PAR Interview: Irene Rubin, June 2007

For authors, part of what makes writing for PAR a rewarding experience is the process of creation, critically examining a field, and engaging in public debate. Until recently reading the Journal has been more of a passive experience. The PAR Interviews are one way to share with readers some of the excitement of exploration and tension of debate, connecting readers with authors. Each issue, we will ask one or more authors to answer a few questions about their contribution to PAR, how they came to write that article, and what it means to them.

In this interview, Irene Rubin talks about her Academic-Practitioner Exchange, "*The Great Unraveling: Federal Budgeting, 1998-2006,"* appearing in the July/August 2007 issue of *PAR*

Jim Heichelbech: Can you tell me a little bit about your background? How did you come to focus on budgeting? Is this something that you considered interesting or high priority from early on? What areas of study would you say define your professional perspective today? What and who have been influential and inspirational for you over the years?

Irene Rubin: I had to teach myself budgeting in order to study the impacts of changing resource levels on organizations. I thus became interested in budgeting in my last year of graduate school, and have never left it since then.

My background is odd for a budgeter, I think. I started off in Chinese studies, for my bachelor's and master's degree. For my PhD I studied sociology. I became interested in budgeting near the end of my degree when I needed one more course to graduate and took an independent study in municipal fiscal problems. I really became involved in budgeting when I was doing my dissertation on universities' fiscal stress. I still remember my thesis adviser telling me that I had too centralized a view of how academic budgeting worked, and how stunned I was at the difference between the textbooks and reality when I confronted it myself.

I was impressed and fascinated by a book entitled A Behavioral Theory of the Firm by Cyert and March, which dealt among other topics with the idea of organizational slack, how slack was created, how it was used, and how it was depleted and with what consequences. From an organization theory perspective and also a cultural perspective, it seemed to me that the intellectual community was focused nearly exclusively on successes, and on survival, and not on the down times, not on the depletion of slack resources, and the consequences thereof. I became fascinated with how organizations cope with declines in revenue and staffing levels. To explore this issue at all required substantial knowledge of budgeting, and so began my career-long focus on public budgeting and organizations in stress.

Jim Heichelbech: At what point did you begin to focus on the normative aspects of budgeting? How does the normative focus fit with the history of the study of budgeting – has it always been considered politically charged, ethically charged? Are there different perspectives?

Irene Rubin: I have never thought of myself as a normative budgeter. I was wary about normative prescriptions that might block my view of the ways that budgeting actually occurred. I investigated reforms because they were adopted and influenced practice. I wanted to know why they were adopted, who supported them, how they changed after adoption, and when and how they were abandoned. The norms of budgeting, however, permeate the field, influencing both practitioners and academics. We have a pretty good idea most of the time as to the way things should be. This tension between the ideal or idealized and the way things actually work provides a rich field for inquiry. Sometimes budgeting is closer to the ideals and sometimes further away, which raises questions about why, what causes a reform to evaporate, or to change so substantially that it becomes something quite different from its original form and intent.

This gap suggests motion, change over time, that is an important focus of qualitative research. A static cross-sectional study cannot get at this kind of change. Cross-sectional studies in budgeting that occur at intervals have caught some of the phenomenon of backsliding or abandonment of reforms, but are not able to trace either causes or consequences.

So normative budgeting is not the focus of this essay, budgeting norms provide a (relatively) non-changing standard that makes visible the changes in practice over time, the directions of that change, and helps hint at the reasons for those changes.

Jim Heichelbech: The article is an "Academic-Practitioner Exchange." What does that mean to you? What do you see as the relationship between academics and practitioners with respect to budgeting? What role do you see academics playing? Where do practitioners fit? Is there a gap, and if so, what is the nature of the gap?

Irene Rubin: I have tried in my work to stay as close as possible to the practitioner viewpoint, to see what was actually there, what was actually being done, what the practitioners were trying to accomplish. I have at times publicized reforms invented by practitioners. So I don't see an inherent tension between academic and practitioner points of view.

Though I would not characterize it as a necessary or deep-rooted tension, I think there are some differences between academics and practitioners, in budgeting as elsewhere. The practitioner has nearly always to be focused on the present, the upcoming budget, on compromises necessary to get this budget passed, and has to demonstrate a certain loyalty, or even defensiveness of the policies reflected in the budget and the compromises it contains. Because they work in the real world, practitioners sometimes have to make compromises. Due to high turnover in many budget staff positions, it may be difficult for many practitioners to gain a long-term view. Academics are able to take a longer-term view (though they do not always do so), putting present decisions in context. They can take the time to step back and examine trends, and they have no need to defend any policies or practices. What they lack, however, is detail, on what decisions were actually made and why.

