

# Exploring Cultural Competency Within the Public Affairs Curriculum

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## ABSTRACT

With the increasingly changing demographics of the U.S. population, increased opportunities for an effective public sector arise. The opportunities can be found in new and innovative approaches to the government-citizen relationships, which take into account the cultural diversity of their population. Cultural competency initiatives within the public sector allow for increased effectiveness of the public sector and the public it serves. The following article explores where these opportunities for cultural competency initiatives can be placed within the public affairs curriculum. The article provides a framework for a cultural competency curriculum in public affairs based on four conceptual approaches: knowledge-based, attitude-based, skills-based, and community-based. Cultural competency discourse in academia sets the necessary foundation for future public administrators working in increasingly diverse populations.

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Contemporary public administration research is increasingly emphasizing the need for the public sector to explore cultural competency initiatives underscored by the continually changing demographics of the United States. White and Rice suggest that the changing demographics of the country will require public sector organizations “to develop more inclusive work cultures that have a better understanding of the many ways people are different from one another and/or different from the organizations” (White & Rice, 2005, p. 3). Bailey (2005) further suggests that demographic changes underscore the demand for more culturally competent public servants. Driven by changing demographics or an aim to have a socially equitable organization, cultural competency has surfaced as an integral part of service delivery and organizational change. Therefore, it is equally important to ensure that the public affairs and administration programs and their curricula reflect cultural competency discourse. Many public service courses hold numerous opportunities for such an inclusion, but various challenges also present themselves.

Broadly defined, cultural competency reflects specific actions or policies within an organization that enable it to more effectively serve its culturally diverse populations. The increased diversity of a population leads to an increase in the number of differences. Cultural differences can play a critical role in public service delivery as well as continued or increased citizen trust and participation in government. Cultural differences among local communities have led some local governments to adapt with efforts for increasing their cultural competency (Benavides & Hernandez, 2007). However, the health sector was first to adapt to cultural differences and changing demographics. The 1980s witnessed the emergence of a collective effort by health practitioners and scholars to promote cultural competency in health and social services (Satterwhite & Teng, 2007).

Cultural competency has numerous definitions and interpretations, each of them applicable to the various organizations of service delivery. However, each definition is underscored by a common focus on organizational change to better serve its customers. For example, Fernandopulle (2007) refers to cultural competency as the “ability of organizations and individuals to work effectively in cross-cultural or multicultural interactions” (p. 16). Moreover, competency can represent a spectrum of developmental stages (Fernandopulle, 2007). Lonner (2007) outlines cultural competency as a continuum “with no absolute fixed endpoints; that is, there is neither an exact bottom for total cultural incompetence nor an exact top measure” (p. 6). To provide a consistent understanding and resource for cultural competency in the health sector, a federally funded institution was founded: National Center for Cultural Competence (NCCC). The NCCC defines cultural competency as “having the knowledge, skills, and values to work effectively with diverse populations and to adapt institutional policies and professional practices to meet the unique needs of client populations.” (Satterwhite & Teng, 2007, p. 2)

The health sector saw cultural competency as a means to provide quality health care through the elimination of existing disparities of health service among race and ethnic groups. Cultural competency has remained a critical component of quality health care delivery. These same strides are not as evident in the public administration as a whole. Rice (2007) outlines four important reasons for embracing cultural competency in public administration: first, cultural competency recognizes the cultural context in which public encounters occur; second, cultural competency presents an opportunity to address the often inaccurate public service and programs provided to minority populations; third, cultural competency increases the relevance of a public agency’s administration, services, and programs to groups that can best utilize them; and fourth, service delivery officials are better prepared to do their jobs (p. 44).

The significant increase in research and discussion around cultural competency in the public administration raises some questions: What role do academic programs have in promoting and fostering a cultural competency dialogue?

Where are the opportunities and challenges for the inclusion of cultural competency into public administration curriculum? Cultural competency provides new and innovative opportunities for the government-citizen relationship. However, through a review of public administration concepts and literature, it should be noted that cultural competency will face ideological and practical challenges before its eventual inclusion in public affairs. Moreover, a review of contemporary cases and literature indicates that there are opportunities for such a discourse to be grounded in existing public administration core concepts.

