

Teaching Public Administration Through Field Research: California Agency Reconnaissance Project¹

Todd R. La Porte, *University of California, Berkeley*
David Hadwiger, *University of California, Berkeley*

Undergraduate courses in public administration depend predominately on classroom work emphasizing information from lectures, class discussion, and academic texts. This approach works reasonably well when students have significant exposure to moderate- or large-scale organizations. Then their own subjective experiences give life to abstract concepts. But most undergraduates have only modest organizational experience. This results in a sense of distance and abstraction regarding descriptive and analytical course materials. One vehicle to close this gap is to involve students in a research project in an ongoing organization.

The California Agency Reconnaissance Project (CARP) was instituted so that students could study a public organization as a close complement to learning theoretical concepts in the classroom.² Moreover, because of the dearth of information about state administrative agencies, students' work could result in original contributions to understanding California state agencies. Along with regular course work, students were assigned individually or in small teams to research the goals, structure, environment, and evolution of a state department. The product of this mixed teaching strategy was a class filled with students who became relative "experts" on "their" state administrative agencies, who shared this expertise enthusiastically with other students, and who discussed textbook theories from the vantage point of "their" agency. With only a few modifications for particular context, this process can be carried out in projects in other states or local public agencies.

Early in the term, each student was assigned a department in the state executive branch. Course read-

ing and discussions were integrated with project planning and information gathering. (See the synopsis of the syllabus and orientation materials in the Appendix. A detailed syllabus is available upon request.) Initially, students carried out preliminary bibliographic research on their department; during the second half of the semester, they formulated questions and interviewed top agency officials. By the end of the project, students had considerable information about their department. They knew what budgetary patterns had affected its operations. They learned about departmental reorganizations and turf battles, and began to understand decision processes and some of the considerations that affected major decisions. In follow-up interviews, students and instructors alike found the process to be rewarding and productive teaching strategy.

California Agency Reconnaissance Project

The agency reconnaissance process is divided into four phases: set-up, classroom and library research, field interviewing and initial feedback, and reports review and editing.

Set-Up

California state agencies administer an annual operating budget of over \$36 billion and are responsible for a jurisdiction with a "GNP" that is larger than most independent nations. Surprisingly, there exists little systematic information about these agencies and how they have accomplished their tasks, especially in this recent period of extraordinary budgetary and intergovernmental turbulence. We began the process by assaying state agencies, gathering

rudimentary statistics, and fixing priorities for initial selections. The targeted agencies were then invited to cooperate with the project. With rare exceptions, the agencies were most welcoming. Then logistical preparations were made for two trips to the state capital: mini-vans were reserved, maps assembled, a meeting place in the capital identified, and other technical matters arranged.

Classroom Preparation/ Bibliographic Research

This phase began the second week of class. Students were given an orientation to the project and a list of candidate agencies which included their last year's personnel and budget totals. Students were asked to indicate which agencies they might find interesting. A week later, they were assigned to an agency matched as nearly as possible to their top choices. (Larger agencies draw two-person teams.)

Next, students gathered bibliographic and budget information about their agency's evolution over the past 15 years. The objective was to seek out significant changes in agency mission, organization, program goals, budget, work force, and outputs. To facilitate this search process, a workshop was arranged with our research librarians. They explained an assortment of state government reference sources and give an introduction to interpreting the voluminous state budget documents. Students then integrated budgetary and other organizational information into a preliminary (mid-term) report following a common format.

The preliminary reports identified the major changes that occurred in the agency regarding agency program or mission, financial resources, and/or personnel authorizations. In a

sense, these changes can be seen as significant “dependent and independent variables” in the agency’s evolution. Their origins and the agency’s coping responses became an important source of questions for the next research phase: field interviewing.

As students prepared preliminary reports, classroom sessions in the familiar lecture/discussion format provided a counterpoint of planning, preparing, and executing the CARP program. Class readings, lectures, and discussion sections described recent history of public organizations, national trends in intergovernmental relations, and the theories about large-scale public organizations. This helped students derive hypotheses about the ways their organizations may have coped with the changes that were documented in the record. Students refined these perspectives and hypotheses in consultation with the field supervisor and instructor.

