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Three-Part Harmony Commentary

Anne Mette Kjeldsen’s analysis of public service motivation, which divides Danish public service employee motivation between service production (or service delivery) and service regulation (or policy), provides a welcome expansion of the existing literature on the motivations of public service staff and how experience reshapes their predilections over time. Our experience supports her findings and suggests that her framework misses a critical third dimension of public service career choice in the United States.

Kjeldsen finds that students who begin in service production are often drawn to service regulation over time. In our experience, we have found that a substantial share of current and future public service employees are motivated to pursue a public service career by a direct, often personal, encounter with a societal need in a particular field. Students initially associate this experience with a desire to provide services themselves and begin their work lives with an experience in direct service delivery in that field—for example, as a classroom teacher, Peace Corps volunteer, or homeless shelter worker. Consistent with Kjeldsen’s findings, this experience of service delivery often leads to a shift in the student’s focus toward an interest in service regulation.

In a sense, these career trajectories reflect a process of maturation, of expanding lenses. Students begin with their own personal experience, pursue initial opportunities that help other identifiable individuals, and then move to the more abstract exercise of developing the management systems and policies that frame service delivery and the personal experience of those in need. Often, through all of these stages, they retain a consistent interest in a particular issue or field. Students enter National Association of Schools of Public Affairs Administration (NASPAA) master’s degree programs in public service seeking training in statistics, policy analysis, public management, and program evaluation—skills that will enable them to pursue careers in program management and policy development, often

around the same set of issues that engendered their initial public service orientation, but with a greater impact.

In the United States, there is a third dimension to this frame of field and evolution of role, and that has to do with the nature of the public service organizations themselves. Kjeldsen examines the experience of Danish social work students, the vast majority of whom go on to work in a single public sector, and the results of her study reflect that specific governmental context. In the United States, the public/private distinction that she draws is murkier. Most social services in the United States are delivered not by staff employed by the government but by nonprofits. And while the government retains formal regulatory authority, many nonprofits are also engaged in what Kjeldsen sees as service regulation, including development of policies, advocacy for programs and initiatives, monitoring and oversight, and capacity building. The concept of public service in the United States encompasses a wide range of organizational settings, and there is a complex mapping between organizational setting, field or issue, and service role.

Students in the United States consider not only a field and a role but also a type of organization. Prior studies have shown that many students are disheartened by the prospect of government work, seeing it as bureaucratic, inefficient, and boring (Light 2003), though there is considerable diversity in work experiences, even among units of government agencies. NASPAA students drawn to government service are often most excited about working in local government, where, in many, though not all municipalities, action is faster and partisan conflict is less heated (see data on accredited programs at <http://www.naspaa.org/accreditation/NS/data.asp>). And more than a quarter of NASPAA students feel that their interest in public service is best met by work in the multifaceted nonprofit sector, which has been described as having “the healthiest workforce in America” (Light 2002). This nonprofit

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sector is highly diverse, encompassing a range of activities from start-up social entrepreneurs to very large, long-standing, and often bureaucratic organizations. Across these varied public service enterprises, organizational cultures and missions differ, sometimes dramatically.

This variation in organizational culture means that someone playing the same role in the same field can have a very different experience in one organization than in another. For example, someone who has a service regulation motivation and an interest in women's health could take a role in policy design and management around family planning. That motivation, however, would be equally consistent with a position designing family planning grants in the federal government or managing and advocating for those grants through a newly formed nonprofit women's health clinic. A position in these highly diverse organizations would suit very different people and might generate different career trajectories.

Kjeldsen's findings may be useful to public service educators as they counsel students about potential career paths. In our program, we encourage students to explore all three dimensions of their public service careers—field, role, and organization—offering a framework designed specifically to help students “compose their careers” across this multidimensional space (see <http://wagner.nyu.edu/careers/cyc>). Students may know in what area of public service they wish to make a contribution, and they may have some sense of their capacities and strengths, but many have less knowledge of the broad landscape of organizations in which they could make a difference. The next stage in the literature on public service motivation should expand on this third element, organization.

References

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