Illinois Is a Hot Mess and MPA Programs Pay the Price

By Dwight Vick

Forty years in the making, the State of Illinois faces an administrative and budgetary crisis of epic proportions. For the past two years, state and local governments made back pension payments ignored for decades. Forty-five percent of all state social service agencies and their contracted nonprofit providers closed. The remaining agencies and providers saw client caseloads increase as colleagues lost their jobs or sought other positions. The elderly, mentally ill and children in foster care pleaded with providers to meet their basic needs like food and medicine. Ten thousand children living in low income households lost day care and preschool vouchers. Parents had to choose between work or staying home. Prisons rationed food for prisoners. Transportation projects stopped throughout the state.

And then there were the schools. Universities announced they were broke and could not afford to open or stay open through the academic year. They declared financial emergency. As Amy Hassinger reported in her *New York Times* op-ed, "Higher Education Is Dying in Illinois," state universities laid off hundreds of faculty and staff. In *The State Journal Register*, Sara Burnett reported economists' predictions that Illinois' economy will enter a long recession of new taxes or draconian spending cuts. Why? Officials relied upon the state rainy day fund to make up an $8 billion budget gap caused by the pension crisis. The lack of long-term planning and the intelligencia exodus further compounded the problem.

Illinois State Statute 315/1, Chapter 48, Paragraph 1601 guarantees public sector employee union and collective bargaining rights to all public employees, including pensions. Pension contributions lagged under both Democratic and Republican administrations at the state and local levels. The recent pension payday seeped upward like a slow-rising flood. This, coupled with the state's recent history of gubernatorial misconduct, led voters to seek an outsider to run for governor in 2014. They elected one: Bruce Rauner, a conservative businessman who ran on a reform platform.

Like many political leaders, Governor Rauner has largely placed the state's problems on the backs of public sector employees, advocating for public sector collective bargaining rights, lower taxes and agency reorganization. Meanwhile, House Speaker Mike Madigan, a 40+-year veteran of Illinois politics and Democratic patriarch, became Rauner's nemesis. Both the speaker and Senate majority leader submitted a state budget in March 2015 with a $3 billion deficit. But, the governor refused to sign it unless conditions were met, such as closing the financial gap. The result: a 16-month stalemate that has driven the state to near fiscal ruin.

How has the stalemate impacted universities? In addition to enrollment-based funding, all Illinois public universities qualify for Monetary Award Program grants (MAP), which provide $600 million for low income students who attend any Illinois college. Most institutions used their rainy day funds to cover the loss or passed them on to the students. For community and regional four-year colleges serving primarily low income students, the lack of state support and MAP grant funding led to a 70 percent reduction in state funding for FY 2015-2016. Many declared financial exigency or emergency.

Thousands of faculty and staff members were laid off around the state. Universities like Chicago State, Western Illinois, Eastern Illinois and Northeastern Illinois encountered negative press for their blanket layoffs. To avoid additional attention, some administrators strictly re-interpreted collective bargaining agreements to reject tenure-track faculty by accusing them of not meeting research, teaching or community service requirements. They froze hires and eventually terminated them. According to University Professors of Illinois, the largest faculty union in the state, the number of member-filed grievances skyrocketed.

In February 2016, the Illinois Board of Higher Education instructed that all state institutions must complete a cost-benefit analysis of its programs. Any program that did not earn money for the university, had low student enrollment or did not meet a critical community need would be eliminated. At its May meeting, the board reported FAFSA figures showing 55,000 Illinois high school graduates applying for financial aid to attend out-of-state institutions. More than 16,000 college students actually transferred from state institutions to ones elsewhere. State university faculty representatives are dusting off their CVs.

How does this situation impact regional MPA programs? They are being decimated. Funding cuts impact any investment into recruitment, research and travel, even basic office supplies. Only marginally meeting NASPAA's new standards, these programs cannot meet basic, longstanding standards in the future, such as consistently employing five full-time faculty members with Ph.D.s in public administration.

To meet the "Standard of Five," administrators this year began to list full-time faculty members from other programs—political science, business, criminal justice, education, among them—with little to no coursework or teaching experience in public administration to serve as MPA faculty members. They hope this approach will satisfy NASPAA standards. If the programs can even find funds to pay for reaccreditation, multiple issues will place NASPAA and its counterparts in an awkward position: Consider whether these programs should be unaccredited or again placed on probation with the hopes that the regional university invests in the program.

A stop-gap budget bill is allowing all public organizations to pay past due bills and remain open until January 2017, at which point the state will again have no budget. Whatever happens, the Illinoisans holding the hottest part of this mess will be those we serve and train for service.

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