Field Interviewing and Initial Feedback

With their “hypotheses” in hand, students prepared questions for interviews with agency officials. What caused these changes in the agency’s budget, its mission statement, or program specifications? How did these changes affect relationships within the agency? Between the agency and external actors? And, most importantly, how did the agency manage to cope with the results of changes in order to maintain agency effectiveness?

In preparation for the field interviewing, senior agency leaders were contacted and their advice sought about the best people to talk with about the agency’s recent evolution. Students were put in contact with the person each agency designated. Two days were set aside for class interviewing in the capital, and students worked out their own schedules with the agencies, generally including three to five interviews. Follow-up interviews were sometimes carried out to fill gaps or explore particularly interesting situations. Agency participants were generally the director/executive officer, assistant directors, budget officers, and planning or administrative officials. Interview schedules were reviewed with each

student prior to the field trip. And students were given a workshop on elite interviewing using materials from Nathan’s *Critical Choices in Interviewing* (Berkeley: Institute of Governmental Studies, University of California, 1986).

Arriving in the capital by university van (driven by the instructor and the field supervisor) at the beginning of the working day, students were dropped off at their agencies to take up a grueling day of interviewing. Students were on their own; an experience they reported as exhilarating, terrifying, and surprisingly informative. Officials usually took up the exercise with a will and became good teachers. Students checked-in at “CARP base camp,” a renovated coffee shop in the basement of the old capitol building, where they eagerly swapped stories about the people they had interviewed and the “inside scoop” they had found. They often came loaded down with agency reports, financial statements, and even videotapes!

By this stage, students had a reasonably good idea of agency functions, and recent changes, and had often discovered that budgets and other written documentation gave a distorted view of what had really occurred. Now *they* knew! Each had in this time become the class’s single expert on an agency. The dynamics of class discussions began to change dramatically. The class now was a group of mini-experts teaching each other and the instructors about what happens in “*their* agency.”

A systematic feedback session was held in class shortly after the capital trip. Working with categories derived from the theoretical literature, a first attempt was made to organize the differences students were reporting about their agencies. For example, which agencies had turned to cut-backs in service to cope with reduced resources? Which ones had expanded the range of fees for service? Which mounted a campaign among politically effective clientele? What accounts for these differences? Is there a pattern among these state agencies? If so, does it correspond to what the literature would lead us to expect?³

The information gathered in the field and insights derived from class

discussion and debates were integrated with the earlier statistical data to make up the final report or term project. These papers followed a common, but flexible, format that called upon students to organize their presentations in terms of the agency’s internal environment and external task environment. Each of these categories was elaborated with several theoretically derived sub-categories. These papers are the culmination of an intense and cumulative teaching process. Individually, they bear witness to an exciting process in which students discovered their own capacity to pose questions, carry out a reconnaissance of reasonable sophistication, and gain unusual insight into organizational processes. Together the papers represented a potentially valuable research resource—if they could pass sufficiently rigorous research muster.

Report Review and Editing

The final phase took place during the summer after the course. The graduate student project coordinator and two paid class members formed a “report review team” to clean the data sets and review the reports. The intent was to provide a rigorous review of the data and analyses and to deposit as many reports as achieved a high reporting standard in the university’s Institute of Governmental Studies (IGS) library as a basis for subsequent research.

First, the team inspected the quality of each student draft report. An appraisal was made about its overall merits and need for further work. Those that passed muster were returned to the agency for comment. In the meantime, the team reviewed the budgetary and personnel data from the state budget to assure accuracy. Using common spreadsheet and graphics software, tables and graphs of budgetary and personnel trends during the past 15 years were prepared based initially on the students’ preliminary work.

As the departments returned their comments on the draft reports, their suggestions were evaluated and integrated into the reports. In a few instances, additional interviews were needed to finish up nearly adequate work. For example, one department complained that an important de-

partmental function had been omitted from the original report. Inevitably, a few departments rejected the student report entirely. In these cases, the instructor and project coordinator made their best estimate of the value of the draft report and the validity of the criticisms from the department.

Over 50 agencies have been studied, some twice, and over 250 state officials have been interviewed. Of the reports that resulted, 26 became "finished reports," deposited under the student author's name in the IGS library. Each follows a common format with verified technical statistical appendices and graphic presentations developed by the report review team.

