



Stepping up to the plate: Making social equity a priority in public administration's troubled times

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The United States is built on and reinforced by exploitation and oppression, especially the genocide “of Native Americans, and the theft of their lands, and the extensive enslavement of Africans” (Feagin, 2006, p. 2). The highest objective of public service is to improve people’s lives, and yet, the U.S. has created policies and programs benefiting white people and disadvantaging Black people and other people of color. Such policies, practices, and laws are structurally racist in that they systematically create and reinforce inequalities at individual and institutional levels, regardless of people’s attitudes or intentions. More specifically, structural racism and anti-Black racism have become embedded practices impacting outcomes in the economy, housing, education, healthcare, environment, criminal and juvenile justice, politics, transportation, and more (Bullard, 2004). These injustices lead to “cumulative effects of social inequity across organizations that compound and reinforce one another”, making racial inequities enduring, systemic, and endemic characteristics of the U.S. (Gooden, 2014, p. 12).

To highlight how racism is embedded in the nation’s institutions and in response to the double pandemics of COVID-19 and killing of black persons by police, we discuss the legacy and linkages of racism related to segregation, healthcare, and policing. In response to these inequities, we present the recent statement from the American Society for Public Administration’s (ASPA) Section on Democracy and Social Justice (DSJ). Next, we discuss the value of social equity as a pillar of public administration (PA) and advance a social equity curriculum for public affairs education to address fairness and justice as essential skills for all public service professionals.

Institutional racism at a glance: Segregation and health

For centuries, U.S. institutions have created legal restrictions on the freedom, movement, economic growth, and political success of Black people. Jim Crow laws and anti-Black violence legalized racial segregation and legitimized institutional racism in all sectors and systems (Feagin, 2006). Legalized racism, anti-Black violence, and limited economic opportunities under Jim Crow contributed to the Great Migration of about six million Black people out of the Southern U.S. during the first half of the 1900s, yet even in Northern States, Black people often faced significant discrimination. As Black neighbors moved into Northern cities, white families increasingly moved to suburbs (Larson, 2020). While the Civil Rights Movement of the mid-1900s made strides fighting *legalized segregation*, white flight compounded by discriminatory housing and redlining policies as well as *de facto segregation* further disadvantaged many communities of color in both cities and suburbs (Blessett, 2020).

Segregation, as facilitated by discriminatory practices and supported by systemic racism, creates vulnerabilities adversely affecting communities of color. Research has found that Black residents living in segregated areas tend to have less equitable health outcomes, limited healthy food options, and increased mortality rates. Further, white residents tend

to receive better health care access and processes than do Black residents (Wright & Merritt, 2020). Thus, where and with whom we live impact how long we live, and where and with whom we live are strongly influenced by structural racism, as cases like Flint, Michigan powerfully demonstrate (Nickels, 2019).

These issues are compounded by COVID-19, a recent example illustrating how structural racism manifests in disparate outcomes for Black people. As Gooden (2020) noted, structural racism and COVID-19 “are two major pandemics” that blatantly intersect. COVID-19, the disease caused by SARS-Cov-2 coronavirus, spreads more easily in under-resourced and underserved areas and, due to structural racism and segregation, under-resourced communities are also more likely to be predominately Black, Latinx, and/or Native American. As such, “[a]s the architect of racial disparity, racism shapes the vulnerability of communities” (Gaynor & Wilson, 2020, p. 1). Communities of color are less likely to have access to the clean water needed to reduce risks of infection through handwashing. People of color are also more likely to live in population-dense areas, use public transportation, and serve as essential employees working in unsafe conditions during the pandemic (Wright & Merritt, 2020). Thus, social distancing is more difficult and exposure to the virus is more likely, leading to racial and ethnic disparities in COVID-19 cases. For instance, as of June 17, 2020, in Alabama, Black people make up 27% of the population yet are 50% of COVID-19 cases; Latinx people comprise only 4% of the population but are 13% of cases. In Iowa, Black residents represent 3% of the population but are 11% of COVID-19 cases; Latinx people make up only 6% of the population but are 27% of cases (The COVID Tracking Project, 2020).

