Evaluation Research and Institutional Pressures:
Challenges in Public-Nonprofit Contracting
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Abstract

This article examines the connection between program evaluation research and decision-making by public managers. Drawing on neo-institutional theory, a framework is presented for diagnosing the pressures and conditions that lead alternatively toward or away the rational use of evaluation research. Three cases of public-nonprofit contracting for the delivery of major programs are presented to clarify the way coercive, mimetic, and normative pressures interfere with a sound connection being made between research and implementation. The article concludes by considering how public managers can respond to the isomorphic pressures in their environment that make it hard to act on data relating to program performance.

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A critical part of the effort to make the link between policy analysis and public management has long centered on understanding and documenting "what works," an approach logically reserved for successful interventions with proven track-records. As a consequence, the task of policy analysts and program evaluators has often involved the difficult and unglamorous work of ferreting out from the vast haystack of interventions those few programs demonstrating the greatest probability of producing significant impact (Rossi, Freeman, Lipsey 1999; Weiss 1972). When this information is made public and disseminated across the field, public managers analyze it and react accordingly. Armed with good data on programs with proven performance, public managers should -- in theory, at least -- be able to speed the replication of successful programs (Shore 1997).

Connecting evaluation research to public decision making has taken on a new dimension as the work of public management has been transformed over the past three decades by the rise of service contracting, which has shifted responsibility for the delivery of public programs to non-governmental organizations. Many responsibilities have been pushed down to more local levels of government through devolution (Donahue 1997) and out to nonprofit service providers through privatization (Donahue 1989; Milward and Provan 1993; Kramer 1981). As this movement "down and out" has swept through government, the task of collecting and acting on evaluation data has changed. Rather than focus on government exclusively, researchers have been forced to examine new models of service delivery that

increasingly look to nonprofit organizations as prime vehicles for implementation. In this sense, the target of research has been broadened by the changing character of governance. Evaluation research focused on the performance of outside contractors can and should help public officials, sometime in multiple localities, make difficult contracting decisions more soundly, learn about programs implemented in other areas, and avoid funding efforts that others have learned do not work.

In principle, this model of how evaluation research can be used to improve public management and contracting is sound and reasonable. It is grounded in a rationalist perspective that seems more than just plausible. Evidence that a particular initiative or program has positive effects can and should fuel replication and expansion, assuming that the needs that are met by a program are widespread and common. Conversely, evidence that an intervention does not achieve its intended objectives should lead to its abandonment, and the search for alternative forms of service delivery.

In practice, however, public managers have had trouble replicating what works and, in at least a few notable cases, have devoted large amounts of public funds into programs that evaluation research has shown do not work or for which there is no evidence of either success or failure. This paper attempts to bring a neglected strand organization theory to bear on the questions of how and why public managers contract with outside vendors for the delivery of programs that they know, or should know, are not effective based on existing evaluation research. We are interested in developing a framework for thinking about the institutional factors that may override the impact of evaluation research and drive flawed contracting decisions.

In carrying such a project, it might be tempting to fall into the trap of singling out and blaming a few individual managers for exercising poor judgment. This is not the approach taken here. Instead, we attempt to develop a framework for understanding what might actually lead managers to spend scarce program funds on efforts that have a very low likelihood of success. To carry out this delicate task, we draw on a branch of organization theory that has come to be known as neo-institutionalism (Dimaggio and Powell 1991; Meyer and Rowan 1991; Scott 1991 & 1998; Zucker 1987) – an approach to organizations that yet to penetrate very deeply into the literature of public administration. By outlining the relevant parts of institutional theory and by bringing them into contact with public administration theory, we hope to both expand the repertoire of explanations of public sector decision-making and to shed some light on the difficult question of why failure are so hard to avoid replicating even in the face of ample evidence. To be sure, the literature of public administration has advanced several explanations for ineffective administration. Bureaucratic inertia, budgetary politics, the emergence of standard operating principles, and other traditional administrative challenges may well impinge on a public manager's ability to execute effectively. What we suggest here, however, is that it may possible to step outside this literature into organizational sociology to locate a different and potentially useful framework for thinking about the issue of failed contracting efforts.

The paper proceeds in three main steps. In a first section we sketch some background on public-nonprofit contracting, present the key elements of the institutional perspective on organizations and its implications for public sector contracting. In a second section, we present a framework for thinking about the intersection of evaluation research and institutional theory and apply this framework to three cases. We conclude in a final section

with some advice for public managers about how to maximize the contribution of evaluation

research and how to minimize the influence of institutional pressures.

I. Contracting Amidst Institutional Pressures

Over the past three decades, the growing reliance of federal, state and local

governments on service contracting has changed the shape and scope of the public sector.

