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## Teaching Ethics in Public Administration

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### Synonyms

[Course material](#); [Ethics](#); [Pedagogy](#); [Standards](#); [Values](#)

### Definition

Teaching of values and procedures that are relevant to the novice public administrator

### Introduction

The teaching of ethics in public administration is a field that has grown considerably over the last 40 years. This is because of concerns within educational institutions that offer the Masters in Public Administration (MPA) and Doctor of Public Administration (DPA) graduate degrees, as well as the belief that citizens beyond the profession hold that public administrators must be accountable, must act in ways that are transparent and public, and must keep to a high standard of ethical behavior. To this end, professional organizations like the National Association of Schools of Public

Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) have asserted the importance of ethics in the pedagogical structures of MPA, DPA, and PhD programs, and a large number of philosophy and political science departments offer undergraduate applied ethics courses on Ethics in Public Administration and Ethics in Public Policy. There are a variety of specific areas to consider: the student audience, the ethical theories and values that are included, and the case studies or dilemmas that students use to practice their decision-making methods and keeping the course relevant and current to the professional life of public administrators currently working in the field. Courses in ethics in public administration are frequently the first step to a broader sense of professionalization for the student, as well as an opportunity to address a deeper set of values and concerns beyond administrative or bureaucratic procedures.

### The Student Audience

There are a variety of students taking courses in public administration with a wide range of motivations. Some students will be future public administrators, working or elected into governmental organizations. Other students will be future public administrators in private sector organizations. A third group of students are those interested in ethics and philosophy, seeking a new set of applications and ways to use ethical theories. There will also be students who are

interested in pursuing careers as professors, academics, or researchers in higher education. At public state universities, all four groups frequently take upper level undergraduate and first year graduate student courses on Ethics in Public Administration. This heterogeneous variety of students in ethics in public administration reflects the growing popularity of Masters in Public Administration (MPA) and Doctor of Public Administration (DPA) graduate degree programs as a path for undergraduate majors in philosophy, political science, and business administration.

A historical timeline of Ethics in Public Administration:

1970s	Approximately 12 Masters in Public Administration graduate programs added ethics instruction and/or entire ethics courses into their curriculum
1978	US President Jimmy Carter signs the Ethics in Government Act, which addresses federal employee's standards of behavior and duties to serve the best interests of the American public The NASPAA member survey of MPA programs finds that 43.3 % of programs that responded to the survey reported that their program includes one course on ethics
1980s	Approximately another 10 MPA programs add ethics instruction and/or courses
1984	The American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) adopted an ethics code designed to raise ethical standards and practices among ASPA members
1986	First edition of David H. Rosenbloom's <i>Public Administration: Understanding Management, Politics, and Law in the Public Sector</i>
1988	The NASPAA created curriculum standards with specific language that public administration programs must "enhance the student's values, knowledge, and skills to act ethically and effectively"
1988	Major study of ethics in public administration courses, making a distinction and a progressive shift between courses focused on bureaucratic ethos and courses focused on democratic ethos
1995	NASPAA member survey of MPA programs finds that 60 % of programs that responded to the survey reported that their program includes an offered ethics course
1997	The fourth edition of Simon's classic text entitled <i>Administrative Behavior</i> is published (50 years after the first edition)
1997	Studies completed on "conceptual diversity" in Ethics in Public Administration and on the

(continued)

	significance of coursework in Ethics in Public Administration during the careers of public administration degree graduates
1997	Peer-reviewed literature provides specific case study methods for addressing ethical dilemmas in public administration
1997	H. George Frederickson publishes <i>The Spirit of Public Administration</i>
2006	The ASPA makes a special call to scholars and teachers of public administration via Public Administration Review to engage in a stronger research and education agenda to enact deliberative and participatory governance in the next generation of administrative leaders
2009	<i>Public Administration Review</i> publishes a special Supplement to volume 69 on Comparative Chinese/American Public Administration, including an article describing paradigm shifts in the teaching of public administration in the two countries by Xun Wu and Jingwei He
2009	Raymond W. Cox III publishes <i>Ethics and Integrity in Public Administration: Concepts and Cases</i>
2010	Public Administration Review includes a special volume on the "Future of Public Administration," recommending, for example, that the pedagogy of public administration must include values of environmental, economic, and social/political sustainability
2014	Eighth edition of David H. Rosenbloom's <i>Public Administration: Understanding Management, Politics, and Law in the Public Sector</i> with coauthors Robert S. Kravchuk and Richard M. Clerkin
2014	The American Society for Public Administration celebrates its 75th anniversary, having begun in 1939
2015	As of September 2015, 192 programs in public administration at 178 schools are accredited by NASPAA