#### CULTURAL COMPETENCY EDUCATION

The notion of incorporating cultural competency into the curriculum of higher education is not new. Higher education programs for the health profession have explored and practiced teaching cultural competency for the past three decades. More importantly, cultural competency training has been found to improve the knowledge as well as the attitudes and skills of health professionals (Beach et al., 2005). Moreover, Beach et al. (2005), in a review of studies dating back to 1980, found that cultural competency education also affects patient satisfaction. Some of these studies outlined objectives and frameworks for incorporating cultural competency into health care curricula.

Ronnau (1994), in a study of cultural competency in social work education, outlines three objectives for educators in moving students toward cultural competence: (a) raise the students' awareness about the importance of being culturally competent; (b) create an atmosphere in which students and teachers can ask questions and share their knowledge about cultures; and (c) increase the amount of information the students have about cultures, including their own (p. 31). Ronnau (1994) also outlines the values of a "culturally competent professional" that students should become familiar with (p. 33). First, cultural competency requires a commitment—acknowledging a lack of knowledge about other cultures and a commitment to learn about them. Second, a culturally competent professional accepts that differences exist between people of different cultures. Third, a professional must be self-aware and recognize the influence of his or her culture. Next, the culturally competent professional will be aware of the different meanings that behaviors may have among different cultures. Fifth, the professional recognizes that knowledge acquisition is an ongoing process. Finally, Ronnau (1994) points out that "culturally competent professionals will be able to make use of the cultural knowledge they have gained and adapt their practice behaviors to meet the needs of the people they are serving" (p. 34).

Just as ideas for cultural competency education within the social work curriculum have been developed, scholars have also discussed and provided frameworks for cultural competency within medical and nursing education (Anderson, Calvillo, & Fongwa, 2007; Kripalani et al., 2006; Rapp, 2006). Kripalani et al. (2006) outline the emerging conceptual approaches for teaching cultural compe-

tency in medical education. First, knowledge-based programs highlight information such as definitions about culture and related concepts. Second, attitude-based curricula underscore the impact of sociocultural factors on patient's values through self-reflection. The third major conceptual approach toward cultural competency teaching is skill building. These skill-based educational programs focus on learning communication skills and applying them to negotiate the patients' participation in decisions (Kripalani et al., 2006).

Adding to the three conceptual approaches just described, Anderson et al. (2007) introduce a community-based approach in their exploration of cultural competency in nursing education. They emphasize the importance of community involvement in all aspects of cultural competency from education of, to the eventual practice by, health practitioners. They propose a four-way partnership with community members, health professionals, students, and faculty to work together in defining cultural competency relevant to their community. The authors conclude that when the community is involved, cultural competency education, practice, and research "become complementary and linked components" that enhance and reinforce each other and ultimately lead to improvements in service (Anderson et al., 2007, p. 57).

The application of cultural competency within curricula is not limited to health professions. Although the research of a cultural competency curriculum is limited in public affairs, a review of the associated discussions, such as diversity and social equity, highlights current opportunities and direction. Johnson and Rivera (2007) point out that "graduate public affairs students need greater exposure to diversity themes and issues" (p. 15). In its guidelines for public affairs schools seeking accreditation, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) advances the notion of diversity across curricula. As NASPAA notes, public affairs graduates are "required to function in increasingly diverse and heterogeneous organizational settings," therefore, "course and curriculum materials as well as other programmatic activities should expose students to issues relating to race and gender and develop in them the capacity to work effectively with individuals representing diverse backgrounds" (NASPAA, 2009, p. 1).

Although most public affairs programs include some form of diversity within the curriculum, this is not a standard across all programs; in some cases, this component is limited to a minimal part of a course rather than an entire course or courses (Hewins-Maroney & Williams, 2007). Similarly, in some public administration courses, such as human resource management, concepts such as social equity are covered but opportunities to formally integrate an understanding of them into HR courses are underdeveloped (Gooden, 2007). Moreover, some public affairs programs can mask the lack of diversity within the curriculum with the argument that there is little diversity among students and faculty (Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Boasiako, 2008).

Efforts toward having a more socially equitable public administration begin with the education of future administrators (Brintnall, 2008; Wyatt-Nichol & Antwi-Boasiako, 2008). Ultimately, a program failing to address cultural competency and diversity issues within its curriculum limits the ability of its graduates to “deliver responsive public service” (Hewins-Maroney & Williams, 2007, p. 36).

Rapp (2006) suggests cultural competency education as a key mechanism for the delivery of culturally competent services. To this end, Rapp provides a framework for a cultural competency curriculum that outlines general components and content examples. This framework is adapted for public affairs curricula and expands to include the four conceptual approaches outlined earlier: knowledge-based, attitude-based, skills-based, and community-based. The framework (Table 1) is used as the basis and outline for the remainder of this paper, following a discussion of the current state of public affairs education and diversity.

