

Understanding the Graduate Program in Public Policy and Administration

by Steven Cohen, Director

When I was a young boy, I remember watching John F. Kennedy exhorting us to ask what we could do for our country. I was powerfully attracted by the young President's call to public service, and it remains a life-long commitment as well as the central mission of the public policy and management program we have built at Columbia University.

Columbia's students and faculty hold themselves to a set of high values and ideals. We are not just about getting ahead and making money, we are about creating a better world. Our vision is an old-fashioned one, but an enduring one. It is an ideal of deferring personal and financial gain to serve the public interest. The experience of teaching, working, and learning at a university is a privilege. We feel we have an obligation to build a strong social and economic order to help members of society not as fortunate as we are.

We live on a small and increasingly crowded planet--a planet that will continue to degrade if we do not learn how to live together. The problems of today's world will only be addressed if talented people like yourselves decide to devote your careers to their solution. To do this you will need two things: a deep sense of commitment to serve the public, and the analytic and management skills to understand and organize solutions to complex problems.

In this era of reinvented governments, becoming a public sector professional does not necessarily mean working in government. The problems facing our society today cut across national boundaries and require an understanding of both the public and private sectors. Many public sector professionals work in the nonprofit sector or perform privatized government functions in private firms. Our most effective governments have learned how to leverage the market for public purposes and to use private and nonprofit organizations to deliver services. Increasingly, professionals need the ability and the agility to move among all three sectors. Columbia's Graduate Program in Public Policy and Administration assumes that in the 21st century all three sectors will need to work together to implement effective public policy.

There is a crisis of confidence in government in the United States today. People think government creates rather than solves public problems and that government programs and policies detract from quality of life rather than adding to it. This perception, that government is incompetent, is relatively recent. After the Stock Market crash of 1929 and the depression of the 1930s, people's faith in private industry was shattered. In contrast, by the end of World War II, there was nothing that our government could not achieve.

Government had been capable of the mass mobilization that defeated totalitarianism during World War II. It could accomplish anything. Obviously neither of these images is accurate. There is nothing evil about organizing human enterprises to make a profit, and there is nothing inherently inefficient about government organizations. Although the private sector has certainly provided the principal vehicle for developing the vast material wealth we enjoy, it has been left to the public sector to deal with problems that can't be handled by the free market. It was government that stabilized the agricultural economy during the 1930s and stimulated a food production system that is the envy of the world. It was government that provided insurance for the unemployed, the aged, the sick, and provided food stamps for the hungry. It is government that builds roads, sewers, and water lines. It is government that has begun to protect the air and water and tries to keep us out of the way of toxic and chemical wastes. Government is relied on to protect us, maintain the economy, and defend us from enemies abroad. Yet as we all know, government doesn't always perform its tasks efficiently or effectively. Large-scale bureaucracy, centralized rules and over-regulation of government managers have made government expensive, wasteful, and unable to solve our most pressing problems.

Today, governments are being reinvented all over the world. We at Columbia believe that change should begin from the bottom up, by changing the people who go into government. We work to improve government's performance by improving the skills of those who serve in government. By skills, I am not only referring to technical skills, such as data, policy and economic analysis, or management and budgeting. I am speaking of a broader set of knowledge. In addition to building technical skills we aim to develop:

- An ethos of public service--an appreciation of its values and its ethics and a belief in its advancement.
- An understanding of the political processes that create, change and limit public programs.
- An appreciation of the importance of interpersonal relations and group work in accomplishing complex tasks. In a modern society, the Lone Ranger is irrelevant and achieves very little.

Columbia's MPA Program accomplishes these goals in a two-year program that includes a highly prescriptive core curriculum, a summer internship, a year-long workshop, and a concentration chosen from such areas as advanced management techniques, urban policy, international affairs, environmental policy, health policy, advanced policy analysis, nonprofit management, gender policy, or social welfare policy. Three additional courses in the political, historical, social or economic context of public policy and a free-choice elective round out the program.

Over the past two decades our curriculum has evolved, and it continues to evolve as our profession changes. Last year we inaugurated a new concentration in Gender and Public Policy and a new Center for Urban Policy. In the past several months SIPA has established a new Earth Policy Center as a university-wide and international resource for the study of the environment. Hopefully, our curriculum will always change as we continue to learn. I believe it will become more international, more focused on non-

governmental organizations, and will include an even greater emphasis on analytic, communication and interpersonal skills. It is our responsibility to prepare you for the world as it really is, not the world our theoretical models say must exist.

I believe that public service is a critical profession. I also believe it is our highest secular calling. There is an element of sacrifice involved in entering public service. Though few of us go broke, even fewer of us get rich. At the beginning of my professional career, I developed the EPA's program for dealing with communities at hazardous waste sites. I had a wonderful, challenging job, but I had to work exceptionally long hours with very little monetary compensation. If money is your primary incentive in life, you have not selected a degree that's going to be particularly useful. But, if you enjoy taking on responsibility for meeting society's critical needs, public service has a lot to offer you.

I invite you to join us as we develop and define public service as a rewarding and challenging profession. We don't believe we have all the answers, but we do believe we are beginning to ask the right questions.

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