As the variety of students in Ethics in Public Administration emerges, there are usually three different concerns for any particular course: (1) giving students a sufficient background in ethical theory and value theory, both from the perspective of the history of philosophy and the context of political parties and their discussion of "values"; (2) addressing specific case studies, dilemmas, or examples of real practice in which ethics and values are relevant and helpful; and (3) helping students to connect ethics and values to "professionalization" as a future public

administrator. Most professors who teach these courses will agree that there is no one right, or best, way to teach ethics. It follows then that a variety of different methods and approaches are often used over the course of a semester. This piece tries to clarify some of those different approaches and how they can be used to give future public administration professionals insight into their own careers and their own decision-making skills.

## The Ethical Theories and Values

One way to begin a course on Ethics in Public Administration is to begin with key terms and definitions from the history of philosophy. For example, a course might begin with a unit discussing Aristotle, Kant, and Mill. Note that some texts will discuss the philosophical ethical theories with relation to key terms, rather than individual philosophers' names: for example, Kant can be referenced in terms of deontological ethics and rules; Mill can be referenced in terms of the common good, consequences and results of policies, common goods, public good, or teleological ethics (Rosenbloom et al. 2014, 13, 521; Rushefsky 2013, 34–39). The key terms, and the central tests for ethical decision-making, in each theory are introduced and then related to situations involving public leadership. For example, Aristotle's discussion of virtue in the *Nicomachean Ethics*, and the concept of the Golden Mean, could be used to address a courageous decision on the part of a city councilman who must expose corruption. Immanuel Kant's categorical imperative and good will could be explained and then related to a mayor who has a duty to tell the truth about his community's budget, in spite of the possibility that her popularity will decline (Cox 2009, 18–19). The theory of utilitarianism discussed by John Stuart Mill, and its emphasis on the consequences and results of actions, could be used to address a local school system struggling to fund arts and music programs (Svara 2007).

In many courses, after the historical ethical theories are addressed, the theories can then be

related to major political party positions on specific issues. For example, the first chapter of Rushefsky (2013) includes a discussion of liberal, conservative, libertarian, and populist views. Each view can be related to government intervention or nonintervention on social and economic issues. For example, conservatives might appeal to Aristotelian virtue theory when they argue in favor of government intervention on social issues. Liberals often appeal to utilitarian ethics for the sake of economic equity and progressive business practices. One strength of this approach is that a relationship between ethical theory and specific practices is set up from the beginning of the course. Two disadvantages to this approach can also occur: students who are already convinced of a particular point of view may simply disregard ethical theories that are not immediately associated with their political party of choice, and philosophy students may find that a quick introduction to Aristotle, Kant, and Mill is too shallow or inaccurate. This is certainly a pedagogical choice to be undertaken carefully, as there will undoubtedly be a major difference between a course applying ethics to public administration and a full course specializing on the ethical theory of Kant.

Another advantage to approaching Ethics in Public Administration with a brief introduction to a variety of different ethical theories is that such an approach preserves "conceptual diversity." A majority of scholars note that today's applied ethics courses do not, and should not, try to impart a set of moral truths. Rather, such courses are to give students a specific set of skills: to be perceptive about detecting ethical problems and disagreements, to be well acquainted with a variety of moral thoughts and perspectives, and to be able to use reason to analyze and address ethical dilemmas. In introducing a metaethical, comparative perspective between ethical theories, we invest the students in making arguments for and against specific ethical virtues, duties, and consequences.

