Review of *Cultural Competency for Public Administrators*

Edited by Kristen Norman-Major
and Susan T. Gooden

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The world is changing: This cliché does not ring hollow for anyone teaching, researching, or practicing in the public administration field. Technological advances, changing norms and attitudes, and evolving demographic realities are persistent features of any competent public administrator's approach to her or his craft. To this end, those responsible for educating and providing research to the public administration field need not only to accommodate this shifting landscape, but embrace it. The recent publication of *Cultural Competency for Public Administrators*, a volume edited by Kristen Norman-Major and Susan Gooden, provides public administration educators, researchers, practitioners, and students with a compelling roadmap for negotiating the new terrain and even thriving within it and, more important, because of it.

There is good reason to seek to harness the power of cultural diversity. Justice Sandra Day O'Conner's justification for upholding the University of Michigan Law School's diversity admissions policy in the 2003 case, *Grutter v. Bollinger et al.*, was based upon the premise that diversity in the classroom improves the learning environment for all. This notion has been backed up by research showing that heterogeneous groupings of work groups are better problem solvers than homogeneous groups. Scott Page, a computational social scientist, has underscored this. His research has found that groups of people who share common mental models, similar backgrounds, and perspectives are less successful at solving complex problems than diverse groups are (Page, 2007). Differences between people allow for the triangulation of perspectives and insight, creating an intersubjective framework for problem solving (Koliba & Lathrop, 2007). The cognitive dissonance that may arise when heterogeneous groups are tasked to problem solve can lead to creative solutions that cannot otherwise be realized.

With these observations in mind, we turn to Norman-Major and Gooden's assertion at the beginning of the volume that "cultural competency is a characteristic of good government." They go on to make a strong case for considering cultural

competency along the lines of race, ethnicity, gender, age, ability, religion, educational level, income and class, and sexual orientation. The message conveyed here is that we must not only tolerate, accommodate, and incorporate diversity into our modern workplaces, but we should embrace and fully harness this diversity to achieve good governance goals that have been a part of the public administration cannon for over 100 years.

The message of shifting from simply "managing" diversity to "harnessing" it echoes throughout this book and is a message that is right for the times. Recognizing that glass ceilings and pay inequities still persist in the modern workplace, we must not only invite diversity into the workplace, but allow this diversity to transform the workplace (Thomas, 1990). This is a long-standing theme in the public administration literature on social equity (Frederickson, 1971) and representative bureaucracy (Krislov, 1974). *Cultural Competency for Public Administrators* provides the reader with insights into identifying and harnessing cultural competencies to achieve these goals by reflecting on the concrete skills, attitudes, and dispositions needed to accomplish them.

A chapter written by Mitchell Rice and Audrey Mathews in particular (Chapter 2) and the entire Part III of the book on "Educating for Cultural Competence" provide an extremely useful set of attributes and educational strategies to foster culturally competent public administrators. The remaining chapters of the book focus on critical issues and perspectives relative to the legal environment, cultural diplomacy, human resource management practices, international service, and a discussion of specific competencies relative to gender differences, Hispanics, Native peoples, sexual orientation diversities, and people with disabilities. Chapters on cultural competencies in health care and disaster management, and the challenges associated with cultural competency, round out the offerings to form one of the most comprehensive treatments of cultural competencies in print. The latter set of observations by Samuel Brown underscore the paradoxical nature of thinking about, living with, and harnessing diversity. Cultural differences by their very nature generate cognitive dissonance. This dissonance can be viewed as a "challenge" to be overcome, or it can be viewed as an opportunity to produce better results.

As MPA and MPP programs look to align learning competencies with NASPAA accreditation standards, the attributes and strategies presented in this book serve as an invaluable resource. This book is a must-read for any program looking to pursue or maintain accreditation. More important, however, this book should be read by current and future public administrators. It should be incorporated into courses on organizational behavior and human resource management. The competencies outlined in this book should be used to guide student learning for the 21st century.

The world is changing. In fact, change has always been a feature of public administrative practice. It is now incontrovertible that effective negotiation of this complex terrain of social change requires cultural competency.

FOOTNOTE

1. Publishing information:
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