Some have termed this shift to outside providers the rise of "third-party government"

(Salamon 1991) while others have named it the "hollow state" (Milward and Provan

1993). No matter what it is called, the growth of public-private contractual relations has

profoundly shaped the work of governance. As public managers have increasingly

contracted with outside parties for work for work that had long been reserved for the

public sector itself (Boris and Steuerle, 1999;Gronbjerg 1991; Wolch 1990), program

evaluation and performance management have emerged as ever more critical functions of

government (Abramson & Kamensky 2001, Newcomer 1996, Weiss 1972). The use of

outside contractors requires that great care be given to the selection, oversight, and

funding of these private entities charged with carrying out public purposes.

Government has progressively shifted much of the responsibility for the delivery

of vital human services to nonprofit and for-profit because these organizations appear to

be effective vehicles for the fulfillment of public purposes. Nonprofits have many

perceived advantages, including being more innovative, flexible, and responsive to the

needs of local communities (Light 2000; Lohman 1992; O'Neill 1989). The growth of

for-profit human service providers, particularly in the fields of job-training and elder

care, has held out the promise that contracting might even lead to substantial cost savings,

as services are delivered by firms with a bottom line. As a result, contracting out has become a critical managerial option for government at all levels, one that promises to maintain quality and reduce costs, thereby satisfying both service recipients and taxpayers (DeHoog 1985 & 1990; Ferris 1993; Smith and Lipsky 1995).

While imposing oversight demands, the ability to bring in outside contractors has the important characteristic of lowering the barrier to entry in many fields. Instead of mobilizing internal capacity, public managers are able to draw on existing group of organizations to implement new initiative often far more quickly and broadly than would other wise be possible. The speed and breadth of implementation that contracting brings with it raises a simple but important question: How can public managers ensure that the programs they contract for are likely to produce valuable social benefits? The answer lies in part in the strategic use of existing evaluation research. Public managers are able to inform decisions about what kinds of programs to implement by drawing on evaluation data of similar efforts that have been implemented in other localities.

Many factors determine the ultimate impact of evaluation data in government. Beyond who has conducted the evaluation (e.g. agency staff, external evaluators, independent auditors), and what kind of evaluation has been carried out (e.g. process evaluation or impact evaluation), other factors that influence the capacity of evaluation research to shape action include the political context within which the evaluation is received (e.g. level of legislative or executive activism and degree of political turbulence and dissatisfaction), who requested the evaluation and how open they are to accepting its implications (e.g. legislators, agency head, program manager, executive officials, budget officers), and the ultimate quality of the dissemination effort (e.g. its breadth, depth, and

accessibility) (Newcomer 1996). All these factors must be weighed when both designing and then seeking to implement ideas and recommendations that emerge from evaluation research.

While there is very good reason that one might expect to find the active and frequent use of evaluation data in contracting decisions, there is a fair amount of evidence, based on case studies over the years, that evaluation research is either ignored or not sought when important government decisions are made. The literature of public administration has hardly been silent on the issue of the missing link between analysis or evaluation and practice. Over the decades, several important branches of public administration theory have advanced explanations for why public managers often are unable to use information to improve decision making and performance. Early theories of bureaucratic politics, for example, emphasized that the budgetary process can lead to perverse decisions and make rational planning impossible (Wildavsky 1964). The inability of government agencies to free themselves from political and budgetary pressure can lead to the triumph of incrementalism (Lindblom 1965), and the inability to make significant changes in direction. Other classics have focused on the phenomenon of bureaucratic inertia, in which a vicious circle emerges that pushes public agencies toward ever greater levels of impersonality and centralization of decision making. Bureaucratic forms act as shields that allow for less personal interaction among workers. Once personal connections are severed, rules and procedures are put in place to stop individuals from seeking to act alone to solve few remaining areas where rules to do not apply. Crozier (1964) aptly noted that a bureaucracy is "an organization which cannot correct its behavior by learning from its errors."

Although explanations based on bureaucratic politics and inertia help us to understand the context within which the connection between analysis and action can break down in government, a more comprehensive model in needed that integrates both the pressures from the environment and the behavior of individuals within organizations. This model can be found in the new institutionalism in organizational analysis. While it has not been widely embraced by public administration researchers, the new institutionalism has made a significant contribution to organizational sociology. Institutionalism has managed move the focus of research from explaining why organizations within common fields are so different from one another to why organizations in reality are so similar in form. Institutionalism greatest influence has been felt in the move it encouraged away from rational action (Coleman 199X) explanations of organizational behavior toward approaches that recognize that organizations are situated in cultural and political contexts.

Over the past decade, institutional research has generated empirical studies on all kinds of organizations, including ones in the nonprofit, business and government sectors. In the area of nonprofits, researchers have focused on organizations as diverse as art museums (DiMaggio, 1991), colleges and universities (Brint and Karabel, 1991), humanitarian groups (Christiansen and Molin, 1995), and professional associations (Halliday, 1993). The relevance of the institutional approach to business firms has also been demonstrated in a set of studies spanning many different fields of business (Haunschild and Miner, 1997; Davis and Greve, 1997; Galaskiewicz and Wasserman, 1989, Holm, 1995; Suchman, 1995; Powell, 1998). To a far more limited extent, studies

have emerged of how institutional pressures shape public sector organizations (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983; Meyer, Scott, and Strang,1987; Meyer et al 1988.).

