of public management most amenable to empirical social science review. One useful way to summarize this is simply by noting that in the late 80s, as a field, we were coming to the end of the Era of New Public Administration while today we are in the mid-life period of the Era of New Public Management. This shift reflects a decline in issues of normative government activism in a political sense towards normative claims emphasizing managerial impact on organizational performance.

Another shift in public management
Salo Vinocur Coslovsky (PhD, MIT) joined the NYU Wagner faculty in fall 2009 as Assistant Professor of International Development.

Alexander C. Heckman is now a Visiting Assistant Professor at The Ohio State University in the Glenn School of Public Affairs.

The ASU School of Public Affairs has continued its association with The Alliance for Innovation, a partnership between ICMA, The Innovation Groups network of local governments, and Arizona State University.

Dr. Naim Kapucu, Principal Investigator, received an award of $1,000,000 from the US Department of Health and Human Services, which will support the capacity building of 80 non-profits in Lake, Orange, and Sumter Counties.

Karen Grépin (PhD, Harvard) joined the NYU Wagner faculty as Assistant professor in fall 2009. Karen’s research examines the economics and politics of health service delivery in developing countries, with a focus on sub-Saharan Africa.


Research focus, consistent with a shift away from government action, is in our unit of analysis. Government organizations were the primary orientation for most of public management research at the start of the period, while today we study a much broader array of organizational forms. We study public-private partnerships, we study non-profit and non-government organizations, and we look at networks of mixed types of organizations. A major corollary to this shift is to study networks more and hierarchies less. Related to a shift toward networks, we have also seen a growing emphasis on issues surrounding collaboration. More complex organizational structures may require higher levels of coordination and hence collaboration to succeed. At the level of the individual, research has also shifted to including issues of collaboration within and across work groups.

Along with growing globalization, public management research has grown to include more and more work that considers core research questions in different cultural and national settings. For example, while public administration research has a long history in the United Kingdom, dissemination of current British public management research to American journals and audiences has grown significantly in the past decade. Along those same lines, the governing boards of our major professional societies are more international. In 1990 PAR’s editorial board did not include anyone from outside the US and in 2009 there were 10 international editors representing 25% of the editorial board. Similar changes can be observed in JPART’s editorial board between 1991, 2 international editors, and 2009, 14 international editors. We also have seen a great deal of new public management research based in Australia, China, Korea and India appearing in our best journals. While some of this work is of a comparative nature, most of it tends to be based on cases and survey data solely reflective of a specific national context.

**New Knowledge**

All of the previously mentioned improvements in capacity and shifts in research foci have led to significant increases in our stock of knowledge with regard to public management. It would be impossible to delineate these increases in detail, so I will simply point to broad areas in which our knowledge has seen growth.

Performance Management is one area the field has made significant improvements, but still has a long way to go. In the late 80s, organizational theorists essentially gave up on the issue of organizational performance, in part, because they could not agree on a conceptualization of the core concept. For public management scholars this is a luxury we could not afford and have continued to work in this domain. While we struggle with many of the same problems that the organizational theorists did, we have made progress. First off, the field has moved beyond naïve output measurement to include relevant theories from economics on production functions. We have considered how issues of individual factors as well as structure affect productivity of output and have even made some strides in thinking about outcomes. We have consistently evaluated the practical attempts to measure and manage performance by governments around the world and by doing so have increased our understanding of how the organizational and political context affect performance.
At the level of individual workers, we have made advances in understanding how people experience their work environment. We now have a strong stream of research reminiscent of the organizational behavior field in business schools and the work done by organizational psychologists which did not exist in public management prior to the late 80s. Much of this work is based on surveys of individuals in government organizations and sometimes attempts to tackle unique aspects of public management context such as perceived red tape or public service motivations. Some of this work grew out of studies done early on contrasting public and private organizational environments and their impacts on workers perceptions.

Finally, I would argue that we can think about much of this new knowledge embedded in what I call the three ‘P’s: Public Service Motivation, Publicness, and Public Values. The first P focuses on individuals and the work environment. The second P relates to organizational structure and function as it interacts with the external environment of organizations. The final P focuses the field back on issues of normative questions. Public values theory has the potential to re-integrate traditional normative concerns such as the constitutional role of the public administrator, definitions of the public interest, and organizational values with empirical studies on outputs and outcomes from the many different types of organizations we study: government, non-profits, networks, public-private partnerships, etc.