#### KNOWLEDGE-BASED CURRICULUM

Cultural competency can become an integral part of public affairs curricula through various content areas; however, none is more critical than having a normative understanding of the importance of a culturally competent public sector. Therefore, it is critical for public affairs programs to provide a knowledge-based component of cultural competency into their curriculum. Content examples for this component area include definitions and terms, local and national demographics, discussions of societal disparities and social equity, and an understanding of the legal and policy implications of cultural competency. Although recent research has focused on a culturally competent public sector, a normative understanding of definitions and terms for course discussions presents a theoretical challenge.

There is an inherent belief within public administration that public servants should be neutral in service delivery, thus limiting discretionary and political decisions by public servants. However, cultural competency runs directly counter to this ideal and expects recognition that a diverse public has diverse needs. Rice (2007) argues that “a focus on cultural differences and cultural variations does not fit the neutrality/equality principles—treat all clients the same with neutral feelings” (p. 44). Rice (2007) also states that “the focus on cultural competency in public administration/public service delivery is evolving very slowly and, therefore, the concept has yet to be clearly accepted and understood by the community of public administration/public service delivery scholars and administrators” (p. 44). For cultural competency efforts in public administration to succeed, the field of public affairs must first acknowledge that cultural differences are critical in public service delivery. However, this acknowledgment is dependent on a normative understanding of cultural competency.

Moreover, the concept of knowledge-based content of cultural competency can be found amid curriculum discussions of social equity. Cultural competency builds on the ideological legacy of social equity as well concepts that emerged from the

Table 1.  
*The Framework for a Cultural Competency Curriculum in Public Affairs*

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<b>Cultural Competency Components</b>	<b>Content Examples</b>
Knowledge-based	Definition/Terms Local and national demographics Societal disparities Policy and legal
Attitude-based	Self-reflection Societal biases Organizational culture/Change
Skills-based	Communication Program development Program assessment Technology
Community-based	Public involvement Nonprofit partnerships Internships

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Minnowbrook Conference in 1968 and New Public Administration. New Public Administration (NPA) aimed to add social equity to administration's objectives questioning whether the service delivered by public agencies enhanced social equity (Frederickson, 2007). In speaking of NPA, Frederickson (2007) points out that administrators are not neutral and "should be committed to both good management and social equity as values, things to be achieved, or rationales" (p. 297).

In addition to definitions and terms, knowledge-based curriculum can be positioned with an understating of the policy and legal aspects of cultural competency. As Bailey (2005) points out, there has been continued congressional legislation requiring or promoting cultural competency among federal employees or recipients of federal funds. The origins of federal mandates for a culturally competent administration can be traced to the Hill-Burton Act (1946) and the Social Security Act (1965), which emphasize providing health services to individuals who have limited English proficiency (Bailey, 2005). Civil rights laws have also fostered the development of language access services in health institutions

and organizations with staff diversity (Mayeno, 2007, p. 12). These early mandates require agencies and other federally funded service providers to reach out to individuals with limited English proficiency. As a result, these organizations are “forced to confront and address the cultural barriers that exist in communication and in establishing effective service delivery” (Bailey, 2005, pp. 179–180).

The knowledge-based component of a cultural competency curriculum has many facets that can be explored. This section highlights only a few areas where cultural competency can be further understood and taught; namely, through definitions and policies. However, other examples include discussions of demographics, social disparities, and to a greater extent, the role of cultural competency in the context of social equity.

#### ATTITUDE-BASED CURRICULUM

A second curriculum component underscores the attitudes of people—most notably, of public servants. Content examples include but are not limited to self-reflection and societal biases. When considering the discretionary power of public servants, an individual’s views become a critical part of the equation. As noted earlier, an inherent ideology is that public administration should be neutral, but that actual practice is far from it. This concept underscores the potential need for a more representative bureaucracy.