In addition to its breadth of substantive focus across sectors, the new institutionalism in organizational analysis accommodates a range of theoretical, methodological, and substantive interests (Scott 1991 & 1995). While much work has been done to sort out and classify the many strands of institutional research, the theory remains more of an orientation than a well-ordered, rigorous theory. Differences among institutional arguments are considerable, but a few central issues and themes do unite the approach. Early statements of the theory emphasized the symbolic and ceremonial transformation that organizations undergo, changes that reflect myths in the institutional environment rather than a detached calculus of costs and benefits (Meyer and Rowan, 1991). Other early work focused on processes such as isomorphic transformation (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983), contradictions (Friedland and Alford, 1991), persistence (Zucker, 1988, 1991), diffusion (Tolbert and Zucker, 1983), and institutionalization (Scott, 1991, 1994, 1995).

In its most basic terms, the new institutionalism has attempted to overcome the old assumption that an organization's internal structure efficiently matches its function or mission (Meyer and Rowan 1991). In the place of this rationalist assumption, the new institutionalism offers a view of organizations in which structure is loosely coupled with work activity, where roles, myths, and ceremonies emerge and spread within fields of activity. Organizations are longer conceived as pioneering innovators and efficiency maximizers, but instead as legitimacy-seeking conformists that regularly look around their field and borrow practices from other similar organizations. By adopting forms and

routines that appear to work or that are at least popular, organizations slowly gravitate towards structural homogeneity or what institutionalists call institutional isomorphism.

In an early and important statement of the theory, DiMaggio and Powell (1991) spell out the nature of the pressures exerted on organizations that can lead to breakdowns in rationality, decoupling of structure and action, and heighten levels of convergence. They identified three forces driving institutionalization: (1) coercive isomorphism that stems from political influence and the need for legitimacy; (2) mimetic isomorphism resulting from standard responses to uncertainty; and (3) normative isomorphism associated with professionalization. DiMaggio and Powell emphasize that these three mechanisms can overlap and intermingle, but they tend to derive from different conditions. At an analytic level, only coercive isomorphism is linked to the environment surrounding the organizational field. Mimetic and normative processes are internal to the field and help explain the spread of roles and structures. In their early theoretical statement, DiMaggio and Powell argue that when organizations are subjected to outside coercive scrutiny, accounting, and regulation, they tend to react defensively and gravitate toward isomorphic transformation. As the pressures from the outside grow, organizations are led to find ways to either diffuse or eliminate this pressure by changing their practices. One of the easiest ways to change is to adopt those routines and structures that are defined by law or government agencies as legitimate. To do so may ensure survival by minimizing conflict.

It is ultimately possible to recover within this work and the broader literature of institutional theory a useful way of thinking about the pressures that shape public organizations. For the purposes of this argument, it is important to note that institutional

theory changes fairly significantly the terms of the discussion of why contracting

decisions are sometimes made in the public sector that do not always represent a full

appreciation of all the facts that might be pertinent. Institutional theory brings the

political environment into the analysis, as well as the pressures that come from peer and

professional networks to explain the tendency of public sector organizations to converge

on models of service delivery – with or without evidentiary support. Our claim is that

the triad of coercive, normative and mimetic isomorphism represents a useful but largely

untapped diagnostic device for understanding the context of public sector management

and decision making. In the next section, we attempt to apply these concepts to three

cases of government contracting.

II. Institutional Pressures, Evaluations, and Contracting Decisions: Three Cases

Having both sketched some of the issues related to use of evaluation data in

contracting and the central claims of institutional theory, it is useful to consider the

contracting decision as the intersection of these two very different dimensions and to

build a simple matrix using these two dimensions: The first dimension is the level of

evaluation research available to contractors and the range of evaluation data that can be

part of the contract decision making process. The second dimension is the level of

institutional pressure that managers are subject to in their work. It is possible to envision

a continuum of institutional forces bearing on public managers, ranging from very low

levels of institutional pressure to very high levels, and a range in the quality and extent of

evaluation data across various fields. By connect these two dimensions, it is possible to

construct four generic scenarios (Figure 1).

The first situation is one where the amount of institutional pressure is high but where there is a paucity of good evaluation research. Under such circumstances, programs may be replicated prematurely, as managers feel pressure to act, even in the absence of good data and information. The second scenario is one where institutional pressures are high and were there is abundant evaluation research. This is a situation in which public managers may rely on strong inter-organizational networks to share information and where data appears to argue to for the swift diffusion of service models across a field, especially if there is public support for action in response to the underlying issue or social problem. The third scenario is one in which low levels of institutional pressure coincide with low levels of evaluation data. In cases where the impetus for change is low and where data supporting particular forms of action are not readily available, incremental expansion of programs may occur, sometimes just because funds are available. The fourth scenario is one in which institutional pressures are relatively low and where evaluation data is abundant. In this situation, public managers may be largely free from institutional pressures, able to ground their decisions in relevant data, and fashion strategically a set of programmatic activities that have a higher than normal likelihood of success.