The Future

This brief review of the past 20 years is one of great growth and change for our public management institutions, their capacity and our knowledge. While I view these as almost uniformly positive, there are some sources of concern embedded in these changes. Changes in information technology, research methods and shifting foci of research questions has tended to over emphasize some topics at the expense of others. A review of JPART publications over the past 10 years clearly indicates a bias toward empirical hypothesis testing studies and a dearth of studies that look at normative roles for public managers and political environment.

First, I would suggest that the past is not necessarily the best indicator of the future. The very core of the US academic enterprise is shifting in a number of ways that will make growth in any academic field more difficult. Universities have been forced to broaden their mission and act more and more as entrepreneurial engines for economic development and have become less places of reflective thought. While action and prescription have always been at the core of public management, earlier generations were out of the mainstream of the academic mission and consequently devalued more reflective theoretical based research. Our advances have, in my opinion, enhanced the quality of our work in part because we have become more “academic” without giving up our roots in the real world. For example, as already noted unlike organizational theorists, we continue to tackle issues of organizational performance. Yet changes in the societal role of the university could reverse this trend. Furthermore, these changes in the university environment and demographic changes are likely to reduce overall resources available,
making continued growth more and more difficult if not impossible. Changes in technology will force public management to develop new approaches to warranting research as society demands more immediately relevant and actionable knowledge. These technological changes are in part driven by broader information linkages and result in more readily available “research products” at earlier points in their development. For years the NBER working paper series has been viewed as a credible source of knowledge, though in most cases these papers have not yet been fully vetted by peer reviewed journals. We see our early versions of papers as working paper series and as early drafts for conferences openly available and diffused. We will need to update and speed up our review and warranting process to keep pace.

The core questions we focus on over the next 20 years are likely to remain attached, at least in a broad sense, to areas we are doing research on today. We will continue to tackle problems of performance, work environment, human resources and budgeting. We, hopefully, will return to issues of a more normative nature and integrate those with our current empirical based research models to better understand the political environment and the various roles of public managers. We will continue to study organizational structure in order to improve our ability to design and build new forms and make older forms more productive.

Finally, we will continue to internationalize the field by studying public management in more and more countries. This will force us to tackle comparative administration issues. Ultimately, the big public management questions, in my mind, will have to focus on how knowledge of public management generalizes beyond place and culture or must be made conditional upon place and culture.

Grace L. Chikoto has taken a position as assistant professor in the Department of Political Science at the University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee. Her dissertation is entitled Government Funding and INGO Autonomy: From Resource Dependence and Tool Choice Perspectives.

Seong Soo Oh has taken a position as assistant professor in the Department of Politics & Public Administration at California State University Stanislaus. His dissertation is entitled The Impact of Performance Ratings on Federal Personnel Decisions.


Dr. James Perry has edited The Jossey-Bass Reader on Nonprofit and Public Leadership (Jossey-Bass), which offers a diverse collection of writings on leadership and management in the public and nonprofit sectors.


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JPART Editor’s Report

by Craig Thomas

JPART’s excellent reputation continues to draw a large number of submissions. In 2009, we received 229 new manuscripts, of which 136 (or about 60 percent) were sent out for review. Selectivity also remained high after review, with 28 manuscripts accepted (most of which were submitted in prior years). The average turnaround time for reviewed manuscripts remained under 90 days, but it could be faster. We ask referees to submit their reviews within 30 days. If all referees do so, then decision letters can go out in less than 60 days (allowing time to find referees, analyze their reports, and write decision letters). I’d like to thank all JPART referees for providing timely, high-quality reviews that help authors improve their manuscripts.

JPART also maintained its high reputation in terms of citations. In the 2008 journal impact factor rankings, JPART was #2 among 28 journals, with the Journal of European Public Policy receiving the top spot. JPART has thus been ranked either #1 or #2 since 2005. This is an extraordinary accomplishment, demonstrating great regard for the journal. The most cited article in 2008 was “Modes of Network Governance: Structure, Management, and Effectiveness,” by Keith Provan and Patrick Kenis. Congratulations also go to Chris Ansell and Alison Gash, whose article “Collaborative Governance in Theory and Practice” was downloaded 1455 times in a single year (September 2008 to August 2009).