Good budgeting scholarship requires both the practitioner's on the ground knowledge of what happened, how it happened, and why, and the academic's sense of context or theory that makes those decisions interpretable to outsiders and non experts. The academic engages in an act of interpretation, making meaning from a series of every day decisions. Practitioners may not agree with those academic interpretations, either because the academics got the facts wrong, are applying unrealistic standards, or because academics are critical of decisions and compromises that were made.

So I would argue that there are some differences between practitioners and academics, that these differences are important and revealing, not only where practitioners and academics agree but also where they disagree.

Jim Heichelbech: In the article, you say that the budget process has become "ad hoc, fragmented, and opaque." As you elaborate on those themes throughout the article, it is clear that much of the infrastructure that makes sound budgeting possible has been corroded. People sometimes fall into an expectation that such infrastructure will remain no matter what we do, serving as a machine that allows us focus on whatever narrow concerns we might have without having to worry about the big picture. But there is clearly a need for ownership and a sense of responsibility for the broader processes. Is there a "tragedy of the commons" dynamic at work in this fragmentation?

Irene Rubin: In my opinion, yes. In any decision making process, there is always a tension between those who would either change the rules or sabotage them for short term policy gains, and those who uphold the process so it will be fair, predictable, and effective. In budgeting, I would argue, academics have spent too little time thinking about the minimum requisites to keep the process itself functioning, and practitioners have spent too little time sorting out the decisions which can alter policy conclusions without sabotaging the structure of decision making. There is too little focus on the longer-term consequences or ownership of those consequences. That may be more of a failing of the academic community than the practitioner community at this point, but once the requisites, the minimum requirements for good decision making processes are made known, getting practitioners to buy in, or setting up appropriate penalties for violations, may become the next, difficult step.

Jim Heichelbech: Although we hear concerns about transparency a lot these days, in part inspired by values of democratic participation, the practical challenge of transparency is a tough nut to crack. As you describe the federal *budgeting process, contrasting how it should work with how things actually are, opacity is identified as a key piece of the "unraveling." How much of this is a question of accountability (e.g. taxpayers who know nothing about budgeting needing to know where their tax dollars go) and how much is simply a practical problem (e.g. budget decision makers not knowing enough to do their jobs)?*

Irene Rubin: Transparency is indeed a critical issue. In the real world, that is to say the world in which budgeting takes place, there are no absolute dichotomies, no clear distinction between transparency and opacity, there are only shades of gray. There are degrees of openness, and what is both interesting theoretically and practically important is the change, more in the direction of greater openness or more in the direction of secrecy.

With respect to what citizens need to know, no budget can be completely open. The federal budget contains so many dollars, so many other kinds of resources, and is so complex, that any attempt to make all of it publicly available would be so overwhelming that it would obscure more than it would reveal. Once that has been said, however, there are ways to make more information available without being overwhelming. The first principle is selectivity, what are the important points that readers of the budget are looking for, and are those easy to find? The second principle should be linkages. In a computerized version of the budget, a click on any item or contract should get more details on that item or a different way of grouping the data for a different analysis. This technology has to date been underused in public budgeting.

What is also important is what is covered by intentional secrecy, whether those items should indeed be secret, and whether that category is increasing or decreasing, and why, whether inappropriate items are being kept secret. This issue gets to the heart of democratic accountability, to democracy itself and the ability of citizens to control their elected officials.

The problem of budgeters not knowing enough to do their jobs does not seem to be one of staff, though they often lack historical context, but is more serious among elected officials. It is not only that the budgeting process is complex, often reserved for a handful of experts, and that other elected officials do not take the time to learn the ins and outs of budgeting, it is that information is sometimes withheld or distorted, intentionally, from those making the decisions while those decisions are being made. Also, there has been episodic use of partisan techniques of calling votes before lengthy proposals can be read.

Jim Heichelbech: You conclude by saying, "It is not so much that we do not know what reforms are likely to work, but that we do not know how to motivate those who benefit from the status quo to adopt and implement the necessary reforms" (615). You suggest that reformers "need to frame the issues, using politicians' own words to embarrass them into action" (616). Can you say more about how embarrassment can make a difference?

Irene Rubin: During the 1980s, budget deficits rose to such an extent that they seemed out of control. The Gramm Rudman Hollings deficit control legislation was passed, but it had all kinds of loopholes in it, and did not seem to in fact control the deficits, despite the claims for it. It was so widely abused that elected officials became embarrassed about the gap between the claims they had made about the importance of balancing the budget and what was actually happening. That embarrassment is credited by some close observers with motivating the adoption of the Budget Enforcement Act, a much more practical and effective approach to budget rebalancing that did generally work.

Jim Heichelbech: I'm curious about the reactions and informal discussions stirred by your way of talking about federal budgeting. Obviously, you've been pursuing this line of thinking for a while. When you attend conferences and talk about these issues at dinner or over drinks, what are the hot points of discussion? Are there familiar disagreements that you've had? Are there specific aspects of your perspective that you like to share?

