

# Charles Goodsell: A weaver of the tapestry of public administration

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## Abstract

Our society has the habit of writing about exemplars after they are no longer with us; this is certainly important and beneficial but misses the opportunity to engage them in a personal reflection on their lives and the contributions/lessons they most want to share. This essay is intended to address this common oversight by sharing the marvelous 61-year career of Charles Goodsell, by first recounting his still active professional journey and closing with his own personal advice to academics, practitioners, and students.

## Evidence for practice

- Practitioners can play an important role in returning to their local and/or home universities to teach and inspire the next generation of public servants.
- Agencies should fully appreciate the need for a strong mission and the impact of symbols in building a culture that reflects core values consistent with the mission.
- Leaders should “enter the world” of their employees to fully understand the scope of their work and the impact of administrative decisions, as well as to convey the joy of public administration.

## INTRODUCTION

Goodsell began his academic career at the School of Public Administration at the University of Puerto Rico in 1961 after a three-year stint in the summers at the Bureau of the Budget on Washington, D.C. and two years as an enlisted man with the U.S. Army Counter Intelligence Corps in West Berlin. With two primary university residences first at the University of Southern Illinois from 1972 to 1978 (where he was founding director of the MPA program) and then the Center for Public Administration and Policy (CPAP) at Virginia Tech from 1978—currently as Professor Emeritus, his accomplishments include 11 books, 87 journal articles, a presenter, convener or discussant at 112 academic conference and professional meetings, 51 public addresses and lectures, chair of 23 PhD dissertation committees, and instructor for 20 different public administration courses. Notably, his photographs of public architecture appear on over 50 covers of top public administration journals. National honors and awards include the Dwight Waldo Award for lifetime contribution to the field of public administration by the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA),

Distinguished Research Award of ASPA and the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, the Marshall E. Dimock Award for best commissioned article to appear in *Public Administration Review*, and election to the National Academy of Public Administration.

## BREADTH AND SIGNIFICANCE OF WORK

Goodsell provides a meaningful synthesis of his work in *Outlandish Perspectives on Public Administration* (2022), the title of which conveys the essence of how he would like to be perceived: a scholar and lover of what he calls the rich tapestry of public administration who has refused to be bound by any single line of inquiry or methodology. This “outlander” disposition has produced work ranging from administrative reforms in Puerto Rico (Goodsell, 1965), his seminal work in defense of bureaucracy (Goodsell, 2004), the social meaning of government buildings (Goodell, 1988), the fundamental importance of mission to enduring agency success (Goodsell, 2011), and

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in-depth interviews with public servants working deep in the bureaucracy (Goodsell, 2019).

Important themes for the study and practice of public administration emerge across his writing. We should not forget that at its core public administration is an applied field and should be anchored in a responsibility to support and improve the operations of government and its involved networks. An aspect of this responsibility is to look beyond prominent and well-known figures and study those who do the daily work of government. This message also speaks to the importance of higher level leaders understanding the work of their employees in the trenches. His study of agencies illustrates how a strong sense of mission tightly embraces the organization, “uniting employees around their common work purpose” and can withstand periodic poor leadership at the top (Goodsell, 2022, p. 21). He also invites us to consider how a strong organizational culture is reflected in physical symbols at any number of levels and settings, ranging from majestic statehouses to welfare waiting rooms.

At the individual level, his work shows a great respect for the moral aspect of the daily work of public administrators in the obligation not to leave disadvantaged citizens behind, and an admiration for the art or craft of public service, by “consciously doing even the smallest tasks with mastery, flair, and distinctiveness.” (Goodsell, 2022, p. 79).

## PERSONAL REFLECTIONS

The writings of Goodsell are available for all to read and discuss, but I also wanted to provide him the opportunity to sit down and share his advice to the wide range of public administration academic and practitioner groups he has studied and worked with as well as general thoughts about the past and future of public administration.

