It could well be argued that, in the limited time students spend in MPA and MPP programs before rushing back out to the professional world, teaching them history might not be the best use of their time. MPA and MPP students need generalizable, practical, and impressive skills by which they can become more effective public servants, or at least hopefully command higher prices for their labor. History, by contrast, is voluminous, and thus takes a long time to master, the end result being personal enlightenment, with some possible examples of past experiences that may, in a very vague and general sense, apply to contemporary situations.

And yet, as Richard Harris demonstrates in his article in this symposium, history pervades most public affairs curricula, in, among other forms, histories of public administration as a discipline, historical case studies, and historical overviews of the policy-making process. To pretend that the study of history does not play a major role in public affairs education is, as Harris puts it, to live in the closet, to the ultimate harm of students, who do not learn how to critically evaluate the assumptions and potential prejudices embedded in historical narratives.

The first two articles in this symposium, by myself and Richard Harris, both grapple with the role of history in the skill-building enterprise that is supposed to define professional degree programs such as MPPs and MPAs; the third article, by Scott Cook and William Klay, provides an example of how history, in the form of Washington’s thoughts regarding the proper instruction for future public servants, might provide new perspectives on contemporary public affairs education. The final two articles, by Jessica Trounstine and Guian McKee, each provide more concrete examples of how these two authors have used history in specific MPP and MPA courses.

The articles by Harris, McKee, and I all rely on a basic distinction between history and historiography, or historical thinking. Both Harris and I focus on historiography and historical thinking in defining new skills that might be introduced into public affairs education. I explore the extent to which different modes of historical thinking might be conceived of as skills, in terms of whether they can be reduced to automated responses that can be internalized in order to create an identifiable form of expertise that can be transferred across organizational boundaries. I examine in particular three modes of historical thinking: analogizing, historical institutionalist thinking, and thinking in “time streams.” I conclude that historical institutionalist thinking has the greatest potential for development as a skill in MPA/MPP programs.

In his effort to bring history out of the closet in MPA/MPP curricula, Harris emphasizes an explicit focus on “narrative rationality”— explanation through storytelling with “plot
lines and...characters and...implicit appeals to widely held public values” that depends in part on literary and aesthetic skills for its effectiveness. McKee similarly discusses narrative rationality as a potential source for skill building in public affairs programs; though Harris focuses mostly on the construction of historical narratives as a potential skill, McGee focuses more on the recognition and evaluation of narratives, and the assumptions embedded therein.

In either case, there is no particularly sharp distinction between narrative rationality and the historical institutionalist models that I suggest could serve as the basis for historically oriented skill building in MPA/MPP programs. Indeed, historical institutionalist models are, like narratives, structured around “a beginning, a middle, and an end, involving some change or transformation” (Stone 1988, p. 138; quoted in Harris) though the terminology is different: critical junctures define a new beginning, with path dependence or some other form of stability in the middle, ending with another critical juncture. One distinction, however, is that while narrative rationality seeks to appeal to “widely held public values,” historical institutionalist models strive for legitimacy by adopting the technical language of the social sciences (and, in the case of punctuated equilibrium, evolutionary science). Thus the further skill that suggests itself is the dexterity to deploy either narrative rationality or historical institutionalism, or some combination of both, to explain a given policy problem, depending on which is more appropriate: appeals to public values or technocratic expertise.

The article by Scott Cook and William Klay stands in contrast to the discussions of historical thinking and historiography by McKee, Harris, and I. Cook and Klay actually reach back into American intellectual history and use George Washington’s thoughts regarding public affairs education, which focused on the importance of socialization and the inculcation of a sense of duty to the public good, to provide a lesson in the alternative paths that contemporary MPA/MPP curricula might have taken. Finally, the articles by Jessica Trounstine and Guian McKee examine how each author actually used history in the MPA/MPP programs at Princeton and the University of Virginia, respectively. Trounstine draws three major lessons from the “Politics and Policy Making in Metropolitan Areas” course she taught at the Woodrow Wilson School. First, she found that comparing historical and contemporary cases in a common theoretical framework—or, as she calls it, “teaching theoretically”—made the historical cases more relevant, which was especially useful if the theoretical framework were developed from historical cases, as is true with much of the urban politics literature. Second, she sought to make historical lessons relevant, primarily by comparing them to contemporary situations—an example of historical analogizing as described by Neustadt and May (1986), and also discussed by both McKee and I in our articles. Although McKee ultimately found historical analogizing to be too formulaic, and I deduced that it did not have the same skill-building potential as historical institutionalism, Trounstine notes its usefulness. Third, Trounstine also found that, in some instances, historical examples simply weren’t relevant to the contemporary concerns of her students, which led her to the judicious use of historical examples. Thus, in contrast to Harris’s claim that public affairs education is thoroughly historical, Trounstine suggests at least one of the limitations to which history can be usefully deployed in MPA/MPP programs.

McKee (notably, the only historian who wrote an article for this symposium) describes the historically oriented core course that he teaches in UVA’s MPP program as “a reflective exercise in a program that is otherwise directed to action.” Thus, in contrast to my (and to some extent Harris’s) attempt to conceive of historical thinking as a skill, McKee conceives of history as a means of reflecting upon and contextualizing the more action-oriented skill-building process. This is crucial, McKee thinks, to the role of public affairs programs in creating responsible public servants. Through training in history, MPP students have a greater perspective and
ability to challenge conventional wisdom, which, he notes, “will rarely advance the career of the MPP graduate (at least in the short term). But it is essential to good policymaking.” McKee suggests that what history can most likely contribute to MPA/MPP programs is the inculcation of a “confident humility,” meaning that it might “provid[e] a check on the hubristic qualities of public policy” while maintaining confidence in the ability of government to effect positive change.

REFERENCES


ABOUT THE GUEST EDITOR

Richardson Dilworth is associate professor of Political Science and director of the Center for Public Policy at Drexel University. He is the author and coauthor of numerous articles, author of the book, The Urban Origins of Suburban Autonomy (2005), and the editor of three books, most recently Cities in American Political History (2011).