

APSA PRACADEMIC FELLOWSHIP

The Third Epoch: A Pracademic View of the EPA's Office of Policy

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INTRODUCTION TO THE BERYL RADIN PRACADEMIC FELLOWSHIP ARTICLES

Over the past several decades, limited opportunities have existed for faculty members in public management, public policy, and related fields to move between the academy and the world of practitioners. The Beryl Radin Pracademic Fellowship Program, announced in 2013 and administered by the APSA Centennial Center for Political Science and Public Affairs, creates opportunities for newer faculty members to recreate the historical experience of joining theory and practice.

Beryl Radin, 2013 Gaus Award winner, established this program to serve others like her who move back and forth between the world of the practitioner and that of the academic. The fellowship provides APSA member academics in the areas of public policy, public administration, and related fields with practical, hands-on experience built around the reality of the decision-making world. The recipients can take this experience back to their institutions and classrooms to

help build bridges between the academic and practitioner worlds.

In its initial stages, selected individuals are placed in federal government agencies in the Washington, DC area. They are expected to work closely with a decision-maker involved in a program of their interest to get a firsthand look at a decision-making environment. More details, including application requirements and deadlines, are available at <http://www.apsanet.org/pracademic> or by contacting centennial@apsanet.org.

In the article that follows, Susan M. Opp and Todd M. La Porte, the inaugural Pracademic Fellows, share their experience in two different locations at the Environmental Protection Agency. Following the strategy of the APSA Congressional Fellowship Program and the dozens of Fellows who relate their fellowship experiences, APSA will also include articles by Beryl Radin Pracademic Fellows in the pages of *PS*.

It is a tough time to be a federal employee. Congress hasn't passed all of the appropriations bills before the September 30 deadline since 1996 (Alexander 2013). Continuing resolutions and uncertainty plague the budgetary process for months every year. In this environment, threatened shutdowns and furloughs are not uncommon (Katz 2015). In addition to this already difficult working environment for federal employees, Americans are increasingly vocal in their dissatisfaction with the government, even labeling it as the second most pressing problem going into 2016 (Cook 2016). While it is challenging to be any federal employee in this environment, it is even more so for someone working for the Environmental Protection Agency (EPA). The Flint, Michigan water crisis¹ and the Gold King Mine spill² in Colorado have both served as recent and visible reminders of the very real and significant consequences of environmental disasters.

Complicating this already difficult work environment are the significant challenges facing the world from climate change. While the phenomenon is not new, it is highly complex. Achieving the goals of environmental sustainability and of mitigating and adapting to climate change requires policies, politics, and processes different from those focused on regulation and pollution control. How the EPA evolves to meet these new challenges is a matter of significant policy interest for policymakers, administrative staff, and scholars. Pressure to respond to these challenges is mounting in the context of an increasingly partisan political environment, which makes effective administration all the more difficult.

How might scholars and other researchers approach learning about the challenges the EPA and others face as they work to make the United States more environmentally sustainable and prepare for and respond to climate change? We suggest that case

study development through extended participant observation is an ideal and necessary tool to learn about complex organizational phenomena. This is a time-honored tradition in public administration (Jensen and Rogers 2001), with seminal contributions by Selznick (1949), Kaufman (1960), Lipsky (1980) and Radin (2002), among others. But it seems to be, losing favor with researchers in public administration and in political science. This article reports on our efforts to grapple with the challenges and changes facing the EPA as it navigates an increasingly complex political and policy landscape during the run-up to the 2016 general election.

As the first APSA Pracademic Fellows, we had the unique opportunity to work as EPA employees in different parts of the Office of Policy (OP) from January to July 2016. The Fellowship allowed us to be embedded in the OP as participant observers during an election year and offered unique insights into the activities of two subunits: the Office of Sustainable Communities (OSC)³ and the Climate Change Adaptation Staff (CCAS).⁴

These two units represent a very small set of non-regulatory groups in the EPA and share some common themes that provide important lessons to researchers. Both are engaged in activities that aim to respond to challenges of sustainable development and societal adaptation to a changing climate. Both are leaders in their respective domains, and both work to shape the EPA's future role in responding to environmental change. Both see the next months as critical to their ability in the medium-term to carry out their different but related missions. Although at this writing the election isn't for another few months, the OP begins its transition work early in the year in anticipation of the arrival of the first of the transition teams in late 2016. The transition work for the EPA involves preparing documents that outline what the agency has been doing and

also documenting what the agency would like to do going forward. The transition process offers a significant opportunity for reflection, reinvention, and change.

