



Chapter I

Lip Service? How PA Journals and Textbooks View Information Technology

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Abstract

This chapter first points out the continued need for a reader on information technology by reviewing the early importance given to computing education by MPA programs and practitioners. Next, the chapter surveys current textbooks' and general public-administration journals' treatment of the topic. Three highly respected public-administration journals and three textbooks are reviewed. The journals are found to typically give little attention to the topic of computing, whether as a main focus or as merely a mention in articles. The textbooks also barely mention computing. In addition, there was no consistent rubric or chapter topic under which computing is discussed. The continued and vital need for a reader on information technology and computer applications in public administration is apparent. Finally, the chapter concludes by briefly discussing a range of issues that public administrators should be conversant with if they are to successfully utilize computer applications in the delivery of public-sector services.

Introduction

In 1985, a special computing education committee recommended to the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) that a sixth skill, computing, be added to the original five skills that must be taught in an MPA program. This recommendation applied to the accreditation of schools starting in 1988. Now over 20 years have passed since the original recommendation. Let us turn to evaluate the progress that has been made.

Computing Education in MPA Programs

There have been two published studies that surveyed MPA programs and assessed the level of computing education. Cleary (1990) mailed out questionnaires to 215 public affairs and public administration (PA) master's programs affiliated with the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration in 1989. Of the 80% returned, about one out of four reported that they had a course dealing with information systems and computer skills. The respondents were quick to note that the information systems and computer-skills areas needed more attention in the future. Yet, 1989 was a long time ago, especially when it comes to the massive changes in the computer field.

Brudney, Hy, and Waugh (1993) did a little more recent survey of MPA programs. Close to 90% of the programs said they use computers in their instruction. Over half of the institutions offer a course in computers, yet only 30% had made computing a requirement. The study also suggested that computing skills need to be taught beyond the typically taught statistical applications.

Without an absolutely current survey of programs, one can only surmise, though pretty safely, that computer use in MPA courses has greatly expanded. Word processing, spreadsheets, graphics, e-mail, the Internet, geographic information system (GIS), and online classes are now part and parcel of MPA programs and assumed student skills.

What PA Practitioners Advise in Computing Education

Four studies surveyed public managers. Lan and Cayer (1994) surveyed administrators in one state. The recommendations were that MPA programs need course work in computer literacy, specifically knowledge of applications and hands-on skills. The respondents said they use information technology (unfortunately this includes phone and fax) an average of 56% of their day. The respondents also said that they were involved with the management of the information system, so management issues as well as computer skills are important for PA students.

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