Further, the virus more severely impacts people with underlying health conditions, such as asthma and diabetes, and people of color are more likely to suffer from these diseases due to structural racism. Medical symptoms of people of color are also less likely to be taken seriously by healthcare professionals, leading to higher death rates (Wright & Merritt, 2020). As of June 17, 2020, on average, Black people represent about 13% of the U.S. population but 24% of COVID deaths (The COVID Tracking Project, 2020). Of those states that track and report racial and ethnic data on COVID-19, deaths of Black people are overrepresented and, in 16 states, COVID deaths exceed their proportion of the population by 10–30% (APM Research Lab, 2020). In the District of Columbia, for example, Black residents are 47% of the population but 74% of COVID-19 deaths. In Illinois, Black people comprise 14% of the population but 29% of COVID deaths (The COVID Tracking Project, 2020). Thus, structural racism is literally a matter of life and death.

Institutional racism at a glance: Policing

Another issue where institutional inequities are amplified is in the disparate policing and police killings of Black people in the U.S. While police have a long history of killing Black people at a disproportionate rate compared to their white counterparts (Headley, 2020), broad public attention and outrage are now focused on the institutional racism found in U.S. policing, which is frequently racist and white supremacist. These killings occur despite public administration’s mandate to improve lives under a constitutional system, to protect its citizens, to guarantee rights, and to foster accountability and legitimacy (Guy & Ely, 2018; McCandless, 2018; McCandless & Larson, 2018). These ideals are

under strain, yet the most recent police killings of George Floyd, Breonna Taylor, Rayshard Brooks, and several others have awakened the consciences of many. Public killings are stark embodiments of how these events are the latest manifestations of lynchings and mob violence directed against Black people that demonstrate how the criminal-legal system not only fails to protect Black people but, many times, terrorizes and subjugates them (Lartey & Morris, 2018).

In *Terry v. Ohio* (1968), the Supreme Court established the reasonable suspicion doctrine, or a doctrine that lowered the Fourth Amendment protections indicating that police could “stop a person under the ‘reasonable suspicion’ that a crime is in progress or about to be in progress”, and this ruling, in tandem with others, established broad powers of policing which make racial profiling more likely, not less (Headley, 2020, p. 83). Perhaps not surprisingly, while white people may be more likely to experience police contact, persons of color are more likely to experience *negative* police contact. Persons of color, and Black people in particular, often receive less equitable police services, are racially profiled, and are stopped, searched, arrested, and killed in greater proportions than white people (Baumgartner et al., 2018; Buehler, 2017; Menifield et al., 2019). As summarized by Headley (2020), “Blacks and Hispanics are also significantly *more likely* to be searched as a result of a traffic or pedestrian stop, despite being significantly *less likely* to be found with drugs, alcohol, or weapons” (p. 84). Also, not surprisingly, white people tend to view the police far more positively (61%) than their Hispanic (45%) or Black counterparts (30%). Specifically, Black people tend to more often report killings by police as problems (80%) versus white people (54%) (p. 85). Consequently, communities of color often see police not as protectors but as tools of the state to criminalize Black identity (Gaynor, 2018).