The useful concepts of moral equilibrium and reflective equilibrium are another benefit to the ethical theory approach. Reflective equilibrium involves a process of deliberative mutual

adjustment, and moral equilibrium is this deliberation as it relates to our ethical choices and our ethical self-understanding. For future public administrators, this process is not only valuable but necessary. By introducing major historical ethical theories, the deliberative process regarding specific cases begins in a natural way. In terms of specific pedagogical techniques, a variety of specific pedagogical techniques, including in-class discussions, debates, and presentations can be created that require students to compare and contrast different ethical theories' solutions to dilemmas. For online courses, discussion boards can be set in which students post their own application of a theory to a dilemma and other students critique, grade, rate, or otherwise react to their fellow students' work. Such exercises provide not only an opportunity to discuss and reinforce specific ethical theories but also provide a chance for students to sharpen their own skills of self-expression and argumentation.

Some public administration texts, especially those that focus on the United States, also include discussion of pragmatism and public policy, coming from a perspective such as John Dewey's discussion of public education or William James on religious belief and psychology. Philosophers will note that such discussions often involve a conflation of "pragmatic" decision-making with "pragmatism," two closely related terms that actually refer to different practices. One can emphasize the significance of pragmatic thinking in specific traditions, and one can trace the history of the tradition to George Herbert Mead's discussion of the individual in their environment and to Aristotelian circumstantial ethics. The broad lesson that this approach successfully teaches is that specific circumstances and conditions should always be carefully enumerated and analyzed as a part of an administrator's decision-making.

A third popular approach to ethical theory as an entry point into public administration is the work of social contract theorists, such as John Rawls, and entitlement theorists, such as Robert Nozick. The Rawls approach has the advantage of taking the concept of justice and clarifying it directly with specific principles to be followed, such as equal access to specific opportunities and

maximizing specific liberties and benefits to society, with intriguing thought experiments in the original position. Nozick has an appeal for students who are familiar with arguments against government intervention on economic issues and arguments against increases in taxation. The disadvantage of this approach is that both Rawls and Nozick are emphasizing "distributive justice," the way that economic status, goods, wealth, and other benefits are portioned out in society from the beginning. Their theories give less attention to retributive justice, in which wrongs are addressed, the guilty are punished, or some plan of reconciliation and restitution is reached. Since public administrators working in the context of government agencies will probably engage in policy decisions related to punishment (e.g., in the context of prisons and criminal justice policies and procedures), the inclusion of additional material related to retributive justice is recommended.

In any case, each ethical theory, or justice theory, can be used as a framework in which a variety of case studies or dilemmas can be addressed. The connection between theory and practice, between theory and cases or dilemmas, is a nearly universal feature in courses on ethics in public administration.

## The Case Studies or Dilemmas

Case studies or dilemmas are profoundly important in applied ethics coursework. In analyzing a case, we invite students to simultaneously take on the roles of the characters in the case study and address their ethical obligations, duties, and virtues. In the case of duties of beneficence and duties of non-maleficence, a case highlights characters who are tempted to act in specific ways that would go against or serve such duties. We give the students a scenario in which they can give consideration to a point of view other than their own, which engages the student in ways beyond memorization of theories, concepts, and facts. Student success often depends on the student's engagement and the feeling that the material of the course has relevance to the real world. Case studies or

dilemmas are uniquely able to convey this for students in ethics in public administration.

Case studies or dilemmas for ethics in public administration courses can vary in complexity and length. It is recommended that such cases be written in a clear and direct narrative, with a set of events involving more than one administrative relationship. For example, a board of trustees member may be making a decision reviewed by other elected officials as well as a hired economic development director. Each character in the dilemma can have various interests, understand the end goal in different ways, and have different understandings of their relevant duties. Cases can also be written to be universal in terms of time and place (a hypothetical city in the recent past) or with a variety of specific details related to economic conditions at a particular place and time (e.g., the market crash of September 2008).

After a rich case is created, it is helpful to give a specific method with a series of steps that the students can follow in making an ethical resolution. There are a variety of exemplary methods for analyzing case studies in courses on ethics in public administration. Case studies address a variety of specific responsibilities, duties, and obligations. These obligations and duties can often come into conflict, a fact which the American Society for Public Administration acknowledged in 2006, calling for a stronger emphasis on deliberation and collective conflict resolution skills in public administration course work (American Society for Public Administration 2006, 169). In order to make students break out a set of specific constituencies and relevant obligations, a grid or matrix with specific decision points can be used, with students proceeding to fill in specific sections of the matrix. Certain duties to a state contractor may be referred to in one portion of the decision process, for example, and specific actions on the part of the public administrator can be compared with what the “normative matrix” says for that portion of the process. Within each portion, specific priorities can be established and ranked, which invokes a quantitative utilitarian approach to the dilemma. Frequently, cases and dilemmas include a detailed discussion of “cost-benefit analysis.” In terms of philosophical theories of ethics, there is a

distinct way in which costs relate primarily to utilitarian consequentialist ethics, and benefits relate to specific duties that particular administrators are expected to instantiate.