Irene Rubin: There is pretty widespread agreement that the budget process has deteriorated. There is disagreement on the consequences, for example, whether it is a good or a reasonable thing to have such a large deficit or how dangerous it is for other countries to own so much of our debt. I think underlying some of that concern is the idea that if the spending is cut back to balance the budget the likely losers will be the poor. There has also been significant discussion on how much of the deterioration has been repaired already, either informally or formally, when and how corrective measures kick in. I find this an especially rewarding line of thought, and plan to continue work on this angle.

One point I would like to bring out is that budgeting and its reforms may have potential implications for public administration more generally. We have tended to see reform as our métier, and have often unconsciously or consciously adopted a model of continuous improvement, as if each reform wave built on the accomplishments of the last one. In budgeting, the picture has so obviously been different, one of the most famous articles in our field talks about reform and its record of implementation and evaporation. The focus is at least at times on the politics of unreform, of the dynamics between reform and falling away from those reforms. This essay should help focus the field on the factors that increase the number of free riders, those who highjack the decision-making processes for short-term policy and partisan aims. Are there not enough tools available to shape policy, so that the process itself must be highjacked? Or is there so little knowledge or concern for the collective infrastructure that destroying it is not considered a cost? Has partisanship gone too far into warfare, seemingly justifying any strategies to gain an advantage? Is the determination to lock in policies by present majorities for the future so strong that future elected officials will have few choices? What is going on here? If locking up resources for the future is the name of the present game, what actions need to be devised to either prevent those decisions or unlock and reverse them, to restore the capacity to budget, that is, the capacity to make choices and adapt spending to current needs?

Jim Heichelbech: For academics and practitioners coming to these issues for the first time, what is the most important thing to keep in mind as they strive to become part of the solution, rather than part of the problem?

Irene Rubin: It is hard to know what the most important thing is. For both practitioners and academics, it is important to avoid buying or perpetrating simplistic thinking, that things are either black or white, or that things have to be the way they are or have been recently. For example the president has argued that the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq have to be funded by supplemental appropriations. That kind of statement needs to be questioned. I teach my students to continually ask themselves, “How do I know?” when they catch themselves or someone else making a generalization or uttering a rule. What is the evidence and how good is it, is there contrary evidence or could such evidence be developed?

Second, every change, every decision, has implications, there is in fact no incrementalism, no way of just keeping on keeping on, without making policy decisions. The decision to keep on doing what is currently being done is also a policy decision, laden with implications. So a certain mindfulness of the importance of day-to-day decisions may be key. It is not only that practitioners need to think of the implications and precedents they are setting, but academics also need to pay more attention to the long-term consequences of present short-term decisions. Because academic budgeters lack what might be considered theory, they typically focus on the changes in front of them, just as the practitioners do, with too little emphasis on the historical context and too little knowledge of causation to work out the implications for the future.

In terms of the importance of day-to-day decisions, the degree to which the decisions each practitioner makes are made in public, or leave a written trace available for public scrutiny, is important. Making decisions in the fishbowl we call the public sector is not easy, but that is our work, that is the work we have chosen, making it easier by removing decisions from public scrutiny should not be an option. Learning when and how to keep the public informed, to keep them interested, is important.

We have overdrawn the distinction between academics and practitioners. Practitioners also need to be teachers. Staffers need to teach their elected officials, it is a major part of their role, and it is not an easy one, their students are (as so many of ours in academe) busy with other things, sometimes think they already know all they need to know, and it is hard to focus on anything other than legislation right in front of them. Staffers need to learn to not only recognize a teachable moment, but to create them, and then take advantage of them. Good teaching, as in the universities, is not about lecturing, it is about learning and teaching from experience.

We need to be more systematic about learning from experience, which means that we need to try to reduce high staff turnover and pay more attention to passing along learning from one generation of staff to the next. We need to learn what kinds of activities or strategies bring down the process, and what kinds of strategies work to stimulate reforms or maintain them.

These tasks will be much easier if practitioners and academics work out more reliable and frequent cooperation and exchanges. It should not be the job of academics to tell practitioners to adopt this or that reform—a most annoying habit that contributes to the lack of ongoing dialogue. Rather academics should focus more on uncovering chains of causation and make clearer the consequences of one or another decision process or rule, or rule evasion, and to keep in the foreground the context and meaning of decisions made by budget staff, appointees, and elected officials. Academics need to run their reconstructions of the practitioner world by those practitioners at regular intervals, for a reality check. Academics may be most useful in suggesting what has worked well in similar situations in the past, or what had unintended consequences here or abroad that should be taken into account. If academics can avoid becoming remote from the practitioner world, if they can address the problems that practitioners currently face with helpful information, the much talked about gap between academics and practitioners will shrink, communications will become easier and more frequent, and solving some of our budget problems may get easier.