### Advice to Researchers

Use your imagination as well as your training. Your university mentors will set you in certain directions, but to accomplish research that is interesting and exciting you need to “look around, get off the tracks, follow your impulses, and charge off!” He shared the example of walking with a friend at an ASPA Conference in Dallas where he showed him the City Hall and the Council Chambers. He was so struck by the imagination of the architecture and how it was reflective of civic power and responsiveness that he decided to write a book featuring the architecture of 75 city halls and 50 American statehouses (Goodsell, 2001).

### Advice to Teachers

Cover the necessary substance but make each class meeting different and adapt to the students you have. Develop a tailored conceptual framework for each class, and in his

case, there would be many iterations of the framework right up to the start of class with “chalk in hand.” He took pride in this approach, although students were mystified by it and wanted the outline before class. He resisted being constrained by a preordained outline that could curtail his own creative thinking but also limit student input that might take up time; you should “let the students have their say.” However, always be sure “to bring the sermon to a close at the exact appointed time.”

### Advice to Students

Go to learn and not merely earn a grade; if you focus on fully engaging the material the grade will take care of itself. John Gaus, a favorite professor in his MPA studies at Harvard, always encouraged students to consider the enormous range of responsibilities for a public administrator (e.g., the expansion of the country out west; it was not just moving the wagons but it involved the moving of an entire nation and administrative infrastructure). Gaus emphasized that living up to the responsibilities of a public administrator is a moral duty as there is an ethical element to everything you do.

### Advice to Practitioners

“Walk in and out of academia” as often as you can; go back to your school and seek opportunities to participate in classes where you can be honest and thoughtful about preparing students for the professional world of public administration. In his study of public servants, he would ask them how they got involved in public service, and it was often a parent or a member of the Park Service coming to class and giving a talk about controlled burning (Goodsell, 2019). Practitioners should not be skeptical or fearful of the academy because they have an authority academics do not have, but they need to express it in a constructive way to get students interested in public service. He marveled at how the City Manager of Carbondale, Illinois was able to convey to his students why the most important function of his job was to “make sure the sewers were running clear...that is it!”

### Advice to Leaders/Administrators

As an administrator himself and an observer of other leaders at universities and in the practitioner world through his research, he suggests that leaders take the time and energy to “enter into the world” of your employees and understand their realities so that you can better understand how your decisions will impact them. You “can’t just be consumed by your own reality as an administrator.” Do not assume that just because you have laid out your plans on paper that people know how this plan translates to their daily work in their positions.

Goodsell's views on how leaders can build a community and culture were no doubt influenced by his long career at an exceptional place called the Center for Public Administration and Policy (CPAP) at Virginia Tech. He was the first faculty member hired by founding professors Gary Wamsley and Phil Kronenberg, who wanted to create something different, "a once in a lifetime opportunity to create a new culture from scratch" where there was no existing entrenched "guardian culture" to hold people back. They intentionally added faculty with different perspectives and interests "who could shout at each other during the day but at night have a drink and calm down and laugh." The ability to create a place where all ideas were welcome with traditional entrenched battlegrounds transcended produced provocative works such as the *Blacksburg Manifesto*, a collective statement on the future of public administration and how it should be viewed (Marshall & White, 1990) and *Refounding Public Administration* (Wamsley, 1990), an argument that government is properly an agential and active servant of the public good.

As a PhD student at CPAP in the late 1980s, I also want to attest to the broader academic culture Goodsell discussed, where students were treated not as "foot soldiers but as fellows" where they were considered full members of an academic community. Faculty did not act as "judgers deciding if you are good enough, but as helpers trying to get students through." This culture was symbolized by a ceremony where upon a successful dissertation defense the committee and student would have a toast and toss their glasses into the fireplace; then the chair of the committee had to clean it up, which was a very deliberate symbolic gesture. The CPAP culture was also exemplified by the intentional intermingling of federal government practitioner students from the Northern Virginia campus with the "motley crew" of full-time students and faculty at the Blacksburg campus. This was yet another example of a culture that welcomed ideas from diverse backgrounds that was beneficial for all parties, celebrated with a traditional wine hour on Friday afternoons always attended by faculty and students.