Evaluation

Students who had taken the course three years before remembered the project vividly. The agency interviewing stood out particularly as an eye-opening experience. Several reported nervousness before the interviews and a sense of accomplishment—and exhaustion—afterwards. The interviews themselves had gone very smoothly. Students were generally pleased with the cooperation they received. Agency personnel were usually cooperative. According to one student,

I (interviewed) four persons and only one did not say a lot. The others were very helpful and even suggested other staffers who might be interviewed. The interviewees saw that someone was interested in what they do and were more than happy to help.

The interview process was seen as informative and practical. Students felt that the project gave a practical understanding of concepts covered in course readings and lectures. One felt that the interview process helped him to better understand personnel management and administration of budget reductions. Others gained a better understanding of the problems confronted by a public organization and learned about the dynamics of agency survival. Others noted that they had learned about dilemmas confronted by organizations and different ways to manage organizations.

The project had taught some students how to work as an independent

member of a team research project. They particularly remembered a sense of structured autonomy. One woman "liked the fact that the professor left much of the report's design to the student. . . ." Another enjoyed the substance of the course, but found particular gratification from the challenge of "developing our own project. . . ." Several commented that they began to realize that they knew quite a good deal about the agency compared to the people they talked with.

Students generally reported very favorable memories of the course. Several specifically noted that it had been useful in post-university careers.

Students who had taken the course three years before remembered the project vividly. The agency interviewing stood out particularly as an eye-opening experience.

One student had worked for a county supervisor and for a congressman after college and felt that the experience with state administrators had been useful in understanding inter-governmental and interbranch relationships.

On the other hand there were complaints. For some students the unstructured quality was worrisome . . . the project's objectives were not always clear. Our reluctance to prioritize specific types of information frustrated some students who wish for a more directed focus. A second complaint is familiar: The workload was heavy as the report deadline neared—during the final two weeks of the semester. While students generally felt their interest in the CARP project rewarded them for the additional work, they felt they did not have enough time to digest and write their reports at the end of the semester. We also found that students had some difficulty during the bibliographic research phase in using state budget materials. While they had found the library workshop to be

helpful, the documents were still imposing. Some had to be led through the documents step by step, which requires a project coordinator who is familiar with budgets.

Teaching assistants evaluated the course positively. They emphasized the value of the CARP project as a teaching supplement, and the unusual opportunity to be a teacher/project manager in an academic setting. They generally found the mixture of lecture/theory and empirical field work exciting and stimulating to the classes. One teaching assistant noted that the project provided "an unusual opportunity to develop skills for teaching undergraduate students the basics of designing and conducting original research." The project was also instructive in the teaching assistants' own research. They felt greater confidence in approaching public officials for cooperation. And project coordinators claimed that CARP had improved their ability to coordinate a team approach to a complex research program.

Finally, state administrators who participated in the project, not surprisingly, had only a vague memory of the project. It did, however, give the university some visibility. Executives found that our students were bright and well-organized and that interviews had gone quite well. They generally liked the concept of the project as a learning tool, though one was skeptical about its value to their departments (obviously not an objective of the CARP project).

In Retrospect

Our experience with this process has been very satisfying and has clearly demonstrated the effectiveness of complementing classroom activities with an informal semi-structured research process. However, the resources needed to effect these activities are significantly greater than those normally allocated for teaching. First, it is almost mandatory that the instructor have the assistance of a field supervisor if the class is bigger than a moderately sized seminar. Second, the transaction costs in dealing with the agencies, while not excessive, are burdensome unless departmental secretarial assistance is available to help with mailings, phone calls, and student logistical

The Teacher

needs. And a small university subsidy for the use of vans was necessary. The assistance of the library staff and interviewer briefings was quite important. Finally, we were fortunate to be able to garner modest summer funds to employ the reports review team to assure that the quality of reported data and analysis was rigorous enough to allow deposition in our research library.

The gains in enhanced learning and the development of original research findings and data certainly justifies the resources. This process strongly increases the effectiveness of our undergraduate offerings. But it cannot be done without support from local university administration and modest additional resources.

