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COMMUNICATION IN PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
THE NEED FOR SKILL-BASED EDUCATION

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Introduction

"No ability is as important to the public manager as the ability to speak and write effectively . . . without the ability to impart and receive ideas, they cannot function effectively."[1] That observation is difficult to refute, but particularly in light of the present interest in participative management techniques and approaches, from the historic need to "sell" programs to budget and policymakers. The development of complex multidimensional recruitment and selection, training, and promotion/reward mechanisms, also suggests that communication skills are even more critical for public employees.

Though we acknowledge that communication is the lifeblood of a public agency and though we purport to value communication skills as important criteria for selecting and promoting public employees, how do we address that need for communication skills in our MPA programs? That question has been given particular currency given the recent calls for greater attention to quantitative[2] and computer[3] skills in public administration graduate education. One might assume that skills in oral and written communication would be even more basic than skills in quantitative analysis and computer technologies. We hypothesize that the emphasis on, and learning activities directed toward the teaching of, these skills varies dramatically from program to program; and improve communication skills appropriate for public managers in a conscious and concerted fashion, beyond the traditional reliance on written examinations and research reports, and short in-class presentations.

The purpose of this paper is to explore issues that surround the expectation that graduates of MPA programs will be competent in the myriad of communication skills needed to maximize their contributions to their employment in a political environment in either the public or nonprofit setting. In the near future we plan to survey all accredited or rostered MPA programs to determine to what extent and at what points programs attend to the communication skills of their students.

Preadmission Issues

Most MPA programs enjoy a mix of students: preservice students who have had minimal job experience since completing their undergraduate programs; early to midcareer in-service students who seek promotion through educational credentialing; seasoned private sector "burnouts" and career changers who hope to find new and different challenges in the public sector; and, senior level public managers who are seeking the theoretical frameworks necessary to order and translate their experience and broaden their perspectives. Whatever the general composition of our student bodies, few of us can boast of filling our classes with seasoned, experienced, and sensitive communicators.

One unanswered question is the extent to which we assess the communications skills of applicants to our MPA programs. Some programs require evidence of written communication skills in the form of a short essay. Others require an acceptable GRE or other standardized test score which may measure verbal skills or may be combined with a quantitative assessment to meet a minimum aggregate score for both verbal and mathematical skills. And, some require that applicants be interviewed as part of the admissions screening process. The graduate admission literature tells us that the undergraduate GPA remains the best indicator of success in graduate school, but we have only to report that to be able to name exception after exception ---student after student---whose GPA of ten years before does not begin to predict the effects of adding the variables of increased maturity and successful job experience. That is particularly common in graduate programs oriented to midcareer, professional students rather than to preservice students in traditional academic programs. So the question we must ask is what are our entry level standards in the area of communication skills for admission into public administration graduate programs? Do we admit an applicant with an undergraduate GPA of 2.49 and a combined (verbal and quantitative) GRE score of 730 who has served as Clerk of the City Council for ten years but turn down the 1985 graduate with an undergraduate GPA of 2.49 and a GRE score of 890?

Program Issues

Given whatever admission standard we identify, inevitably one or more students reveal deficits in their written or oral expressions in an expected format and the question then becomes one of what should we do about it? Should students be required to take these courses as prerequisites to further work in the program or are they appropriate elective courses providing they teach a useful range of communication skills?

Another unanswered question is what communication skills
should be taught to MPA students as part of their program of
study. Moreover, should those skills and competencies be
consciously integrated into the curricula to assure adequate
exposure and proficiency among graduates of the program?
Stephanie Goldstein in a 1981 Public Relations Journal
article[4] suggests that public agencies should be talking to
(1) themselves; (2) regulators; (3) the general public; (4)
legislators in order to inform and maintain a good image.
Arthur Heise[5] in a recent Public Administration Quarterly
article argues that effective communication is necessary to
rebuild public confidence in government and proposes a model
to help organizations increase levels of confidence in public
agencies.

David C. Slater, resident author of the International City
Management Association in 1983, in addressing the potential
roles of city planners in administration, suggested that
communication skills were essential if planners want to be
involved in policymaking. He went on to suggest that the
communication must be uncomplicated and intelligible, brief and
clear in the presentation of data, reasonably free jargon, and
sensitive to the political realities of the audience. "In most
instances, the better articulated ideas are better understood
and more widely accepted. . . ."[6] Slater went on to outline
critical areas of communication, including analysis and
presentation of technical planning materials, memoranda writing,
mapmaking, nontechnical media briefings and public presenta-
tions, negotiation, and report writing of a variety of sorts, as
well as the use of state-of-the-art telecommunications
technologies.