Figure 1

Amount of evaluation data available

	Low	High
High	**1. Forced Diffusion**	**2. Accelerated Replication**
Low	**3. Unsupported Incrementalism**	**4. Grounded Contracting**

Level of Institutional Pressure

We explore three variations on "the pure type" scenarios below with case examples and, by way of conclusion, explain how and why public managers should seek to create conditions that will allow them to approach the fourth scenario, one that will allow them to ground their contracting decisions solidly in evaluation research.

1. Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE)

DARE is the nation's largest school-based drug prevention program. It is designed to prevent substance abuse by exposing youth to the dangers of drug and alcohol use through a curriculum delivered by police officers, teachers, and parents. Most DARE programs target 5th and 6th graders, although the program has been

expanded to include younger and older students. In DARE's initial year (1983-84), 10 police officers taught the curriculum to approximately 8,000 students in 50 elementary schools. Over the past 17 years, DARE has been expanded and implemented in over 8,000 cities across the nation, reaching 35 million students a year in more than 80 percent of U.S. school districts. The program has also been exported to Japan, Vietnam, and Brazil, among other countries.

Initially, DARE was developed as a pilot program by the Los Angeles Police Department (LAPD) against the backdrop of the emergence and spread of crack cocaine. Given the strong tendency of crack users to engage in criminal activity to support their habit, the LAPD began searching for strategies that would prevent drug use and subsequent criminal activity. These efforts resulted in the DARE program. DARE's curricula is designed to teach students to recognize pressures to use drugs from peers and from the media, teach students the skills to resist peer inducements to use drugs, enhance students' self esteem, teach positive alternatives to substance use, and increase students' interpersonal communication and decision-making skills. Across the nation, DARE's classroom material is standardized and does not vary substantially from school to school. This curriculum is taught over the course of 17 hour-long weekly sessions. DARE police officers are primarily responsible for delivering the instruction with the assistance of teachers. A variety of teaching strategies are used, including the presentation of facts, group discussions, role-playing, and workbook exercises.

The growth and evolution of this program followed the passage of the Drug-Free Schools and Communities Act (DFSCA) of 1986. DFSCA provides money to States, schools, and communities to develop and expand drug prevention programs. Funded at

approximately $500 million per year, school corporations must implement a comprehensive drug prevention program in order to be eligible to receive DFSCA funding. A substantial number of schools have turned to DARE as a means to meet these eligibility criteria. DFSCA money is also used to support the implementation of substance abuse prevention programs, such as DARE. It is important to note that local support for DARE occurred at the same time this program was endorsed by numerous federal government agencies involved in the support of schools and the war on drugs, including the Department of the Interior, the Bureau of Indian Affairs, the National Park Service, and the Department of Defense. These government endorsements created immense coercive pressure on local school corporations to adopt the DARE program.

Even though DARE had only been in operation for a short time, the program was quickly labeled a model in the field of drug use prevention even though there was no valid and reliable evidence to suggest these perceptions were accurate. Local officials interested in accessing federal money were quick to identify existing programs that would allow them to access additional resources. DARE was visible, well marketed, and tacitly endorsed by "experts" in the field and government agencies. Moreover, DARE soon became identified as an important component of the war on drugs and the "just say no" campaign. This linkage was fostered as a constellation of political and civic leaders, as well as educational and criminal justice professionals, sought strategies that would symbolically endorse the drug war, while aligning these various spheres of public life with this campaign. In short, support for DARE became support for the drug war, and conversely opposition to DARE represented opposition or at least lack of commitment to the drug war. This intense normative pressure, combined with the strong arm of

government endorsement, put DARE on a fast track for widespread diffusion. School districts and local police departments across the nation were quick to copy the Los Angeles model. During the early years, skepticism about the program's impact was rare. Local officials acted on blind faith, unfolding a standardized DARE program in community after community – with little or no attention to whether drug use was even a problem in a particular community.

Today, DARE is a centrally controlled and administered. DARE America, a not-for-profit organization, is responsible for implementing and managing the program at the national level. This organization is assisted by an advisory board of experts and advocates in the field of substance abuse prevention. DARE's organizational infrastructure also includes state-level commissions that are responsible for coordinating and promoting substance abuse prevention programs within each state. Across the nation, DARE has received wide spread public support by forging close partnerships between local schools, law enforcement, and the non-profit sector. These partnerships have fostered a web of organizations and institutions across the nation around the issue of drug use prevention. For these actors, DARE provides financial resources, media attention, and legitimacy as allies in the war on drugs. In short, DARE and its administrative apparatus has embedded once disparate actors from various parts of the social structure into a complex network of organizations that have an interest in the continued operation of this program.