Jim Heichelbech: The problem of academics becoming remote from the practitioner world seems to be an important challenge for all areas of public administration, not just budgeting. How do academics and practitioners close the gap in their daily work?

Irene Rubin: Part of the problem of distance between academics and practitioners is a matter of style. Academics, and their department chairs and deans, are obsessed with prestige, authenticity, and being right, being well read, building on the literature, and citing their predecessors on whose work they rely. The result can sometimes be formalistic and I confess boring to read. The word author may in this sense be short for authority, the authors speak with a voice of authority, as if they have discovered some truth, which it is now their responsibility to share. They tend to play down debate, ignore that their voice is one among many, and that their version of reality may not have been fully accepted by the people they studied, for whatever reasons. People looking for truth, and who only have a few minutes, may be grateful for this voice of authority. But when authors have doubts, this need to seem authoritative often results in passive voice, hiding the knower, or when they have not done sufficient search of the literature, lead to claims such as "it is widely known that" or "generally accepted that". Academics tend to overstate the importance of their findings, claim more certainty for their findings than they deserve, and hide behind a passive voice in an effort to float above results that seemingly speak for themselves. All of that distances the reader from the author, who may be downright invisible.

So one step is to change the expected style of formal writing, and allow back in the I in research, I found, I theorized, I observed, I concluded. When confronted with a decision, I chose. Not only is this style more direct and engaging, it allows authors to take responsibility for conclusions, and readers to see that other choices were possible and might have led to different conclusions.

Though it might seem sometimes as if the gap resulted from lack of mutual respect, I do not think this is the underlying problem. I think academics who go into public administration generally recognize the difficulties that practitioners face and admire them for the jobs they do. Academics document the innovations that practitioners come up with, so they know how good they really are. And practitioners were students at one point, they were exposed to the academic life, and have some idea of what it involves. They often make lifelong relationships with their teachers and come back to them for advice year after year. So lack of respect does not underlie the lack of conversation, in my view.

One solution has been the pracademic, the person who embodies in him or herself the values and experiences of both academic and practitioner. We may not be able to talk to each other frequently or openly over the great divide, but the pracademic can maintain a monologue with him or her self. Pracademics are valued in public administration as in few other academic fields. It is not an easy transition but many of the leading scholars in budgeting spent years as budgeters before converting.

Part of the reason for lack of dialogue in the journals is that practitioners lack the time and the incentive to write for professional journals. Getting their opinions and experiences into the literature may require some different techniques. Perhaps we need to encourage practitioners to reply to academic articles, briefly noting their own experiences, where they support or contradict an article, or where they fill in with mechanism what is outlined as a correlation. These replies can be posted on a journal website, or published in later issues. We may need more coauthored pieces, where the academic interviews the practitioner, finds out his or her ideas and experiences, and then takes the time to write them up for others to read. Academics may also need to be a little less uptight about academic legitimacy that forbids or derides case studies, which are a relatively easy and valuable contribution that practitioners can make to the literature. For their part, practitioners will have to resist the temptation to put a gloss on whatever they have done and sell it as a best practice. A more revealing view of what was tried, what worked and what did not, and how problems were fixed is likely to be more useful to others.

Another channel I think will be rewarding is for academics to tap the careers of retired practitioners, doing oral histories with them. This kind of collaborative research is likely to have a time dimension to it that will be useful to the field.

Jim Heichelbech: Thanks Irene. These are great insights and I have no doubt that your comments will stir us to talk more and accomplish more.

Irene Rubin is professor emeritus at Northern Illinois University. A former editor of PAR *and* Public Budgeting and Finance*, she has published extensively on fiscal stress at the federal, state, and local levels. Her recent books include* Balancing the Federal Budget *(CQ Press, 2002) and* The Politics of Public Budgeting *(CQ Press, 2005). She is currently engaged in research on contracting out. E-mail: irubin@niu.edu.*

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References and Notes:

Cyert, Richard M. and James G. March. 1963. *A Behavioral theory of the Firm*. Oxford: Blackwell.

Information about "Tragedy of the Commons" from Wikipedia:

http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Tragedy_of_the_commons

"The tragedy of the commons is a type of social trap that involves a conflict over resources between individual interests and the common good. The term derives originally from a parable published by William Forster Lloyd in his 1833 book on population. It was then popularized and extended by Garrett Hardin in his 1968 Science essay 'The Tragedy of the Commons'.[1] However, the theory itself is as old as Aristotle who said: 'That which is common to the greatest number has the least care bestowed upon it'.[2]"

[1] Hardin, G. (1968) The Tragedy of the Commons, Science 162, 1243-1248

[2] Aristotle, Politics 1261b34