California Agency Reconnaissance Project Orientation

Overview

Public agencies are in the midst of change. To gain a better appreciation of the organizational world, we will be part of an on-going program of reconnaissance at the state level. Students . . . will be assigned a California State administrative agency for preliminary analysis of its development and the ways it has sought to cope with changes in the past decade. The project is in two parts: (1) statistical trends describing the agency's overall development since 1970; and (2) analysis, based largely on interviews with agency officials, concerning the changes within the agency and between its chief clients and overseers. . . .

Introduction

These have been tumultuous times for public organizations in the U.S., indeed for all advanced industrial societies. Prompted by economic distress and ideological programs, central governments are sharply limiting their involvement in civil sectors of society. The trend toward increased national oversight and support of economic and social sectors is attenuating. The federal government, in a number of areas, is stepping away from activities that are also carried on by state and local governments.

In Washington, we see stabilized or declining resources allocated to agencies across a wide range of functions. At the same time, state and local governments are confronted with greater demands and a decrease in locally derived resources. Thus, the dynamics of federal agencies are likely to be quite different from those of state and local organizations. . . .

In California, these changes have been especially intense. State agencies confronted with both a severe financial climate (ushered in by Prop. 13, et al.) and the recent economic recession at a time when federal support is waning. If our administrative agencies have strong capacities, the devolution of functions is likely to improve local flexibility without degrading services or the quality of public life. All would be well for our state government, now serving a population on a par with Canada's, in a state economy generating a "GNP" ranking among the world's top ten nations. If, however, California's agencies are not flexible and robust, the long-term results for state services are problematical.

Examining California's Administrative Agencies

What do we know about California's administrative agencies? How do they compare in vigor with their federal counterparts? . . . What responses have they made to the rapid onset of severe resource constraints, conditions very different from those characterizing much of their history?

A good deal is known about California's legislature and politics, but systematic descriptions and analyses of its administrative agencies—data necessary for understanding the effects of national policy on state and local administration—is simply missing. While information can be found scattered in government documents, especially budget and operating materials, it is dispersed, uneven in quality, and of little immediate assistance in answering our questions.

This "gap" in knowledge becomes increasingly serious as the scale of Californian economy and society continues to grow. . . . [O]ur situation presents a rare opportunity to

begin filling the "gap." . . . One or two students, depending on the size of the agency, will be assigned to a California state agency. With the help of data and format guides prepared for this project, . . . each team is responsible for two somewhat different types of information:

Part I. A description of the agency's development, since 1970, as depicted in statistical data in the annual budget statements (on reserve in the IGS library). This description should include:

- Budget trends, absolute and controlled for inflation, including percent of state budget total;
- Personnel allocation, including percent state total;
- Program statement, including significant changes, reorganizations with increase or reduced functions/units;
- Formal reporting relationships—hierarchy and oversight vis-à-vis the legislature;
- (Informal relationships with interest groups, et al., if evident in available materials.)

Part II. An analysis of the agency's coping strategies, and adjustments in the face of the changes it has confronted as described in Part I. Based on interviews with agency officials (arranged by students in cooperation with instructors).

Appendix

Public Organization and Administration

Abbreviated Syllabus— Upper Division Version, Spring 1987

Professor, Todd R. La Porte
Teaching Assistant, Sean McClosky
Project Coordinator: David
Hadwiger

This course explores the ordering power of large-scale public organizations in the service of a democratic society and the limits that constrain this service. Our objectives are to provide: (1) a view of the shape and dynamics of public organizations and an initial basis for your own involvement in and/or criticism or support of public organizations; and (2) an opportunity, through a term project,

to “get into” organizational life more deeply.

In lectures, discussion, and debate we examine aspects of the structure and process of public organizations. Analytical conceptions improve our understanding of the behavior of organizational participants as they seek to forward the public interest, especially in a time of limited resources. Other themes include political critiques of bureaucracy, the extraordinary demands Americans place on public organizations, and the political context of public management. Sections emphasize particular perspectives or “roles” in the “bureaucracy,” especially as they respond to recent changes in national/state relations. Two debates are scheduled . . . during the semester.

Students produce two written projects: (a) by mid-term, a short note discussing the evidence of public organizational influence “seen from street corner” observations; (b) a term report based on participation in—the California Agency Reconnaissance Project (CARP)—a review of selected agencies of California state government which includes at least one field trip to Sacramento.