Office of Sustainable Communities

The Office of Sustainable Communities (OSC) is one of the largest units in the Office of Policy and has a lengthy history dating back to the 1990s when it was known as the home of the Smart Growth Program. OSC’s major focus is collaborating with and providing technical assistance, applied research, and tools to communities with an emphasis on smart growth principles such as walkability, infill development, and mixed land uses. The office is staffed with approximately 30 people divided into two units—each with their own director and associate director. The OSC staff is a highly educated group with a significant number of employees who hold doctorates. Currently, the overall goal for OSC programs is to help American communities become more sustainable, healthy, and economically vibrant places while also reducing greenhouse gas emissions and preserving the environment.

Climate Change Adaptation Staff

In contrast to OSC, the Climate Change Adaptation Staff (CCAS), with six people, is the smallest unit in OP. This group isn’t organized as a distinct office like OSC, but instead is organized as a working group in the immediate front office of OP. It is headed by a senior advisor on climate change, a highly respected and long-serving EPA senior staff member who has worked on climate adaptation issues since the 1990s. CCAS’s role is to coordinate internal EPA adaptation planning, capacity building, and mainstreaming. It also has taken a leadership role in supporting implementation of presidential executive orders, especially EO 13653 “Preparing the United States for the Impacts of Climate Change,” which directs Federal agencies to incorporate climate considerations into their activities.⁵ EO 13653 established the Council on Climate Preparedness and Adaptation, and authorized the chartering or re-chartering of working groups to carry out the Council’s mission. EPA was among the first major federal agencies to develop and implement climate vulnerability assessment and implementation plans. In part because of this, the CCAS staff leads have become interagency leaders and sources of advice in the effort to institutionalize climate adaptation practices throughout the federal family, focusing on activities such as climate-aware planning, staff training, workforce development, budgeting, and acquisitions.

THE THIRD EPOCH: EVOLUTION AND REINVENTION IN THE EPA

The EPA remains largely a regulatory body charged with administering the rules meant to achieve compliance with federal standards over pollution. From this vantage point, the EPA falls squarely into what Mazmanian and Kraft (2009) call the “First Epoch” of the environmental movement (see table 1 for an overview of the three epochs). It is difficult to see past the regulatory functions of the EPA or to see how it manages the incentive alignment activities associated with the second epoch,

which occur, to an extent, outside the EPA’s organizational purview (Fiorino 1999, 2006). Even federal employees, including many at the EPA, have difficulty seeing the EPA as anything other than a regulatory agency. However, as two pracademics working alongside the staff, we were able to get to know much more about the EPA’s nonregulatory and innovative efforts to reduce pollution, protect the environment, work toward sustainability, and prepare for climate change impacts. Working in this capacity allowed us to see past the regulatory functions of the EPA and uncover evidence of the existence of some of the concepts that are consistent with the third epoch of environmental management in the EPA. Drawing from the framework provided by Mazmanian and Kraft, the sections below highlight the major lessons and themes of our time in the EPA and illustrate the activities that are consistent with the third epoch of environmental management in the United States.

Non-Regulatory Efforts to Encourage Sustainability

While the EPA still largely works in a top-down regulatory environment, the nonregulatory and sometimes bottom-up activities of the OP suggest the question “What is the future of regulation in the EPA?” OP is made up of a group of four program offices and two ad-hoc working group teams that seek to find ways to incorporate sustainability principles into the everyday activities of the federal government and of communities across the country. As one high-level manager pointed out in a staff meeting, “We aren’t going to be able to reduce the impacts of climate change by regulation alone.” This attitude is a cultural norm in this office, and the employees of the OP recognize both the value and the need for nonregulatory initiatives to combat the environmental challenges of the future. For example, OSC’s activities include a significant emphasis on technical assistance provision to communities to help educate, demonstrate, and integrate sustainability principles into their daily activities. These technical assistance efforts are designed to be responsive to the changing demands and needs of communities. Current major technical assistance efforts in OSC include a local foods initiative, a smart location mapping tool, technical assistance for using broadband service to promote economic revitalization, and smart growth implementation assistance. Drawing from lessons gleaned from their community-based work, OSC is finalizing the design of two new technical assistance programs including one focused on health center locations and another focused on small-scale manufacturing initiatives. All of these

