Grand challenges in public administration: Implications for public service education, training, and research

Teresa Gerton & Joseph P. Mitchell

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In this articleClose

Introduction

Implications for public service education and training

Educating and training current and future public servants

Conclusion

References

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Introduction

For the past few decades, the United States has been in a state of near constant change. As new challenges have arisen and demands on government have increased, however, the public sector has often been in a reactive mode – struggling to adapt to a rapidly evolving international, economic, social, technological, and cultural environment. Over the next decade, it will be even more important for governments at all levels to improve their operations so that they can both tackle new problems in new ways and earn the public’s trust.

The National Academy of Public Administration (the Academy) launched the Grand Challenges in Public Administration initiative in 2018. This effort – led by a Steering Committee of 14 members representing the diversity of the field – worked to identify the most significant challenges that government will face in public administration during the 2020s. The Steering Committee defined Grand Challenges in the public administration field as those that:

Are large in scope (interagency, inter-sectoral, intergovernmental, and multi-disciplinary);

Require significant innovation and long-term commitment (a decade or more);

Seek to achieve worthwhile, ambitious goals that we know will be challenging to address successfully;

Require paradigm shifts in thinking and/or significant change in government functioning; and

Have significant individual, governmental, and societal impacts.

Over the past year, the Steering Committee received significant public input, held multiple facilitated sessions to analyze public input, and brought their own expertise to bear in identifying Grand Challenges. The Academy’s staff conducted considerable independent research on a broad range of potential topics, and the Academy Board was actively engaged in vetting ideas, offering expertise, and making final decisions on the Grand Challenges list.

At the Academy’s annual meeting in November 2019, we identified the resulting 12 Grand Challenges in Public Administration within 4 focus areas, as outlined in Table 1.

Table 1. Grand challenges in public administration.

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Additional information about each Grand Challenge can be found online at www.napawash.org/grandchallenges.

In order to solve the Grand Challenges, public agencies will need to address the following core management issues:

Manage amidst risk and uncertainty;

Conduct business in an agile manner;

Reflect the nation’s diversity and ensure inclusion;

Improve service delivery;

Protect cybersecurity; and

Support environmentally sustainable operations.

This article identifies what schools of public administration, public affairs, and public policy (hereafter referred to as public affairs schools) can do to help the nation address the Grand Challenges in Public Administration. These schools play a critical role in imbuing public servants with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to help the nation address these challenges. Specifically, public affairs schools can further connect public administration to other disciplines, expand the curriculum and programmatic offerings, and incorporate new ways of learning.

Implications for public service education and training

The Grand Challenges have significant implications for public service education and training.

How government does the public’s business has evolved over the last few decades and will continue to do so. Governments are increasingly called upon to address complex and interconnected “wicked problems,” so the need for leaders, man