### **Keeping Ethics in Public Administration Relevant to Professional Life**

It is important to note that over the last 40 years, the number of programs granting the Masters in Public Administration and the Doctor of Public Administration degrees has increased dramatically, and the number of programs including ethics training and whole courses on ethics in public administration has also increased. The professional organizations like the NASPAA have made a concerted effort to endorse, support, and require such courses. The courses frequently include students who are philosophers, political scientists, as well as traditional MPA/DPA students. In terms of the professional value of the courses for the MPA/DPA, they give students a chance to address an ethical dilemma before they are in a position of sole responsibility for their decisions, and it gives them a methodology for addressing difficult situations when they arise in their professional life.

A perennial question in the literature on teaching ethics in public administration is whether or not teaching ethics makes a difference in the lives and careers of public administration graduates. Since the 1990s, there have been regular surveys and qualitative reports on past graduates of MPA programs to discover what ethical dilemmas they had faced in professional life and whether or not their ethics training had been helpful. A definite niche in public administration programs for ethics training has been established and that there is a positive difference being made, but it is limited. For example, in a 2009 article describing the different approaches to public administration courses in the United States and China, the variety of approaches to public administration was argued to both increase the breadth of research in public administration and to also create intense debate between divergent paradigms (Wu and Hei 2009, S21). Frequently, social pressures and negative

aspects of favoritism intrude on ethical deliberation. The concept of impartiality as discussed by Immanuel Kant can be difficult to overcome. Another set of influences comes by way of the Internet and social media, in which decisions of public figures are frequently discussed and criticized quickly and harshly. Accountability and transparency are two of the overarching and highly important values relevant to the career of any public administrator. Currently, professors teaching ethics in public administration must balance a variety of paradigms and theoretical approaches in order to impart professional skills and give their students the ability to adapt to the global and multifaceted environments in which they will use those skills (Wu and Hei 2009, S26).

In the 1990s, ethics in public administration courses were evaluated. Many courses were built around either a democratic ethos or a bureaucratic ethos. At the time, these approaches were seen as most relevant to the daily practice of public administrators in the workforce. The bureaucratic ethos upholds the standards and values of managers and the standards and values that managers appeal to in operating as government officials. The democratic ethos appeals to broader values, like constitutional values, the public interest, and social justice. One example of these two approaches in a textbook from the 1990s is H. George Frederickson's *The Spirit of Public Administration*, published in 1997. Although this distinction is still reinforced in many textbooks on ethics in public administration and ethics in public policy, there are a variety of other approaches or ethos that are more specific and relevant given the current global context. For example, the concept of sustainability has been recommended by Daniel Fiorino as the necessary focus for the future of public administration as the field approaches to the year 2020. His argument attempts to be comprehensive by including both the concept of sustainability in the environmental sense and economic and social/political sustainability (Fiorino 2010, 583). The perceived tension between environmental sustainability and economic interests is one of the most significant challenges for future public administrators and scholars.

## Conclusion

The teaching of ethics in public administration normally includes a selection of ethical theories, political values, and specifically constructed case studies and ethical dilemmas. A well-constructed course includes a variety of information on ethical theories and a set of activities with specific processes and procedures that give students a chance to practice handling scenarios before they are in their professional role and individually responsible. For philosophy students, courses in ethics in public administration give an opportunity to apply ethical theories in unique conditions. For political science and public administration students, courses in ethics in public administration provide an opportunity to think beyond the level of bureaucratic policies and procedures and to address the vocation of public administration as a way to live out a deeper set of meaningful values and goals.

## Cross References

- ▶ [Administrative Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Administrative Theory of Ethics](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Competence](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Decision Making](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Decision Making: An Applied Structure Addressing Ethical Challenges](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Frameworks](#)
- ▶ [Ethical Values](#)
- ▶ [Ethics and Organizational Culture](#)
- ▶ [Ethics and Philosophy](#)

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