At the time DARE was replicated across the country, no valid empirical evidence existed that tested the program's impact. Local political decision makers did not really care whether DARE worked. It was more important to implement DARE, sending a

signal to government funding agencies, parents, and other interested parties, that schools

and their administrators were allies in the drug war. Demonstrating this shared

normative belief by replicating DARE was perhaps more important to local political

decision makers than whether or not DARE actually reduced drug use. Since its initial

implementation and widespread adoption across the nation, a substantial research

literature has emerged assessing DARE's impact. Overall, evaluations of DARE have

consistently found the program to be ineffective at reducing drug use. Recent research

using longitudinal data, tracking drug use among randomly selected DARE participants

in comparison to those participants who received a standard drug education curriculum,

has found that the program does not reduce drug use (Lynam, et al, 1999). These

researchers conclude that "[f]ew differences were found between the 2 groups in terms

of actual drug use, drug attitudes, or self-esteem, and in no case did the DARE group

have a more successful outcome than the comparison group" (1999:590).

Meta-analysis of eight rigorous quantitative evaluations – all using control or

comparison groups, a pre-test or post-test design with random assignment, reliable

outcome measures, and large sample sizes – found similar results (The Research

Triangle Institute, 1994). These findings confirm prior research on the ineffectiveness

of DARE (Clayton, et al., 1996; 1991; Rosenbaum, et al., 1994; Dukes, Ullman, and

Stein, 1996; McNeal and Hansen, 1995). Perhaps most troubling are recent findings that

suggest DARE may increase drug use among participants (Rosenbaum, et al, 1998). By

talking about the dangers of drug use, the study found that DARE may have

inadvertently planted the idea of rebellious experimentation in the minds of some youth.

Thus far from scaring children away from the drug culture, the program may actually glamorize drug use by making it appear dangerous and forbidden.

The mounting evidence that DARE does not work has prompted a few police departments to withdraw support for this program. In 1996, the chief of police in Louisville, Kentucky withdrew his department's support for this program. DARE suffered the same fate two years later in Bolder, Colorado and Salem, Oregon where local school officials and law enforcement personnel cited the programs rigid curriculum, extensive time commitment, and poor results. Other cities, such as Oakland, Omaha, Spokane, Washington, and Fayetteville, N.C. have also eliminated their participation in DARE. For some of these officials the decision was not easy, alluding to the program's "strong community support" (Sebastian, 1998).

However, the number of cities and schools to drop DARE remain very small, and DARE is still the largest drug prevention program in the nation. Signifying the normative symbolic pressures associated with this program, DARE officials have responded to the mounting evidence that their program does not work by attacking the motives of researchers, suggesting that their work is linked to a broader political agenda to legalize drugs, while embracing anecdotal testimony of participants, teachers, parents, and police officers who believe DARE is an effective program. This strategy worked until a number of high-profile advocates of the DARE program began publishing research documenting the program's shortcomings.

However, the normative and coercive pressures to maintain the status quo are strong. To date, school corporations are not willing to terminate DARE programs for fear of being labeled advocates of drug legalization by parents, local law enforcement

officials, DARE America, and state DARE commissions. This fear has been fostered by anti-drug and anti-crime advocacy organizations that have rallied in support of DARE, accusing any school corporation that drops the program of supporting drug legalization. Similarly, school corporations do not want to forgo the public financial resources that are made available to their organizations by participating in this program. While the total amount of new money made available to a school for a DARE program is small, continued participation in DARE is used as a signal by other public and non-profit funding agencies when considering the allocation of additional resources. Together, these institutional pressures have prevented a coherent and systematic response by local school districts to the ever widening scope of evaluation research findings that DARE is not effective.

2. Individual Development Accounts (IDAs)

IDAs are a policy tool designed to help low-income workers and households build assets and achieve upward social and economic mobility. IDAs are matched savings accounts – similar to Individual Retirement Accounts. While IDAs vary, the typical program restricts eligibility to those below the federal poverty line. For many programs, a 3-1 match is typical. That is, for every dollar saved by an IDA participant, a match of three dollars is made. The amount of matched savings for any given IDA participant is usually capped, so that the match will only occur for savings up to a given level. Typically, the savings accrued in IDAs can only be used for post-secondary education and training, business capitalization, or a down payment on the purchase of a home.