Downloads have become an important indicator of immediate impact. In this regard, you should know that all accepted and typeset articles can be downloaded before they appear in print via Advance Access (http://jpart.oxfordjournals.org/papbyrecent.dtl), which provides guidelines on how to cite the on-line version. JPART publisher Oxford University Press considers the on-line version of an article (not the print version) to be the year of publication. As such, it is counted in the rolling two-year impact factor. Thus, the impact factor for 2008 is the number of articles published in JPART 2006 and 2007 divided by the number of citations to those articles in 2008 in all journals.

The biggest change for JPART this year was in the editorial team. After beginning my service as editor in January, I appointed three new co-editors – Keith Provan, Jodi Sandfort, and Andy Whitford – who joined continuing co-editors George Boyne, Anne Khademian, and Don Moynihan. The co-editors advise me in their areas of expertise on which manuscripts should be reviewed and who should review them. When the reviews come in, we jointly reach a decision on the manuscript and write the decision letter. If a co-editor’s name appears at the bottom of a decision letter next to mine, then you will know that a co-editor worked with me on your manuscript. If only my name appears, then there was no co-editor. I am the sole editor for the majority of manuscripts, and play an active role in all co-editorial decisions. The co-editors do not serve as referees.

One final point: I indicated when I became editor one year ago that I would not make major changes in the
Maria Damon, Assistant Professor of Public Policy and Environmental Studies, secured a grant from the National Oceanic and Atmospheric Administration to research developing meaningful ecosystem indicators to inform resource management.

Sewin Chan, Associate Professor of Public Policy at NYU Wagner, was recently named to the U.S. Department of Labor Advisory Council on Employee Welfare and Pension Benefits Plans.


Stephen P Osborne edited and published The New Public Governance? Emerging Perspectives on the Theory and Practice of Public Governance (Routledge). This collection sets out to explore the emerging field of public governance studies and to present a framework with which to understand it.

The Accenture Advances Award for the best article published in the International Public Management Journal was awarded to R. Karl Rethemeyer and Deene Hatmaker of SUNY-Albany in August of 2009.

The field of public administration has few candidates for the title “founding father” with a stronger claim than Luther Gulick. A century ago in NYC, Gulick helped launch and directed the Training School of Public Service within the Bureau of Municipal Research, which later evolved into the Institute of Public Administration (IPA). IPA, the first center of professional education for public service, pioneered a rigorous approach to the work of government. NYU Wagner convened a December 4 symposium of faculty, students, alumni, and NYC officials to honor Luther Gulick and the IPA. George Frederickson, Edwin O. Stene Distinguished Professor of Public Administration at the University of Kansas, and Kenneth Meier, Charles H. Gregory Chair in Liberal Arts and Distinguished Professor of Political Science at Texas A&M University, joined several NYU Wagner faculty members to examine the contemporary relevance of Luther Gulick and IPA’s contributions to the field. Visit http://wagner.nyu.edu/podcasts/ to hear the symposium podcast and read the papers.

Symposium: “Legacy and Contemporary Relevance of Luther Gulick and the IPA”
Highlights from the 10th Public Management Research Conference in Columbus, OH

The 10th Public Management Research Conference was held October 1-3, 2009, by the John Glenn School of Public Affairs at the Ohio State University in Columbus. Dozens of scholars represented 92 total universities, from 31 different American states. 36 of those universities lie outside the United States. In two days there were 36 panels at which 144 papers were presented. Papers were written by a variety of authors, and covered several themes related to public management. Paper authors were comprised of 65 international participants from 13 different countries around the world. Additionally, 40 PhD students contributed to papers presented at the conference.

Peter J. May of the University of Washington has been named the Donald R. Matthews Distinguished Professor of American Politics.


Anthony Kovner, Professor of Health Management, co-authored Health Delivery in the United States (9th edition) (Springer) and Evidence-Based Management in Health Care, (Health Administration Press).

Karen Grépin, Assistant Professor of Global Health Policy, secured a grant from the NYU Global Public Health Research Challenge Fund to establish a comprehensive healthcare-performance-monitoring system in Ghana.

Newly granted PhDs from the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy include: Natalie Helbig, Moses Kamya, Morris Bidjerano, Ting-Wei Chiang, Ahmed Guler, Angie Chen Dalton, Hyungjung Kim, Do Han Kim, Deneen Hatmaker, and Lei Zheng.
Zhan Guo, Assistant Professor of Urban Planning and Transportation Policy, secured a grant from the Mineta Transportation Institute to study the first mileage-fee-replacing-gas-tax program in the U.S., and another from the Managing World Cities Program to conduct a study with researchers from the University of Hong Kong on the pedestrian environment in Hong Kong and New York City.