Table 1
The Three Epochs

EPOCH	KEY ATTRIBUTES
1: Regulation	National-level command and control Regulatory approach to environmental protection Rule of Law
2: Efficiency and incentive alignment in regulatory efforts	Market-based management of pollution State and local level enforcement efforts
3: Sustainable communities	Collaboration and public-private partnerships Broader emphasis on society wide needs Resource conservation and experimental approaches

Adapted from Mazmanian and Kraft (2009), 8–10.

initiatives are nonregulatory, voluntary, and include partners external to the EPA. As an example, the Local Foods, Local Places program is offered in partnership with six other federal units across the government. Through this program, EPA staff organizes workshops where national and regional experts are brought in to assist an applicant community with a local food challenge. Ultimately, these workshops use local food and smart growth principles to foster revitalization and sustainable economic development.⁶

Much like OSC, CCAS's activities are entirely nonregulatory. The CCAS's primary function over the last seven years has been to introduce and mainstream adaptation thinking into the EPA as a whole. Enlarging the mission of the EPA to encompass climate adaptation has been challenging: the agency's traditional Epoch 1 regulatory responsibilities deeply shape its structure, operations, and culture. Executive Orders issued in 2009 and 2013 directed federal agencies to produce climate vulnerability assessments, and then to develop adaptation strategies and implementation plans. EPA was among the first to complete these plans: its internally accessible Adaptation

highly educated people with collaborative predispositions and an ability to cross traditional subject-matter boundaries. Additionally, the presence of a significant number of ORISE fellows⁹ and detailees¹⁰ has provided on-going access to new ideas for OP. There is also some evidence that other agencies have similarly entrepreneurial staff interested in partnership-building as demonstrated by the periodic initiation of contact for partnership opportunities from other federal agencies. A challenge for the EPA going into the next administration will be to move beyond the bottom-up method of collaboration and facilitate a broader institutionalization of these principles into the next administration.

External Partnerships

In addition to the partnership-building efforts within the federal family, OP works hard to collaborate with an external constituency consisting of states, communities across the United States, neighboring countries, and also nonprofit groups that participate in the Smart Growth Network.¹¹ In some cases, OP's external engagement

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Resource Center is an extensive repository of climate science information and operations guidance. The CCAS sees itself having succeeded in diffusing climate thinking widely in the agency.

Collaboration, Experimentation, and Policy Learning in the Federal Family

Both OSC and CCAS exhibit a strong commitment to collaboration and policy experimentation and are active in seeking out partnerships across the federal government as well as within the EPA itself. Learning from the successes of the very visible 2009 HUD-DOT-EPA⁷ Partnership for Sustainable Communities, these units have made collaboration a central part of their ongoing efforts to encourage sustainability in the United States. In addition to the internal efforts of staff, during our tenure at the EPA, a major 16-agency⁸ memorandum of agreement (MOA) was rolled out to help provide a framework for agencies to collaborate on place-based work. The EPA contact for other agencies interested in partnering with the agency is a staff member of OSC.

Although this MOA exists to provide some framework and contact points for cross-agency collaboration, the actual process of developing these partnerships is largely driven by individual staff members willing to reach out of their silos to other agencies or EPA units. As with anything that is voluntary and driven by individual action, partnership-building tends to be ad-hoc, fragmented, and largely based upon the willingness of individual staff members to spend the time building the partnerships. Furthermore, with this bottom-up process of collaboration, partnership-building can face significant challenges when confronting different organizational cultures, differing levels of statutory control, and uneven resource availability.

Although collaboration is a cultural norm in these offices, the reality is that the initiation of this type of work rests with individual staff members' willingness and ability to cross internal and external bureaucratic boundaries. This bottom-up initiation has implications for human resource management in OP and across the federal government. Although short-staffed, OP has been successful in hiring

is an infrequent occurrence resulting from unique circumstances. Other times the relationship is long-standing with a routine structure meant to facilitate the ongoing communication and activity. For example, the Smart Growth Network holds quarterly meetings with the 40 nonfederal partners where OSC is a leader in planning and executing the meetings. At each of these partner meetings, presentations are given by content experts representing cities, nonprofits, and other organizations on a topic of interest to the group. These presentations often provide important information to the OP on what specific tools, information, and assistance communities across America would find most useful to tackle the difficult challenges of sustainability and climate change. This type of routinized collaboration provides a structure where the strategies of the EPA can be up-to-date and aligned with current needs of communities across America.