IDAs were first conceived in the late 1980s and early 1990s as an alternative to public welfare programs that typically increase short-term income but have no impact on long-term wealth accumulation (Sherraden, 1991). Since wealth (not income) is thought to be responsible for explaining variation in life-chances (Conley, 1999), IDAs were thought to be an effective means of encouraging savings and subsequent wealth creation by subsidizing the savings of the poor. The concept of IDAs is closely aligned with several aspects of the American belief system that emphasize savings, education, homeownership, and entrepreneurship. IDAs posses a strong normative element in that they are perceived to encourage participants to engage in behavior that is in keeping with cherished ideals of economic self-sufficiency and personal uplift via hard work. Advocates of IDAs emphasize the importance of this policy tool as a devise that can make the "American dream" a reality for all citizens, including the poorest of the poor. Hence, the normative pressures on policy makers, including important philanthropic and non-profit sector actors, to support IDAs are powerful. In essence, support for this policy tool acted as a symbolic endorsement for support of the American dream that everyone has a chance to be a success.

Initial adoption of IDAs began on a piecemeal basis. Large philanthropic organizations, such as the Ford Foundation, began funding small-scale IDA programs that would be operated by non-profit social service providers where part of the grant funds would be used to match participants' savings. As these initial programs unfolded and gained some publicity, other philanthropic organizations began to advance this programmatic concept, encouraging grant applicants to propose similar initiatives. Within a very short period of time, many of the nation's 3,500 community development

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corporations and countless other social service agencies were responding to requests for proposals and new grant initiatives that sought to replicate existing IDA programs.

The widespread adoption of IDAs occurred without much support from the public sector. That is, governments did not place much pressure on non-profits to implement these initiatives. While a few small government programs were implemented that borrowed on the IDA concept, they were the exception, not the rule, and did not represent anything near full scale IDA implementation. For instance, starting in the early 1990s, the Department of Housing and Urban Development initiated the Family Self Sufficiency Program. This initiative tries to foster economic mobility among Section 8 participants via an escrow account. Payments to these accounts occur when a participants' income would increase, resulting in an increase in rent. The marginal increase in rent is set-aside in an escrow account – with no match – that can be used by participants for expenses related to education and training, business capitalization, and homeownership.

In more recent years, the federal government has given states more flexibility to utilize federal welfare dollars to implement IDA programs. In particular, the Personal Responsibility and Work Opportunity Reconciliation Act of 1996 authorizes states to create IDA programs with TANF block grant funds and to disregard all money saved in IDAs in determining eligibility for all means-tested government assistance. All deposits into the IDAs are limited to earned income. States currently providing IDAs for TANF recipients in their state plans are Arizona, Arkansas, California, Colorado, Delaware, Georgia, Illinois, Indiana, Iowa, Kansas, Kentucky, Maine, Missouri, Montana, New Mexico, Oregon, Pennsylvania, Rhode Island, South Carolina, Tennessee, Texas, Utah, Virginia, and Washington. However, it is important to note that states are neither required

to use TANF funds to create IDA programs nor penalized for failing to do so. In short, the coercive pressures to adopt IDA are relatively low.

The decision by these states (as well as other non-governmental organizations) to embrace IDAs is not the result of independent, rigorous social science evaluations that have shown this policy tool to be effective. After all, the evaluation literature on IDAs is almost non-existent. A few small-scale assessments of specific IDA initiatives have been done, but none have utilized rigorous evaluation methods, such as random assignment or comparison groups. The absence of rigorous evaluation research on IDAs is, in part, by design. Foundations that fund IDA evaluations have at times refused to disseminate the work to researchers unless the results are positive.

3. YouthBuild

YouthBuild is a youth and community development program that offers job training, education, counseling, and leadership development to hard-to-employ youth and high school drop-outs, between 16-24 years old, through the construction and rehabilitation of affordable housing in their own communities. Participants are trained in the construction trades, on a 12-month cycle, and the affordable housing developed through their efforts is typically owned and managed by community-based organizations, including community development corporations.

YouthBuild began in 1978 as a part of the Youth Action Program – a non-profit, community based organization – in East Harlem. Initially, this initiative was designed to improve the lives of hard-to-employ youth by training them with basic life skills and job skills through the construction of affordable housing in poor Harlem neighborhoods.

Funding for the two New York sites would come from a combination of municipal and philanthropic grants.

While YouthBuild was able to generate local interest and support for its initial sites, it was unable to distinguish itself from the large number of youth and community development programs operating across the nation. For many government and philanthropic funding agencies, YouthBuild was perceived as one program among countless others with a similar mission. Funding agencies interested in supporting youth and community development programs could express their support for such efforts in a variety of ways – whether or not they supported YouthBuild.

In order to improve the visibility and position of YouthBuild among the many youth and community programs across the nation, a coalition of local non-profit organizations was formed in 1988 to pursue a strategy of national replication. This coalition attempted to expand this program beyond New York City, address the programs slow and episodic replication in other sites, and develop a strategy to achieve these goals. These efforts eventually succeeded with the power and persuasion that government funding carries.