R. Karl Rethemeyer has been promoted to Associate Professor, and is the new chair of the Department of Public Administration and Policy for the Rockefeller College of Public Affairs and Policy.

Natasha Iskander, Assistant Professor of International Policy, received a grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation to support her research on the labor market participation of Mexican immigrants in the U.S. construction industry.

Dana P. Goldman joins the University of Southern California’s School of Policy, Planning, and Development (SPPD) faculty as professor and as the new Norman Topping/National Medical Enterprises Chair in Medicine and Public Policy, a position created to enhance USC’s knowledge of the impact of public policy on the practice of medicine. He also serves as director of the School’s new Schaeffer Center for Health Policy and Economics.
Mitchell Moss, Henry Hart Rice Professor of Urban Policy and Planning, secured a grant from the New York State DOT for the September 11th Memorial Program for Regional Transportation Planning.

Mary Kay Gugerty, Evans School of Public Affairs at the University of Washington, and Aseem Prakash, Department of Political Science at the University of Washington, have two edited volumes forthcoming: Voluntary Regulation of Nonprofit and Nongovernmental Organizations: An Accountability Club Framework (Cambridge) and Advocacy Organizations and Collective Action (Cambridge).

Paul Smoke, Professor of Public Finance and Planning, received a grant from the World Bank to run a World Bank workshop on shaping decentralization.

Rogan Kersh, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Public Policy, and Todor Mijanovich, Research Assistant Professor, secured a grant from the National Institute of Health to study the influence of calorie labeling on food choice.

Anthony M. Bertelli joins the University of Southern California’s School of Policy, Planning, and Development (SPPD) faculty as an associate professor and as the C.C. Crawford Chair in Management and Performance, which supports efforts to improve managerial performance in the public and private sectors. Dr. Bertelli has expertise in the impact of political institutions on public policy.

Sonia Ospina had a research report on a study of national evaluation systems in 12 Latin American countries published as a book by the Brazilian National Association of Local Governments.

C. Nicole Mason, Research Assistant Professor and Executive Director of the Women of Color Policy Network, received funding from the American Express Philanthropy for Lead the Way: Building the Pipeline of Women of Color Leaders in the Non-Profit Sector, which is a capacity-building and leadership initiative for women of color mid-level managers and emerging Executive Directors working in non-profit and community based organizations across the U.S.

Stephanie Moulton is assisting the Ohio Housing Finance Agency in establishing the Office of Affordable Housing Research.
Marta Panero, Deputy Director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management, and Hyeon-Shic Shin, Research Scientist at Rudin, received grants from the New York State Energy Research and Development Authority to study reducing vehicle miles traveled through urban distribution centers in the New York.

Ellen Schall Professor of Health Policy and Management, and the NYU Wagner RCLA received a grant from the Robert Wood Johnson Foundation for pilot activities to launch the RWJ Health and Societies Scholars Alumni Population Health Initiative.

Anthony Shorris, Professor of Practice and Director of the Rudin Center for Transportation Policy and Management, secured a grant from the NYMTC for work on its Executive Development Training Program. He also received a grant from the Federal Transit Administration to study peer-to-peer information exchange on BRT and bus priority best practices.

Charles Wise and Trevor Brown have been awarded a contract by the U.S. Agency for International Development to assist the Parliament of the Autonomous Republic of Crimea, Ukraine in developing as a representative institution.
Newly graduated PhD’s from the John Glenn School of Public Affairs at the Ohio State University include: Angela Crandall, Alexander Heckman, and Hung Phu Nguyen.

Rae Zimmerman, Professor of Planning and Public Administration, secured a National Science Foundation Scholars for Service Grant, for graduate students to study policy aspects of cyber security and infrastructure. She also secured a grant from the U.S. Department of Homeland Security to research using infrastructure density for research allocation policy.

Dennis Smith, Associate Professor of Public Policy, Rogan Kersh, Associate Dean for Academic Affairs and Associate Professor of Public Policy, and Allen Zerkin, Adjunct Associate Professor of Public Administration, secured a grant from the Federal Transit Administration to study public participation efforts by New York’s Metropolitan Transit Authority (MTA).
Management Matters

THE PMRA NEWSLETTER

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