Course evaluations: 40% on the final exam, 40% on the term project, and 20% on the mid-term exam, “street corner” note and section evaluations. The mid-term and final exams include materials from sections, course readings, and are based on review questions and allow prepared outlines.

Required texts: Ira Sharkansky, *Public Administration* (Freeman, 1982); Charles Goodsell, *The Case for Bureaucracy* (Chatham House, 1983); Amitai Etzioni, *Modern Organization* (Hopkins, 1962). Course reader: (a) Federalism, (b) California government, and (c) critiques of bureaucracy.

Course Syllabus Synopsis (with field research items highlighted)

Week I. The Study of Public Administration—in these times. The course overview (expectation and mood); scope of public administration—basic distinctions.

Week II. Public Organizations in Perspective. Present situation: contrasts and

evolution; public organizations “in these times”: central questions; demand, growth and challenge.

Week III. Environment of Public Organization. Inside public organizations: *the California Agency Reconnaissance Project (CARP)*; *agencies assigned*; emerging public organizational complexes; inter-governmental “mazes,” and constraint. “Street-corner” observation briefing.

Week IV. Reducing Disorder, Pursuing the Public Interest. Political and technical complexities: bases for uncertainty; bases for administrative organizing; hierarchies, participation, and “effectiveness.”

Week V. Current Context(s) of Public Management. Resource scarcity and coping with tax-limitation measures; decisions and compliance: “control equals management?”; “seeing” organized actions—“*On the Street Corner*.”

Week VI. Choice and Action in Times of “Turbulence.” Inside Organizations II: discussions with county manager; information, and survival politics; systems process and disruption. *CARP, Pt. I due*.

Week VII. Policy Dynamics and Conflict. Bases for decision-making: self-interest, skill, position?; the bureaucrat as “lightning rod, scapegoat, champion?”; DEBATE I: Can/should decisions be shared?

Week VIII. Bureaucratic Politics and Evaluating the Public’s Interest. Systems performance and evaluation—as if one had information—or Have there been cutbacks?!; Inside Organizations III: access and discovery; *set-up for agency recon*.

Week IX. Allocating (and Securing) Resources. Budget process: “Stoking the Fires”; hard choices in times of uncertainty and demand. Mid-term essay (based on review questions). *CARP field work orientation*.

Week X. SPRING BREAK—Capital set-up.

Week XI. Program Survival “in These Times.” “Cutbacks” and bureaucratic politics; ways agencies cope: *CARP hypotheses*. *Set-up for capital trip*. *Final briefing*.

Week XII. Information, Personnel and Persons: View of Life Within. Information systems and organizational control; personnel systems: incentives for competence. *CARP field trips*, *interview debriefing—intuitive comparison*.

Week XIII. The Accountable Relation: Can It Exist? Persons in-our-service: relations within; across the boundaries—citizens and “servants”; formal account-

ability: in the courts.

Week XIV. Issues of Bureaucracy and Democracy. Political accountability: formal and informal relations; DEBATE II: Should bureaucrats be heroes?

Week XV. Public Organizations: Prospects. Patterns in the future of public organizations; future developments in California’s bureaucracy; speculations on the behavior of persons within.

Week XVI. Review and Reconsideration. *Final discussion of CARP process*; *project trends—class discussion*. Initial review discussions.

Week XVII. Review (3-hr.), essay examination based on review questions.

Notes

1. This article is a shortened version of a paper presented at the 13th National Conference on the Teaching of Public Administration, Arizona State University, Tempe, Arizona, February 15-17, 1990. That paper included the research and data format guides used in the project and a list of agencies studied. If these are of interest please contact the senior author. Steven Stehr assisted effectively as original field supervisor in the development of this project. The authors gratefully acknowledge the University’s Institute of Governmental Studies and Committee on Educational Development whose support was crucial in enabling this project to flower.

2. The CARP process has been repeated four times—spring and fall, 1984, and spring, 1987 and 1990. The process was also used in an Administrative Behavior class, in 1990, for a reconnaissance of public or public service organizations that responded to the October 1989 San Francisco earthquake, and, again in 1991, on the complex infrastructure organizations of this university the equivalent of the city government in a city of some 45,000 citizens.