## Past and Future of Public Administration

Over his career observing the practice of public administration, Goodsell admires institutions that have provided nonpartisan professional expertise to government leaders, noting the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) and the old Bureau of the Budget (where he interned in the late 1950s under President Eisenhower). NAPA more than ever needs to fulfill this role in our polarized political culture, but he does encourage NAPA to be less practitioner-oriented with their speakers and "less slanted away from theorists and

academics", noting that Dwight Waldo was never invited to speak! He laments the replacement of the Bureau of the Budget with the current Office of Management and Budget, which has become "just a place to push the particular political plans of the President."

In terms of his favorite classic books from the past, he recommends *Big Democracy* (Appleby, 1945), *The Study of Public Administration* (Waldo, 1955), and *Functions of the Executive* by (Barnard, 1938). These books were a great influence as they argued for the importance of a strong and progressive administrative state as well the value of the voice of the practitioner in the case of Barnard, an executive with AT&T.

Regarding the future of public administration, he focused on the need to protect the study and practice of public administration and the concept of "publicness." Public administration needs to defend itself (the focus of much of his writing) and "escape the control of political science, sociology and economics...we draw from all three but they cannot dictate our soul." He describes this soul as "an intention to create a great tapestry of millions of men and women who earn a living but give themselves to serving others." He challenges public administration academics to go beyond a focus on getting published and also engage in and learn from public service....this is what makes us different from other disciplines.

He would like public administration as a subject of teaching, research, and action to see itself in "different lights" where those engaged in the field have a greater appreciation for the scope of public administration, which is beyond mere implementation to a comprehension of the "full force of power and influence" involved in efforts like the backing of the Ukraine in such a quick and dramatic fashion. He marvels at the "fantastic way" we have responded to requests from generals in the Ukraine and transported critical equipment so rapidly, with thousands of people in and out of uniform scouring for supplies and flying them straight there. Public administration is an undeniable force in our country and a fine field for study.

Regarding his concept of publicness, he laments how over the years the citizenry as a whole has never fully recognized the existence of public administration, except for dramatic cases such as going to the moon, battling Covid, building the Hubbard Telescope, or in a negative light with scandal. But these events are only "pieces" or glimpses of public administration; the field gets very little "common attention" for the critical work done behind the scenes. Consider a hurricane event. The people who tell us about public administration are the media who focus on all the enormous damage done initially by a hurricane and how the government was too late or did not do enough. There is some attention to the immediate emergency services provided, but all the subsequent rebuilding through public administration that goes on for months or years does not get nearly the same attention.

## CONCLUSION

Spending time with Goodsell provided an opportunity to understand the core of a scholar who in his seventh decade of work has developed a rare appreciation and even awe for the field of public administration. In a democracy where the public attention focuses on legislation and policy, he relishes the “deep down” work in the agencies imbued with mission who are stewards of the public dollar and make this country function. He challenges all of us in the field to be more self-conscious of how public administration is part of a greater whole working together with “institutions of publicness” on behalf of all of us: governments, nonprofits, membership associations, commercial corporations, private charities, foundations, and volunteers.

It is fitting that when I asked Goodsell for any final comments, he noted that we should have “fun” in pursuing our work in public administration. Academics and practitioner leaders should give their students and employees a sense of joy in doing a job well done on behalf of the public. He concluded with the story of a city worker in Richmond who started as a grass mower, and did his job so well that he was put in charge of the drainage system for a city that faces serious flood challenges. In shadowing him in his office and around the city, it was clear that he built a team of fellow public servants who were inspired by him and found joy and importance in their work through his infectious leadership.

Goodsell revels in what he calls the tapestry of individuals “lending part of their souls” to practice the craft of public administration and serve all of us. Reflecting on his life's work of diverse scholarship, he merits the title of a profound weaver of the full scope of the administrative state.

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