To what extent and how can MPA programs address those and
other communications needs? Are effective communication skills
identified among written behavioral objectives at the program or
course level? What courses, if any, are designated to teach
communication skills? And, what innovative methods are used to
teach communication skills? David Swain surveyed 71 under-
graduate public administration programs and found the only
communication course per se to be "Public Speaking." Courses
suggestive of this title were required by eight programs and
were listed as elective for only seven more[7]

Skill Issues

A first question to be considered is whether specific
skills are identified as important in the program? The
following table outlines some of the major communication skills
that might be included in a professional graduate program. The
horizontal headings to the right of the page identify the degree
to which the communications are public.

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COMMUNICATION SKILLS

	Type	Objectives
Written[8]		
	Letters	Structure Clarity Brevity
	Letters of Inquiry Letters of Recommen- dation Letters of Complaint Informational Letters Memoranda	Structure Brevity Clarity Action Orientation
	Summaries	Brevity (one page or less) Inclusiveness Logic Clarity Accuracy
	Option Papers	Outline Options Analyses Structure Clarity Depth
	Position Papers	Advocacy
	Reports:	
	Progress Reports	Goals Accomplishments Problems Solutions Adjustments to Plans
	Employee Performance Reports Process Reports Proposal Reports Resume Writing	
	Training Manuals	Clarity of Directions

<u>Oral</u>

>   Feedback
>   Persuasive Presentations
>   Briefings
>   Negotiation
>   Impromptu Analyses
>   Long, Technical Presenta-
>   tions
>   Problem Solving and Discus-
>   sion Leading
>   Audience Analysis
>
>   Interviewing
>   Group Exercises (With and
>   Without Leaders)
>   Large and Small Audience
>   Presentations
>
>   One-on-one Communication
>   (With Subordinates, Peers
>   and Superiors).
>
>   Speeches

<u>Listening</u>[9] --Active and Passive

>   Types: Hearing
>   Analyzing
>   Empathizing
>
>
>   Purpose: to learn
>   to receive criticism
>   or praise
>   for creative problem
>   solving
>   to critically receive
>   persuasive messages
>   in meetings
>   for power and influence
>   with empathy

<u>Non Verbal</u>[10]

>   Body Movements
>   Facial Expressions
>   Gestures
>   Use of Space
>   Postural Configurations
>   Dress
>   Interior design

Are students encouraged to develop listening skills or are they simply expected to possess them?

Are students taught to use media technologies to enhance their oral presentations? Presentations can be much more effective with the use of audiovisual materials (even black-boards), flipcharts, slides and transparencies, videotapes, films and, and other aids. As an aside, we might also ask ourselves whether we use these devices in the classroom or do we ignore the opportunity we have for role modeling in the area of communication.

Are students taught to develop useful data through traditional research methods, observation, and interviews, or questionnaires? Academic programs in some cases discourage students from trusting their own perceptions or observations. Interviewing skills, critical in recruitment and other person-nel actions, are often neglected by all but the university placement office or, possibly, faculty committees charged with preparing students for Truman Scholarship, Marshall Scholarship, or Presidential Management Internship program interviews.

Are there any courses designated to address particular skill areas? For example, is there a conscious effort in the introductory courses to get students to participate in class discussion, present reports, write short case studies or response papers, do longer research projects, or anything else beyond writing essay examinations once to several times during the term? Or, is there a senior level seminar in which students do lengthy research projects, present critical analyses, and/or interact with other students in joint research activities?

Issues Related to Methods and Resources

If communication skills are considered crucial and are integral parts of the curricula, what innovative methods, if any, are used to teach those skills? What simulations are available for classroom use, such as in-basket tests or negotiation exercises? What kinds of nontraditional written exercises are being used?

At the Second National Conference on Teaching Public Administration, John McGriff suggested that assessment centers might be an effective instructional technique for public personnel education.[11] The assessment center approach might very appropriately become a means for identifying weaknesses and teaching critical communication skills to students in graduate MPA programs. He noted in his paper that assessment centers are concepts or approaches rather than locations and can therefore be used in the classroom setting.

