

Issues and Problems in Public Management Education

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Public Management education's (PME) negligible impact on the government bureaucracy calls for a reexamination of the PME curriculum. For instance, the "manager syndrome," which is noticeably rampant in the bureaucracy, is also perpetuated by the PME. The academe has to produce more craftsmen by reinforcing the skills aspect of public administration in the fields of accounting, finance, marketing and management.

There is so much disaffection with the bureaucracy. There is the widespread consensus that along with the growth of its workforce, there has been a corresponding deterioration in the capacity and quality of government services being delivered.

In the light of this public disaffection however, Public Management education (PME) is a virtual nonentity. Most people are oblivious to the fact that as an academic discipline, Public Administration (PA) is supposed to ultimately affect the public service, positively or otherwise. But as things stand, Public Management education does not seem to figure in the scheme of things at all.

Part of the reason is that there have not been enough PME graduates to constitute a critical mass to effect a discernible impact on the bureaucracy, which has become so rigid in its ways.

The absence of such a critical mass is quite interesting considering the fact that the Philippine bureaucracy has grown several times over the years and has consistently been the country's number one employer. Consider too the fact that PME started since 1952 and the member schools of the Association of Schools of Public Administration in the Philippines, Inc. (ASPAP) now number 37.

Perhaps we should recognize one unpleasant truth: not much value is placed on Public Management education both from the viewpoint of students and the government itself which should logically absorb and presumably benefit from the products of PME.

For several years now, the University of the Philippines had to scrap its undergraduate PA degree program for the simple reason that nobody was enrolling. This situation revealed quite clearly how low government service has come to be regarded in the eyes of young Filipinos. Nobody consciously sets out to be a bureaucrat. A young

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man or woman after finishing high school may aspire to be a doctor, lawyer, businessman, engineer, but never a bureaucrat. A bachelor's degree in Public Administration is usually pursued only as a poor second or third choice after failing to make the grade requirement in the other disciplines. On the graduate level, we all know for a fact that many, if not all of those who pursue a masters or a doctoral degree are those already in government service who need the academic credentials for a promotion.

But beyond the question of numbers and achieving the critical mass, ASPAP should answer the question: What is the distinctive competence of the PA graduate? Does going through a Public Administration course make one a better government official or employee than one who has gone through, say, a business or an education course?

In recent years, there is a growing school of thought which advocates the adoption of the practices of the corporate world as the key solution to making government more efficient, responsive and more cost-efficient. Thus, the Masters of Business Administration graduates, the economists, the corporation planners and the industrial engineers have been regarded as the fair-haired boys who will set things right in the grand scheme of things. I do not have any exact figures but I am pretty certain that in staff development expenses of the bureaucracy, much more money is spent sending people to business schools rather than PA courses. Then as now, PA graduates are automatically regarded as materials for administrative officers or personnel officers/positions. Even among the powers that be, Public Management education is hardly recognized as an ingredient to long-term bureaucratic reform.

This should be a cause for concern among ASPAP members: it is the business of schools of public administration to produce good bureaucrats. But the fact is, after 38 years, conclusive proof that PA graduates have performed better on the job as bureaucrats than graduates of other disciplines is still wanting.

Why? I trace it to the "manager syndrome" in the bureaucracy wherein everybody fancies himself as a generalist manager and nobody wants to become a craftsman. Unfortunately, PME in the Philippines has sought to perpetuate this syndrome. At the undergraduate level, we are producing people who envision entering the government service immediately as managers, concerned mainly with the broad brush strokes, not the petty operational details. This syndrome is all the more evident in the graduate level with the masters degree or the masters units regarded as the ticket out of front-line operations into a swivel chair.

The crying need of the Philippine public service is for more people with a clear notion of what needs to be done, who are competent and capable of doing it and willing to do it, even if it means rolling up his sleeves and dirtying his hands in the process. In more specific terms, the government needs people who will work hands-on in such matters as work simplification, cost-cutting or times of reduced transaction.

This is exemplified concretely in the following account. A public servant was instructed by his boss to try and reduce the red tape in the release of imported cars. He spent more than two weeks tracing the process from table to table, from person to person, from office to office documenting the paper flow. He saw that while the official flow charts showed fewer steps, the actual paper chase defied rational explanations. Some papers went back to the same person three or four times. He plotted this on paper and came up with a 7-meter chart. He says that if he can reduce the 7-meter chart to 3.5 meters, he would be happy. Thereafter, he just keeps on chipping away until he brings it to more manageable proportions. To this day, he is still at it chipping away in the hope that the process will still be shorter, less complicated and less graft-prone.

What I have just described is a craftsman. Unfortunately, in government, craftsmen are regarded as similar to peons. Such tedious jobs of documenting runaway processes are usually relegated to minor functionaries which is why they remain the way they are: red tape-ridden and graft-prone. Everybody wants to direct, manage, order, instruct, even charm. Nobody wants to document and trace and then use that documentation as a basis to try and effect a change for the better.

Thus, I am a bit bothered by the notion that the PA curricula should be overhauled with a view towards de-emphasizing the techniques aspect and putting more weight on the behavioral aspect. Since 1986, whenever the subject of bureaucratic reform crops up, the automatic reaction is that reform should take place in the moral ethical dimension. Thus, academe should strengthen this aspect in the PA curricula.

I beg to disagree. Not that they are unimportant, but can we really teach moral and ethical behavior? Sure, we can perorate endlessly on such virtues but the academe cannot go beyond just making students intellectually recognize them. The assimilation process, and eventually the issue of positive or negative behavior is determined almost wholly by the greater environment.

From my viewpoint as a practitioner, the academe has to produce more craftsmen by reinforcing the skills aspect of the PA curricula starting at the undergraduate level. The Bachelor of Science in Business Administration program offers a choice among accounting, finance, marketing, and management as fields of specialization. Why can the PA program not break out of its generalist mold and come up with specialization in government finance or local government operations or social services. As things stand, the PA graduates are regarded as "jack of all trades, master of none" which is probably why they are often relegated to being administrative or personnel officers. We have to put more rigor and more science into the teaching of PA. By doing so, we just might demolish the managers' syndrome I mentioned earlier and in the process imbue the PA graduate with that aura of competence an economics or an engineering graduate has. Thus, "selling" public administration as a priority career choice among the best and the brightest becomes a workable proposition.

And how do we exactly do this?

I propose that the academe, through ASPAP, conduct vigorous and sustained recruitment drives among high school juniors and seniors to entice them to consider public administration as a career choice. The selling proposition will not be so much the cut and dried appeals to patriotism but the prospect of becoming part of an important reform team which finally will make a difference and eventually turn the bureaucracy around.

But such a sales pitch will be hollow if Public Management education remains the way it is. The distinctive competence of graduates of PA will have to be established first and recognized. This brings us back now to the issue of imparting the distinctive skills and expertise which will set your products a cut above the rest of the traditional bureaucracy.