Within agencies, racism and white supremacy can abound to produce inequities. Many departments are not representative of the communities they serve, yet even in locations with better representation (e.g., Atlanta, where Rayshard Brooks was killed), killings occur. Rather, what is so often at the core of policing’s inequities is how many in public administration equate Blackness with criminality (Gaynor, 2018). Within departments, individual-level factors, especially unconscious bias and stereotypes amongst officers, can and do play out in encounters every day, and the system is stacked against Black people as they often have fewer options to obtain fair and just remedies than do white people (Edwards, 2016). Yet, personal level factors do not entirely explain disparities – organizational dynamics and culture, unchecked discretion and limited oversight on administrative practices (e.g., kneeling on someone’s neck to subdue them), policies, chains of command, levels of scrutiny, formal and informal messaging, as well as elected leader and community messaging all combine to produce multiple points of disadvantage in which Black people – whether encountered on the street or even serving within departments – are less likely to receive the equal protection of the law (Glaser, 2014; Headley, 2020). As encapsulated by Wright and Headley (2020), race is relevant when considering police-community relations. Recent police killings are the unjust outputs of systems that have been hallmarked from the beginning by racism and white supremacy; and the aloofness as well as dirty hands of public administrators must be met with an ethic of care, respect, and a rewriting of the social contract to ensure that everyone, not just the privileged, benefit from public policies (Alkadry & Blessett, 2014; Blessett et al., 2016; McCandless & Ronquillo, 2019).

Equitable response: Statement from the ASPA section on democracy and social justice

While the nation struggles with a convergence of these two crises, COVID-19 and police brutality, the ASPA Section on Democracy and Social Justice (DSJ) released the statement shown in Table 1. This statement was influenced by the discussion of Minnowbrook 50 in which scholars developed a call to action noting the responsibility of everyone in the field to promote social equity (Blessett et al., 2019). With increasing public attention around issues of racism and inequities across policy domains, all in public administration must boldly speak truth to power and take responsibility for making positive change.

Toward a new curriculum: Serving the public interest

For centuries, racism, scaffolded by white supremacy, has denied Black people access and opportunity, fairness, and justice, as well as representation and inclusion in the United States. To foster more equity and justice, we need action in multiple venues, especially in terms of how we educate today's and tomorrow's public service professionals.

Such educational improvements must begin with acknowledging how race-conscious legal protections and remedies like civil rights and affirmative action are under constant attack (Berry, 1999). As a public policy, many U.S. citizens support equal opportunity but

Table 1. Equitable response: ASPA's Section on Democracy and Social Justice's Statement.

Systemic racism against the Black community and the disproportionate impact of COVID-19 on people of color has awakened the consciousness of mainstream U.S. society. Through social media and the news, we have witnessed the police brutality that Black people are forced to live with on a daily basis. The recent police killings of unarmed Black citizens and the disparate impact of COVID-19 highlight the disturbing truth that in the United States and within its institutions, race *still* matters. Today, we can all bear witness to injustice and see anti-Blackness fully and unapologetically on display. **WE** declare, "This Must Stop."

In our stand against the inequities of COVID-19 and police brutality, **WE** in the public and those serving in public service institutions must:

- Admit that our current system unfairly impacts Black citizens and also produces disparate outcomes—health, educational, economic, and more—in numerous vulnerable communities.
- Openly declare that discrimination and injustice – whether in our country, communities, or institutions – impede liberty and justice for all.
- Acknowledge our common responsibility to stand up against injustice.
- Live up to our professional standards and ethical obligations to serve the public interest, uphold constitutional values of fairness, and enshrine social equity as a pillar by holding public service institutions accountable for improving equity.
- Change public policies, programs, and practices that produce inequities in our society.

Equitable change requires hard work. As champions for diversity and advocates for inclusion, **WE** believe in standing up for the principles and practices of social equity. The highest purpose of public service is to improve lives. **WE** must ensure that the benefits of public administration, not just its burdens, are equitably advanced and afforded to all. With renewed commitment, **WE** must advance the equitable change that we want to see in our government, in our communities, and throughout our public institutions.

Inequities caused by COVID-19 and police brutality remind us that the Section has work to do. Through our past webinars and engagements and through this statement, we further commit ourselves to advancing the causes of justice by:

- Sponsoring dialogs on promoting social justice
- Partnering with professional organizations, nonprofits, and government entities
- Helping members contribute their expertise to remedy injustices
- Participating in and leading protests against injustices
- Supporting and promoting publications advancing social justice
- Convening a working group of organizations, groups, scholars, and practitioners to advance and develop professional ethics and standards needed to dismantle the systemic racism embedded in policies, programs, practices, outcomes, and resources.