3. The material informed the second of the two debates held in class. The first resolved that: “Administrative decisions can and should be shared among executives, middle level managers, and union representatives”; and the second that “The problem of accountability is largely solved. Professionals are competent, executive control budgetary and personnel systems, and the legislature speak for citizens.” Each debate divided the students up into different contending roles—politically appointed executives, career bureaucrats of the middle level, unionized workers, and representative of the agency’s clientele.

About the Authors

Todd R. La Porte is professor of political science, University of California, Berkeley. He was associate director of the Institute of

The Teacher

Governmental Studies during the CARP project and is currently engaged in studies of organizations that operate technologies of such criticality that nearly failure-free per-

formance is demanded.

David Hadwiger is a doctoral candidate and was project coordinator and field supervisor. He has recently returned from the

Defense Base Closure and Realignment Commission in Washington, D.C., where he was studying the effects of military spending on congressional re-elections.

Teaching the Political Ideas of the Bible

H. Mark Roelofs, *New York University*

What follows is a syllabus for a 14-week, one-semester, four-point, undergraduate course in the political ideas of the Bible, both Old Testament and New. Prerequisite is a one-semester introduction to political theory.

Teaching the Bible in the American academic environment has hazards. In that mostly secular world, the phrase "Bible study" is reflexively taken to mean "religious devotions" or even "proselytizing." To avoid these implications, the older style was to call Bible courses in a regular college curriculum something like "The Bible As Literature." Tactics of that sort miss the point—virtually all great literature, from the idolatry of Macbeth to Huck Finn faith-wrestling on his raft, addresses or is based on profound religious concerns.

My approach is that the Bible's consistent and profound religious concerns are necessarily accompanied by major political implications and conceptions. The point is both general and specific: generally, any religion, save the most solipsistic, must translate into social and political behavior in order to have practical significance; specifically, what most distinguishes the Biblical God from the time of Abraham forward—unlike all other ancient gods—is the distinction of being a god of history and of political action.

On the other hand, I argue that faith and action are personal responsibilities and that nothing is to be gained—either in the classroom or elsewhere—by trying to manipulate anybody. I further argue that this class is an "academic" enterprise in which dispassionate analysis and calm reflection will be highly praised.

(I am then forced to concede that both these injunctions are quite possibly expressions of a Protestant bias—and perhaps, more exactly, a Presbyterian one.)

Syllabus

The Biblical Contribution to the Western Political Tradition

The principal intent of this class is to extract political concepts from Biblical materials, identify them with

The principal intent of this class is to extract political concepts from Biblical materials, identify them with major strands of the Western political tradition generally, and, most important, define the concepts with precision.

major strands of the Western political tradition generally, and, most important, define the concepts with precision.

In overview, we will find in the Biblical materials three distinct though related clusters or families of political concepts: those associated with the nation and its charismatic leader; those associated with revolution and the prophet who calls for it; and those associated with what is

called here the confessional life and the seeker who pursues it. All of these concepts are indigenous to the Bible and are also powerfully present in the Western political tradition.

Two practical difficulties will inhibit our effort to identify these concepts: one has to do with us; the other with the Biblical materials.

Our difficulty is that, although we live in a Biblically shaped culture, as a generation of academics our Biblical illiteracy is very nearly total. We have been taught to equate the Bible with religion and, then, with obscurantism, superstition, pathetic subjectivism, personalism, or whatever else need be of no concern to professional objectivity and rational/scientific enlightenment. If we are to treat the Biblical materials with the intellectual seriousness that our present enterprise requires, we must overcome both ignorance and bias, each in near-absolute degree.

The difficulty with the Biblical materials is twofold. First, the Biblical writers, in their "primitivism," were wholly unconcerned with conceptual problems. Their philosophical competence was minimal. They regularly used terms interchangeably and exchanged meanings among related terms with what can only be regarded—by academics concerned with intellectual rigor—as literary abandon.

Nevertheless—and this is the second difficulty the Bible presents to practical research—the Biblical writers wrote with enormous effect. No book in history has had greater impact; no book has been a more powerful source of controversy. And the controversy continues—desperate, fundamental, urgent, and political. Moral majoritarians and liberation