In addition to OSC's efforts in engaging external groups, the CCAS has engaged with external constituents by providing a wealth of adaptation planning resources for use by state, local, and tribal governments. They take advice from its Local Government Advisory Committee, one of the 22 Federal Advisory Committees that EPA has organized to provide the agency with occasional external stakeholder advice.¹² Furthermore, the CCAS has also broadened its collaborative activities across borders, with a recent agreement to open the federal climate adaptation community of practice to the Canadian government. Interest in climate policies in Canada languished under the conservative Stephen Harper government, but has been revived under the new government of Justin Trudeau (Davis and Shear 2016).

Toward a Fourth Epoch in Environmental Policy?

It might be worth posing the question, suggested by our accounts above, that the Mazmanian and Kraft framework should be extended to encompass climate adaptation, climate smart growth, and climate resilience as a fourth epoch. The interdependence and complexity of the issues, the inherently intertwined global, regional,

and local nature of the phenomena, and the need for more extensive collaboration, all argue layering a new fourth epoch on the earlier three. Institutionally this will require much more internal and external interaction and collaboration, more expertise, more attention to politics and policy, more attention to process: all things that Beryl Radin has written about in her earlier work on HHS (Radin 2002).

CONCLUSION

While the external face of the EPA largely remains a regulatory one, this isn't the only face of the agency. Researchers studying environmental policy and management in the United States would not immediately recognize the important nonregulatory work going on in the EPA if not for internal access to the agency activities. The OP's activities shows promise for an EPA that can reflect and work with many of the principles of the sustainability movement. These activities also demonstrate the ways that a traditionally rigid bureaucratic entity like the EPA can, at the same time, be entrepreneurial, collaborative, and flexible in pursuit of its mission.

Working alongside EPA staff, contributing to analyses and studies, participating in interagency meetings, navigating the internal and federal bureaucracies, and engaging with foreign counterparts provided us with unparalleled access and opportunity to learn what really goes on day-to-day, and what agency staff see as longer-term opportunities, concerns, and challenges. We are convinced that a sustained working presence in government agencies is essential to a clearer understanding of the public sector more broadly. Participant-observation-driven case studies are costly and time-consuming, and have been criticized as unhelpful for theory building (Adams and White 1994). But we believe that they are essential methodological tools at a time when resource constraints and research appetites tend toward ahistorical Big Data quantitative studies, overly historical documentary research, or studies based on data gathered for other purposes than those of the researcher. Participant observation studies are also essential at a time when organizations view their external environments with suspicion, and are less willing than in the past to allow outsiders to see internal processes in real time. Support for participant observational research by the professional societies is critical to reassuring public organizations that the research community takes their concerns seriously. ■

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NOTES

1. See *Detroit Free Press* coverage from March 17, 2016 at <http://www.freep.com/story/news/local/michigan/flint-water-crisis/2016/03/17/epa-chief-we-were-misled-michigan-deq-flint/81905750/>.

2. See *Denver Post* coverage from May 3, 2016 at http://www.denverpost.com/news/ci_29844302/senators-formally-request-criminal-probe-gold-king-mine.
3. Susan Opp worked in OSC.
4. Todd LaPorte worked in CCAS.
5. The full text of the order is at: <https://www.whitehouse.gov/the-press-office/2013/11/01/executive-order-preparing-united-states-impacts-climate-change>. For an annotated version with links to other orders, definitions and background information, see <https://sftool.gov/learn/annotation/427/executive-order-13653-preparing-united-states-impacts-climate-change>.
6. See: <https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/local-foods-local-places>
7. See: <https://www.epa.gov/smartgrowth/hud-dot-epa-partnership-sustainable-communities>
8. Treasury, Justice, Interior, Agriculture, Commerce, Labor, Health and Human Services, HUD, Transportation, Education, Homeland Security, EPA, Appalachian Regional Commission, Corporation for National and Community Service, Delta Regional Authority, and the National Endowment for the Arts
9. ORISE fellows are paid research/work opportunities. ORISE fellows can be recent college graduates, recent graduate degree recipients, or faculty members and are renewable for up to three years.
10. Details are temporary positions for current EPA employees to serve on a special project for a specified time period.
11. See www.smartgrowth.org
12. A list of EPA FACA advisory committees is at: <https://www.epa.gov/faca/all-federal-advisory-committees-epa>

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