Meier and Nigro (1976) define the theory of representative bureaucracy as administrators with attitudes “similar to the attitudes held by the general public, the decisions administrators make will in general be responsive to the desires of the public” (p. 458). Krislov (1974) viewed representative bureaucracy as a notion that “broad social groups should have spokesmen and officeholders in administrative as well as in political positions” (p. 7). Lipset (1950) argued that the social values of bureaucrats influence their governmental decisions—a reflection that Mosher (1968) identifies as *active* representation. The theoretical basis of active representation asserts that favorable decisions should be expected by administrators representing a sector of society with similar views and demographics. On the other hand, passive representation asserts that a bureaucracy is representative simply when the demographic characteristics of the community are similarly reflected in the administration. Equal employment opportunity, affirmative action, and managing diversity are key elements for achieving passive representation in public sector service and delivery; but to achieve active representation, government employees need to become culturally competent (Bailey, 2005).

Street-level bureaucrats are critical components in the development of culturally competent policies and programs within organizations. Brintnall (2008), writing from an international perspective, argues that the work of Central and Eastern European civil servants is critical given their direct involvement with citizens and communities in addressing issues of ethnic and religious diversity, social and political equity, and political pluralism and conflict. Moreover, Brintnall

(2008) suggests that civil servants “must know policy issues appropriate to the issues they deal with and be effective at implementing policy, and they must have an understanding of the particular circumstances of the citizens with whom they deal” (p. 40). Through research interviews, Brenner (2009) finds that Latina administrators’ “integrated multiplicative identities” allows for their policy intentions to be realized within government and in turn influencing policy that impacts their ethnic communities” (p. 846). A representative workforce can help in communicating rules, as Brenner (2009) exemplifies by stating, “Latina administrators are able to shed light on ambiguous rules and norms that may have previously marginalized Latino/a clientele and residents” (p. 846). Ultimately, one argument calls for creating a more diverse workforce, which can then help in achieving organizational cultural competency (Betancourt, Green, & Carrillo, 2002).

In addition to a curriculum that incorporates the concept of a representative bureaucracy, attitude-based content looks at students’ individual views and beliefs. As Lonner (2007) argues, “a provider’s cultural competency is based on her ability to overcome misperceptions, misconceptions, and miscommunications at a one-to-one level with patients” (p. 8). Students coming into MPA/MPP programs may be doing so with preconceived views and beliefs that can influence their perceptions of and future interactions with diverse populations. Borrego (2008) has found that Hispanic MPA students have internalized perceptions such as helplessness and resiliency issues. These internalized perceptions may dictate their future actions as public servants. As Rice (2007) highlights, “being competent in cross-cultural situations means learning new patterns of behavior and effectively applying them in appropriate settings” (p. 42). One approach may be for graduate programs in public affairs to adopt foundational principles for decision making that is based on human rights theory and puts social equity at the forefront (Alvez & Timmey, 2008). Alvez and Timmey (2008) highlight the failed response to Hurricane Katrina victims as an example of where public administrators would have benefited from adopting a human rights framework for decision making. Culturally competent approaches begin to set the educational foundation for providing more equitable and effective responsive services and programs.

An area of additional consideration in developing an attitude-based curriculum for cultural competency is reflecting upon the perception communities have of their public administrators. For example, studies of Latino perceptions of government have found differences among the various Latino groups. De la Garza et al. (1992) found some differences among Mexican, Puerto Rican, and Cuban populations. Cubans were found to have the highest degree of trust in government. Just over 50% of U.S. Mexicans and Puerto Ricans felt that government is run “by the few in their interest” (p. 81). Similarly, Barger (1976) found differences in Mexican American, African American, and Anglo students’ images of government.

In addition, students can participate in existing programs and centers that raise awareness of biases and diverse cultures. For example, the New York Tolerance Center “offers a series of programs exploring the character and consequences of racial, ethnic, religious and sexual bias,” and some programs are designed specifically for public servants such as law enforcement and educators (Fried, 2008, p. 1). The White Plains Police Department intends to have all 215 officers attend the Center’s “Building Community Trust in a Diverse Post-9/11 Environment” (Fried, 2008, p. 1). Rather than wait until students become public servants, such programs can be incorporated in public affairs curriculum to begin developing understandings of cultural competency sooner instead of later.

#### SKILLS-BASED CURRICULUM

In discussing health care service delivery, Betancourt (2004) notes that cultural competency will not eliminate disparities but serves as a set of skills for providers to deliver high-quality care to patients. By accepting this premise, Betancourt argues, cultural competency can be viewed as mainstream movement—a premise just as applicable in the public sector as in the health sector. A skills-based curriculum builds on existing public affairs skills such as communication, leadership, and program planning and evaluation, yet it incorporates both the knowledge- and attitude-based curriculum to translate into cultural competent skills. As public administrators, students will be responsible for executing the skills learned throughout the curriculum. Two content examples, communication and assessment, are explored further here.