Source: Democracy and Social Justice Section of the American Society for Public Administration (2020).

rebuttal strategies for implementing affirmative action, thereby causing conflict among competing public service values. Leveling the playing field is often fraught with exclusionary practices to block people of color from enjoying full participation in life, liberty, and the pursuit of happiness (Berry-James, 2001). For decades, a few racial/ethnic and gender groups have benefitted from equal opportunity policies and affirmative action strategies – yet, tangible gains and losses fail to address the historical, legal, and contemporary context of leveling the playing field for Black Americans (Berry-James, 2010). Eradicating racism and discrimination require a deep understanding of systemic racism, structural racism, institutional racism, white privilege, white fragility, microaggressions, and white-splaining (Abdullah, 2020). Beyond defining these terms, scholars, researchers, and educators must work together to build a knowledge base to broaden awareness of cultural and social differences as well as create remedies for educational inequity, injustices in criminal-legal and juvenile justice systems, health and health care disparities, and cultural incompetence (Berry-James, 2012).

Racial discrimination is the norm in U.S. society, despite rhetorical commitments to equal opportunity and the principles of affirmative action. The courts remain unclear on the question of affirmative action, sometimes making a distinction between *de jure* discrimination (mandated by law) and *de facto* discrimination (arising from societal practices) (Berry, 2004). Nevertheless, the social construction of race continues to perpetuate racism and discriminatory practices as seen by institutional inequities, government behavior, and disparate societal outcomes. For everyone who interacts with the federal government, state government and local government, a *New Public Administration* vigorously pursues social equity in professional practice and trains professionals to serve in the public interest (Box, 2014). As noted by Berry-James (2012):

The pursuit of cultural competency represents a window of opportunity in America that expands traditional knowledge, skills, and practices (KSAs) into more effective KSAs that promote a public service workforce who possesses the knowledge, skills, abilities, awareness, and attitudes to eliminate the existing gap between cultural and social groups in the United States. If we fail to focus our efforts on the changing demography of America, we blindly widen the ‘cultural divide’ – creating more profound disparities in education, employment, housing, justice, health (physical, mental and emotional), citizen engagement, and overall quality of life. (p. 181)

The power to redress systemic racism lies in the hands of public service professionals. By advocating for social equity and social justice as global standards in public affairs education (through accreditation, scholarship, curriculum change, and student as well as practitioner engagement), we can create an impactful public service. Given the current situation of the double pandemics, we must develop, implement, and evaluate individual, curricular, and institutional efforts to create inclusive practices and equitable social structures for the good of our society by advancing our understanding of social equity and teaching a social justice anti-discrimination curriculum. Research, teaching, and service in social equity and social justice require a commitment to equitable change, *in the public interest*.

Norman-Major (2011) asked what it would take to make consideration of social equity in public administration a standard of practice versus a plea for systemic change. As seen by disproportionate COVID-19 health outcomes and police murders, racial disparities and injustices challenge public administration to foster learning about social equity as a pillar and standard of practice for all public administrators.

Equity in context: The pillars of public administration

Public administration scholars and practitioners refer to the four Es or four pillars of public administration which are: economy, efficiency, effectiveness, and equity. All too often, most attention is paid to questions of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness and equity gets little or no consideration (Frederickson, 2010). These values are at the heart of public administration decision making and policy implementation, requiring public administrators to find the appropriate balance among them to assure we are serving our communities in the public interest. As a brief recap these four public service values are defined as follows:

- (1) Economy – Managing scarce resources to get the desired level of service for the least cost.
- (2) Efficiency – Providing public services so that the greatest output or results are gained through the least amount of input possible.
- (3) Effectiveness – Successfully producing a desired result or accomplishing a set of goals.
- (4) Equity– As defined by the National Academy of Public Administration: “The fair, just and equitable management of all institutions serving the public directly or by contract; the fair and equitable distribution of public services, and the implementation of public policy; and the commitment to promote fairness, justice and equity in the formation of public policy” (Wooldridge & Bilharz, 2017, p. 2).