YouthBuild experienced dramatic growth in the mid-1990s with the support of two federal agencies. In 1992, Congress passed the Housing and Community Development Act of 1992. Title D ("Hope for Youth") of this law included funds for programs like YouthBuild. Between 1993 and 1997, the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development awarded $158 million to fund YouthBuild programs. In addition, the Corporation for National and Community Service selected YouthBuild USA as a national-direct grantee to develop YouthBuild AmeriCorps programs in six

communities, including funds for education awards (scholarships) to YouthBuild

graduates. YouthBuild has also received substantial financial support from the

philanthropic sector. The Ford Foundation, the Lilly Endowment, the Charles Stewart

Mott Foundation, and the DeWitt Wallice-Readers Digest Fund have all made substantial

investments in this initiative. This level of financial support would result in the

development of over 100 YouthBuild sites in over 90 cities across 35 states, involving

more than 3,500 participants.

The federal government's endorsement of this program had a ripple effect. It

spurred philanthropic investments, while also prompting state and local governments

interested in accessing these resources to import the YouthBuild program to their cities

and communities. For those places with large numbers of hard-to-employ youth, access

to these resources was critical, given the general scarcity of public funds for programs to

help this population. As a result, local and state governments were quick to embrace

YouthBuild.

Currently, YouthBuild programs operate in a decentralized environment. Each

site is responsible for securing its own funding and managing its operation. YouthBuild

providers are connected through YouthBuild USA Affiliated Network – a non-profit

organizational association of YouthBuild providers. This association provides technical

assistance to specific YouthBuild providers and is charged with the continued

development and replication of this program.

Expansion of the YouthBuild program occurred without any rigorous independent

research assessing its impact. In brief, it was scaled-up to the national level with public

funds even though there was no evidence demonstrating the program worked, or that it

represented an improvement over existing youth workforce development programs, such as the JobCorp. A subsequent evaluation has been conducted (Ferguson and Clay, 1996). This research followed 177 YouthBuild participants, measuring labor market and educational attainment outcomes, as well as behavior measures related to time management, leadership proclivity, and substance use. These results indicate that 17 percent dropped out of the program, while 38 percent of participants in the study went on to full-or part-time employment, school, or training. Of those who were employed after completing the YouthBuild program, 66 percent went into construction related jobs at an average wage of $7.60 per hour. Of those who were employed in non-construction related jobs, the average wage was $6.80 per hour. Unfortunately, this evaluation did not use random assignment or a comparison group, making it impossible to determine whether these outcomes are the result of YouthBuild or represent labor market outcomes that would have occurred without the YouthBuild intervention. Moreover, it is unclear whether these outcomes represent an improvement over other youth workforce development programs.

In spite of the limited evaluation research on YouthBuild, the federal government's endorsement of this program has forced local officials to adopt the program if they want to expand or enhance their youth workforce development programs. As a result, YouthBuild remains an unproven program where local support is largely the result of federal government pressure to adopt this initiative.

III. Rethinking the Context of Public Sector Contracting

These three cases provide a glimpse of the variation in the type and extent of institutional pressure brought to bear on public managers. As summarized in the table below, each example varies by the extent of institutional pressure that was present at the time of adoption and subsequent expansion.   The three types of institutional pressures -- normative, mimetic, and coercive -- capture the range of institutional pressures that may influence the adoption and expansion of public programs that are managed and implemented by nonprofit organizations.

Type of Institutional Pressure	Drug Abuse Resistance Education (DARE)	Individual Development Accounts (IDA)	YouthBuild
Normative	High	High	Low
Mimetic	High	High	Low
Coercive	High	Low	High

DARE represents an example of where all three dimensions of institutional pressure are high. Among local school administrators and law enforcement officials, a strong normative commitment to preventing drug use and subsequent crime was an important aspect of this program's genesis and adoption in our nation's school system. Other like-minded professionals from across the nation, with a shared concern for these issues, were quick to embrace DARE as a logical policy response. Moreover, schools and local law enforcement agencies were quick to adopt DARE so as to signal a shared

belief with the public that drugs and drug use are bad.   Reluctance to send such a signal

might label a school or local law enforcement agency as a supporter of drug legalization.

These strong normative pressures were accompanied by high-levels of coercive

and mimetic institutional forces. The primary coercive pressure involved the passage of

federal legislation in 1986 mandating schools to implement a comprehensive drug

prevention program. Since schools were compelled by government to deliver these

initiatives, many schools were faced with the uncertainty of not knowing whether

substance abuse prevention programs worked or whether the type of program offered

would produce different results.   This level of uncertainty generated substantial mimetic

pressure among local school officials to import an existing program. Many school

officials simply turned to the most visible initiative at the time – DARE. Together, these

high levels of institutional pressure surrounding the DARE program forced its

widespread adoption even though there was no systematic evidence to suggest it was

effective. Moreover, the persistence of these institutional pressures has made it almost

impossible for this program to be dismantled even though very rigorous evaluations

suggest it is ineffective.