Bailey (2005) outlines five elements organizations need to develop to become culturally competent. One of these elements is self-assessment: measuring and assessing cultural competency within an organization is critical to overall efforts of implementation. Assessing cultural competency within a public organization includes several aspects such as the racial and ethnic diversity of staff, whether their mission statement acknowledges the importance of cultural diversity, the requirement of staff training in cultural competency, and overall organizational environment (Rice, 2008). In the application of a skills-based performance assessment, Rice (2008) outlines tools and measures that can be utilized by organizations, practitioners, and students and ultimately incorporated into a public affairs curriculum.

An additional skill often covered in academia is communication. Cultural competency emphasizes recognition of diverse languages, and short of taking a foreign language course, students have the opportunity to explore new and innovative ways that technology can help improve the ability to communicate in diverse populations. New technologies in the public sector allow for enhanced efficiency in government’s effort to provide public goods and services (White & Rice, 2005). For example, municipal call centers and websites have the ability to disseminate and process information in the primary languages of their constituents. With this ability comes an increased dependence on new technologies for

service delivery. One approach toward addressing the increased dependence on technology is to ensure that government's technology-based services are multilingual. Kellar (2005) points out that "languages are the front door to another culture, and many local governments are recognizing this fact" by providing initiatives and programs within multilingual communities (p. 8). A critical step in advancing cultural competency in the public sector is ensuring programs and services are accessible in the primary client's language. This can be achieved by translating brochures and program materials as well as websites.

#### COMMUNITY-BASED CURRICULUM

Collectively, knowledge, attitude, and skills-based components of a cultural competency curriculum can go a long way toward ensuring a culturally competent public sector. However, all three component areas and examples discussed can be significantly enhanced by incorporating the community. Benavides and Hernandez (2007) exemplify the benefit of working with communities through their review of best practice cases that highlight how by collaborating and seeking participation from Hispanic localities, public sector organizations are able to design optimal programs.

Wu and Martinez (2006) identify six principles for implementing cultural competency. After an initial recommendation underscoring the role of community representation and feedback, they go on to suggest that organizations seeking to advance cultural competency within their organization should seek out leaders of community groups so they can become active participants in developing and implementing guidelines. Successful best practices in local government tend to be those that reach out and tailor programs with input from the community they are aiming to serve (Benavidez & Hernandez, 2007).

The practice of public sector organizations working with communities has critical benefits that should first be explored in academia. This ideology is reflected by the NASPAA diversity guidelines, discussed earlier, for schools seeking accreditation in public affairs education. In two of the five examples that NASPAA provides in efforts toward a diverse curriculum, the importance of working with the local community is emphasized. First, NASPAA (2009) suggests that public affairs programs use "prominent women and minority officials as guest speakers in courses, workshops or special programs." This relationship between academia and local community leaders of diverse backgrounds is a critical introduction to diverse populations; but more important, it is an introduction to the practice of working with the community.

A second NASPAA recommendation is for public affairs programs to design internship experiences to place students under the supervision of women and minority agency mentors. This recommendation also works at various levels. Working with and in diverse groups via an internship highlights the importance of internship placement, but it also provides the critical mentorship that can help meet the challenges and opportunities discussed in the attitude-based

curriculum. Similarly, Johnson and Rivera (2007) recommend that internship placements aim toward putting students in contact with communities of color. Ultimately, any efforts to bring students, faculty, and the community together help ensure the success of a community-based curriculum.

## CONCLUSION

With the increasingly changing demographics of the United States, new opportunities and challenges will arise for public service delivery. These opportunities and challenges can be met through innovative approaches and organizational changes that reflect effective service delivery for diverse populations. As outlined in this discussion, public sector organizations and employees can be at the forefront of such efforts through a culturally competent curriculum of public affairs programs. Building on existing practices and culturally competent curricula, this paper provides a framework for a culturally competent curriculum. This framework outlines four conceptual approaches—knowledge-based, attitude-based, skills-based, and community-based—and offers content examples for each approach. Although this paper does not present an exhaustive list of content examples, it is evident that ample opportunities exist for public affairs programs to make their curriculum more culturally competent, if they are not already doing so. Based on the existing studies and this framework for a culturally competent curriculum, it is important to note that the four content areas have their greatest potential when evaluated and practiced collectively. In closing, it is highly recommended that public affairs schools explore and assess their current curriculum to find where they can further integrate cultural competency.

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