While the first three pillars are well ingrained in the practice of public administration, equity is not. A key strategy for entrenching social equity within public administration is to embed it within public affairs education curricula so that preventing discrimination and protecting people of color from harmful policies, programs and practices becomes a standard of practice for public servants.

A social equity and social justice curriculum

The effects of racism, discrimination, disparities, inequities, and injustices have been well-documented in scholarly journals, by government reports, activists, and in social outcomes. Programs interested in developing a social equity and social justice curriculum for public affairs education must face the hard-core truth: A commitment to diversity, social equity, and social justice matters. Curriculum design and redesign to include the social construction of race and the reality of racism requires an overarching obligation to act (Adams et al., 2007). A successful public affairs curriculum requires that scholars teach graduate students how to demonstrate knowledge, skills, and abilities to advance diversity, social equity, and social justice in the classroom, in the workplace, and in our society. To achieve equality for all, fostering social equity must become the standard of practice in public administration. In the classroom, students must be given opportunities to develop competency in social equity, to acquire skills that rebuild public trust, and to dismantle barriers to social justice. Learning how to evaluate and redesign policies, practices, and programs are key to acquiring the essential skills for decision making, when exercising discretionary powers in the public interest (Gooden & Berry-James, 2018).

From foundations to the capstone, graduate students must learn to work side by side with citizens and across multiple sectors to make decisions in the best interest of the public. Connecting a public affairs education to the unmet needs of citizens in the real world requires that we educate and train students with the necessary skills and abilities to stand up for vulnerable populations and redress unequal opportunities and unjust outcomes created by unfair public policies, programs, and practices. Social equity and social justice must hold overriding importance in the application of theory and practice. Students must understand equity considerations as inherent in decision making as are considerations of economy, efficiency, and effectiveness. In Tables 2 and 3, we adapt information from Norman-Major (2011) and Berry-James’ pedagogical work in social equity and cultural competence as instruction strategies for scholars planning to transform curricula in both several core and elective courses.

The above examples describe several ways to incorporate social equity and social justice across the public administration curriculum. In reality, every course can intentionally

Table 2. Teaching a transformative public affairs curriculum: Core classes.

Course	Foundations
Learning Objectives	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Describe the field’s historical development and its core values including efficiency, effectiveness, economy and equity (4Es). • Explain the value tradeoffs of the 4Es. • Compare/contrast the roles of the public, private, and nonprofit sectors in causing and redressing inequity.
Signature Assignments	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Analyze public policies using the 4Es. How is each value represented? Are all treated equally? If not, which dominates and why? Consider trade-offs and the short and long-term consequences and benefits of the policy. • Examine an inequity in your community from a cross-sector perspective. What are the respective roles of the public, nonprofit and private sectors in addressing the inequity and working to eliminate it? Are the sectors collaborating? If not, what might the public sector do to build collaboration?
Course	Ethics
Learning Objective(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Understand the difference in ethical values across sectors. • Appreciate the importance of ethical diversity across cultures. • Define <i>fair, just</i> and <i>equitable</i> vis-à-vis public administration and policy implementation. • Analyze the ethics of inequity in public policy and administration. • Consider ethics in addressing inequities in communities.
Signature Assignment(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Have students use news articles raising issues of inequity and social justice and have them write memos to policymakers addressing the ethical considerations involved and how they might be addressed. • Have students analyze the codes of ethics from their agencies or professional organizations, especially if they include equity, social justice, fairness, diversity, and cultural competence? • Interview leaders in public, private or nonprofit organizations. How do they define ethics? What role do ethics play in their work? Do they see their view as different from other sectors? What do they see as the relationship between ethics, equity and social justice?
Course	Capstone
Learning Objective(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Compare and contrast the four Es. • Justify the role of the public administrator in ensuring equity. • Investigate how social equity is reflected in students’ workplaces. • Investigate applied approaches emphasizing public service values, including the 4Es.
Signature Assignment(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> • Through a collection of signature activities and assignments, require graduate students to demonstrate core competencies learned in the MPA program. • As a capstone project, assign a complex issue that requires problem-solving and innovation skills. Require students to demonstrate competency in core areas of public affairs education. Using a decision-making process, students create equitable solutions to public sector problems by gathering evidence, examining alternatives and considering the consequences, implementing a plan which demonstrates how well they have mastered learning outcomes.