As always, the field of public administration can draw upon the work of other disciplines or professional groups and apply it to the public sector. One such group in the area of communication is the National Council of Teachers of English, located in Urbana, Illinois. Another is the Society for Technical Writing. Both of these groups promote research and address professional writing issues. An active member of both groups has recommended two current publications which are illustrative of some of the current work being done in this area:

1. O'Dell, Lee: Writing in Nonacademic Settings to be published by Guillford Press (N.Y.) in 1986. (Note the chapter by Janice Redish on Accessibility.)

2. Williams, Joe: Ten Lessons in Clarity and Grace. Scott Foresman (Glenview), 2nd edition, 1985.

The field of oral communication similarly has its professional organizations and its gurus. One such organization is the Society for Business Communication. Craig Aronoff[12] of Kennesaw College, who is well published in the area of business communication, advocates the review of current "lay" publications in contrast to much of the academic writing in the area. He maintains the principles are straightforward and simple and believes academia has tended to mask their simplicity through the use of jargon and multi-syllabled words. Among the recommended readings are books of Rudolph Flesch, which are available in any bookstore.

This brief section on resources is intended to be only illustrative. The work being done in professional writing and speaking circles is varied and bears further study of its applicability of the field of public administration.

Options for Teaching Communication Skills

The question of increasing the teaching of communication skills in MPA programs may be as simple that providing a list of appropriate and desirable skills that faculty can use in developing class formats. The listing above might serve to increase awareness of the need to teach communications skills and to stimulate the development of course materials. Other options may be to follow through with case analyses, particularly those suggesting that students write memoranda and letters, and to use assessment centers and other simulations to encourage the development of communication skills. Finally, programs may opt to develop whole courses devoted to the development of communication skills. This latter may be a less popular choice because of the competition for subject matter identified by course titles in programs choosing to limit their required credit hours.

Summary

We have explored issues surrounding the when, how, and why of teaching communication skills in graduate MPA programs. We believe that current "hot topics" such as computer literacy and the need for greater quantitative emphasis in MPA programs should not supplant the more basic and pervasive need for graduates to be competent in all aspects of communication. To assume that all graduate students will acquire these skills without knowledge about and practice on specific skill acquisition is to make the same mistake we make when we assume that professionalism need not be taught. We offer no pat answer; we intend only to encourage further communication and discussion among our colleagues lest we ignore the essentials in our efforts to be responsive to the age of technology.

FOOTNOTES

1. H.L. Schacter, Public Agency Communication (Chicago: Nelson Hall, 1983), p. ix.

2. William L. Waugh, Jr., and Ronald J. Hy, "Policy Analysis Skills, Microcomputers and and Public Administration," Public Productivity Review (forthcoming, 1985).

3. Kenneth L. Kraemer et al., "Curriculum Recommendations for Public Management Education in Computing," Final Report of NASPAA Ad Hoc Committee on Computers in Public Management Education, June 1985.

4. Stephanie Goldstein, "Hi, I'm from Government and I want to Help You," Public Relations J. 37:10, 1981, pp 22-24.

5. Arthur Heise, "Toward Closing the Confidence Gap: An Alternative Approach to Communication Between Public and Government. Public Administration Quarterly, 9:2, 1985, pp. 196-217.

6. David C. Slater, "Some Emerging Objectives of Educating Planners and Public Administrators," Paper presented at the Annual Conference of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, Minneapolis, Minnesota, October 15, 1983.

7. David Swain, "American Undergraduate Public Administration Education: Curriculum Choices and Program Emphasis." Proceedings of the Eighth National Conference on Teaching Public Administration, April, 1985, p. 394.

8. Schacter, Public Agency Communication

9.   A.A. Gatthorn and H.R. Adams, <u>Listening. Your Way to
Manage-</u>
<u>ment Success.</u> Scott, Foresman and Co. (Glenview) 1983.

10. L.R. Cohen, "Minimizing Communication Breakdowns Between
Males and Female Managers," <u>Personnel Administrator,</u> 27 Oct
1982, pp. 57-58.

11. J.H. McGriff, "The Assessment Center as a Selection and
Instructional Technique in Public Administration." Proceedings
of the Second National Conference on Teaching Public Administra-
tion, May 1979, pp. 106-113.

12. Personal Conversation, March 5, 1986.