Bridging the Theory-Practice Gap: A Comparative Assessment of Student-Administrator Engagement Models in Delaware and Brno

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Abstract: The gap between academic public administration education and the daily realities of practice remains a persistent challenge for universities worldwide. While classroom theory is essential, the cultivation of public service values and professional readiness often requires experiential learning and direct engagement with practitioners. This paper presents a comparative analysis of two models of student engagement: the long-standing student worker model at the University of Delaware's Institute for Public Administration (IPA) in the United States, which involves direct project work and internships, and the MuniLab initiative at Masaryk University's Institute for Public Administration in Brno, Czech Republic. While starting as a seminar series, MuniLab has evolved to employ students as subcontractors for municipal projects, mirroring the Delaware approach.

The study explores the transferability and comparative value of these models. The Delaware model, with over 40 years of history, serves as an established benchmark for integrating students into professional public service roles. In contrast, MuniLab represents a successful adaptation of this model within a Central European context, developed specifically to overcome practitioner skepticism, motivate students for public administration careers, and foster a culture of cooperation between the university and the public sector.

Using a qualitative methodology, this research relies on a series of semi-structured interviews with two key stakeholder groups across both institutions: (1) participating students and (2) partnering public administrators (e.g., mayors, city managers, and agency directors). The study aims to assess the "comparative value" of these programs by examining the sentiment and values of the participants. Specifically, it investigates how these engagement models influence students' public service motivation, their perception of government efficacy, and their professional readiness. Conversely, it assesses the practitioners' sentiment regarding the value of academic partnerships and their trust in the next generation of public administrators. Preliminary analysis suggests that despite distinct administrative cultures, the "bridge-building" mechanism of value-added student labor is a universally effective tool for strengthening local administration and democracy.