Table 3. Teaching a transformative public affairs curriculum: Elective courses.

Course	Social Equity
Learning Objective(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify existing and emerging theories to advance social equity. ● Illustrate how leadership can promote social equity's advancement. ● Explain social equity measures in public and nonprofit sectors. ● Discover pathways of access, diversity, and inclusion to explain governmental strategies to achieve equitable outcomes.
Signature Assignment(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Use case studies to connect structures, functions, processes, and sectors capable of implementing strategies to bridge gaps between social disparities and outcomes. ● Conduct a racial equity audit to uncover, recognize, and change institutional racial inequities in the public and nonprofit sectors. Audits should include recommendations for leadership as well as cultural and systemic changes. ● Assign a research paper to reframe a policy or historical issue that challenges racial inequities and highlights solutions at state, local or community levels.
Course	Cultural Competence
Learning Objective(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Identify the language, philosophy, and conceptualization of cultural competence as it relates to public service values. Discuss how cultural competencies are demonstrated along four dimensions (attitude, practice, policy, and structure). ● Describe individual and organizational characteristics along the cultural competence continuum (Cultural Destructiveness, Cultural Incapacity, Cultural Blindness, Cultural Competence, and Cultural Proficiency).
Signature Assignment(s)	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ● Using case studies, illustrate how social and environmental factors, system and policy factors, individual factors, and provider factors influence disparities in health services, public education, family and child welfare, police and criminal justice, vulnerable individuals and Native American affairs. ● Using role-play, promote individual self-awareness as well as an organizational awareness to improve cross-cultural interactions. Assign a service-learning project to conduct an organizational assessment that distinguishes culturally and linguistically appropriate programs and services.

explore dimensions of social equity and social justice. For example, courses in organizational theory and human resources can explore diversity, equity and inclusion (DEI) strategies that reflect program mission as well as manage talent acquisition in an organization. Research methods and policy analysis courses can adopt a data-driven approach to examine meaningful metrics for diversity and inclusion as well as measure the impact of fair and just policies that guide agency work. The opportunities to incorporate DEI and social justice strategies across the public administration curriculum and more importantly, train students to evaluate how DEI strategies produce equitable results is vital when educating public servants.

Regardless, the field faces a reckoning over its role in contributing to injustices that disproportionately impact Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC). We must strengthen our commitment to amplify BIPOC voices and develop career professionals brave enough to stand up and advocate for equitable change. Effective curricula recognize that leadership matters, and that it is the responsibility of schools to empower students to lead on social equity and social justice (Starke et al., 2018; see also NASPAA, 2020). Ending the subjugation of BIPOC communities by acknowledging the civil rights and privileges of all U.S. citizens is the work of everyone. It is important to also recognize that #BlacksLivesMatter is more than a social movement – it is a call for a professional standard of practice that pursues social equity and social justice in our field. As we combat the pandemics of COVID-19, racism, police killings, and more, the need for social equity curricula has never been more acute and necessary. Let us heed the call and fully enshrine social equity and social justice in public affairs education.

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