Much like DARE, IDAs also evolved out of high normative and mimetic

pressures; however the nature of these pressures was slightly different. The push to adopt

IDAs grew out of the desire among social service professionals to create a vehicle for

assisting poor families generate wealth. Administering in-cash income support programs

were perceived as a necessary (but not sufficient) response to poverty, since they did not

provide a basis for helping poor families become upwardly mobile. They prevented

material hardship without offering a means to achieve self-sufficiency. In order to

address this perceived deficiency, IDAs were slowly embraced among social service

professionals.

The mimetic pressure surrounding IDAs were rooted in the common position of

many social service agencies and other local community-based organizations with limited

resources who were looking for ways to at least symbolically send signals to clients that

they (as an organization) had a policy or program that could help clients achieve upward

mobility. Adopting these programs would also send signals to potential funders that

these organizations were in the business of changing peoples' lives rather than

maintaining the status quo. Since IDAs could be implemented on a very small scale,

potentially affecting a few hand-picked participants, many social service agencies and

community-based organizations adopted this policy.

One substantial difference between DARE and IDAs is the level of coercive

institutional pressure. At the moment, there is no federal law that requires states or

localities to operate IDA programs. Since 1996, states may use welfare block-grant

money to pay for IDA programs but there is no requirement to do so. This level of

institutional pressure has resulted in fairly widespread replication of IDA programs even

though there is no clear evaluation research demonstrating its success. This process of

replication has occurred from pressures within social service organizations and several

philanthropic funders, but unlike DARE, has not been forced on non-profit managers and

local government administrators by federal mandate.

In contrast, YouthBuild has expanded on an incremental basis, fueled largely by

coercive pressures but without strong normative or mimetic pressures. To be more

specific, there was nothing that differentiated YouthBuild from the thousands of other

similar workforce development programs for teenagers scattered across the nation. While normative pressures were present among non-profit organizations and others involved in workforce development issues to fund programs that would help disadvantaged youth enter the labor market, there were no unique forces at play within these organizations to explain why YouthBuild would have gained an advantage. Similarly, mimetic pressures were also low. However, the coercive pressures imposed by the U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development's endorsement of this initiative (without any evidence that it worked) caused the program to grow incrementally across the nation.

In the end, institutional pressures played very different shaping the implementation of the three programs examined here. In each instance, these pressures significantly shaped the pattern of implementation that was followed and set the context within which evaluation research was or was not used to inform contracting. Of course, the idea of making a link between evaluation research and decision making is appealing. It holds out the possibility that public management can actually improve over time as knowledge is translated into action. What we have argued here is that institutional pressures can and do shape the meaning and implications of evaluation research and make it difficult for public managers to establish a strong link between information and action. In some cases, like DARE, this has led to vast amounts of resources being expended on a program that almost most research indicates simply does not work. In other cases, like IDAs, program replication has proceeded largely ahead of the analysis of evaluation research.

While it is tempting to focus only on what public agencies do well and the programs they implement that work best, we believe that greater attention, both in the

form of further empirical and theoretical work, needs to be directed at cases of failures, where decision making breaks down and where programmatic results are disappointing. Only by shifting the focus from "what works" to "what does not work" is it likely that researchers will be able to develop useful diagnostic tools for managers that can help them improve in their work. A key starting point, we believe, is the greater application of institutional thinking to public administration. Too long separated from the best ideas in organization theory (Rainey, 1997), public administration theory can be enriched by further pursuing points of intersection with the broader literature on organizations. One insight we have highlighted here that emerges at this point of contact is the need to focus on the overlooked challenge of managing the institutional pressures around public agencies, pressures that incline these agencies toward institutional isomorphism.

Beyond opening itself up to new theoretical inputs, public administration, in general, and contracting theory in particular, needs to move beyond the single-minded focus on the importance of information to good policy making. Sound contracting involves not just having good evaluation research to guide action, but also an environment in which institutional pressures are minimized so that information can be processed and used meaningfully. Without focusing on ways of controlling the tendencies of public agencies toward isomorphism, even the best evaluation research will be unable to inform decision making.

Putting public managers into the fourth position (see Figure 1), i.e. operating with good evaluation data and amidst low institutional pressures, requires a fair amount of work and vigilance, both in collecting data and shielding the decision making process from professional peer pressure, the inclination toward mimesis, and the power of

coercion from funders at higher levels of government. A critical first step in claiming this fourth option for public managers is creating and preserving high levels of independence and autonomy. Only when public managers are shielded to some extent from the forces pulling them in countless directions will they be in a position to make good use of evaluation research and make the link between data and decision making. In this sense, the institutional approach to public administration requires a radical rethinking of the meaning and form that accountability and oversight should take in the public sector. It may just be that the only way to improve the link between information and action is to shield public managers from some of the many external forces that pull and push them in their decision making. Loosening networks and reducing control from higher levels of government will not be easy, but the payoff in terms of more grounded decision making and wiser sterwardship of public resources could be significant. If institutional theory were to force public administration to explore these issues more fully, its contribution to practice would be lasting and important indeed.

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