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James Q. Wilson and Public Policy Education

Adam Crepelle

James Q. Wilson was one of the foremost academics in the field of public policy of the twentieth century. Unlike many scholars, Wilson's intellectual pursuits have also had a tremendous impact on practical policy making. Wilson's work was also groundbreaking as he attempted to add morality to a field dominated by datasets. *The Moral Sense* was one of Wilson's final books. To pay homage to Wilson's career, Pepperdine University School of Public Policy hosted a conference titled "Character and the Moral Sense" on February 28 and 29th, 2014. The conference discussed Wilson as man and an academic, but the conference also raised questions about public policy education. Schools of public policy should forever pay tribute to Wilson by integrating the methodology he developed.

The conference's final panel, "Encountering the Moral Sense in the Public Affairs Classroom: A Response," responded to a December 3, 2013 article in the *Washington Post* titled "Want to Govern? Skip Policy School." The answers laid out current curricula and changes that can be made based on lessons from Wilson's career. The first respondent was Dean Henry Brady of the Goldman School of Public Policy at the University of California, Berkeley. Brady divided the current public policy curriculum into three elements: 1.) market failure; 2.) methods, such as empiricism; and 3.) politics, or program implementation. Courses in these areas seldom mention families, groups, morals, or values; likewise, Brady argues that Wilson's emphasis on these topics made him revolutionary. Wilson had two key truths according to Brady. One was that people are social creatures with a moral sense, and the other is that people have original sin.

Brady then provided several areas public policy schools need to further study: stratification theory, mass democracy and the power of people's movements, private property versus collectivism, markets versus central planning, marriage and kinship, democracy versus other forms of governments, and most importantly, the side effects of policies.

Following Brady, Dean Jack Knott of the Sol Price School of Public Policy at the University of Southern California provided the curriculum at his school: 1.) economics and markets; 2.) organizational theory and management; 3.) quantitative and qualitative research methods; 4.) policy substance; 5.) politics and the political process; and 6.) public finance. Knott stated students receive little training in morals as there are only a few ethics courses offered at his school. Knott suggested Wilson's work can be used to integrate more substantial ethical education into the public policy curriculum.

Angela Evans, Professor of Public Policy Practice at the Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs at the University of Texas at Austin, concluded the event. She asserted public policy is taught to offer students a path to action. Evans laid out several subjects public policy curricula should include such as deliberative reasoning, how to govern and tensions of governing, and communication skills. Evans argues that the major challenge is there is no formula for how to combine these disciplines, but public policy schools should be the heart of universities because public policy merges all disciplines.

To become the heart of universities, as was suggested as a possibility by several panelists during the conference, schools of public policy should follow Wilson's example and incorporate a multidisciplinary approach into their curriculum. The conference also had a panel titled, "Moral Sense: The Defining Encounter." This panel was composed of a diverse group: a philosopher, a psychiatrist, and a political scientist. The panel's purpose was to display how experts in various

fields view the same question. Providing policy students with multiple methods to analyze problems gives students more options to discover a successful solution. Wilson's openness to all modes of discovering the truth is related to his nonpartisan scholarship. Public policy programs should adopt Wilson's multi-disciplinary approach that will help find the truth.

Policy experts often fall into one of two camps. Empiricists, who think all knowledge is derived from sensory experience, and moralists, who focus on ethical principles. Just as he refused to limit his intellectual options, Wilson also refused to be classified as an empiricist or moralist. He sought a middle ground. Harvard University's Harvey Mansfield noted Wilson always wanted to look at the facts, and Wilson was not looking for laws. He was looking for patterns. Mansfield stated Wilson combined the physical and social sciences with Adam Smith to discover his moral sense. Wilson was a seeker of the truth rather than ideologue. Likewise, Steven Teles of Johns Hopkins University stated Wilson's work was an alternative to reductionism. Wilson did not try to reduce everything to components; instead, Wilson sought to categorize data. He was seeking diversity to find similarities. Teles also stated Wilson was not a missionary for his ideals.

Finding public policy professors with no political opinions and who are interested only in the facts is quite difficult. Thus, public policy faculties should embrace intellectual diversity. Political agendas should not be pushed in the classroom; however, professors are human. Naturally, the material will be taught in a slightly skewed manner. Exposing students to intellectuals with liberal, conservative, socialist, and libertarian views will help students understand policy better. More importantly, students will be able to explore ideas and determine the veracity of information that is being presented.

Professor Angela Hawken, Pepperdine University School of Public Policy's James Q. Wilson Fellow, also pointed out Wilson's willingness to change his opinions based upon the data. Similarly, Wilson was willing to craft new theories based upon the most current data. Rare for a person with his level of achievement in his field, Wilson was willing to respond to questions with the answer of, "I don't know." "Basing his opinions on the data is a trait," remarked Hawken, made Wilson "unique." For this reason, Wilson's work was, and remains, respected by people of all political affiliations. Hawken also observed Wilson was eager to perform field work. Wilson's primary purpose for entering the field was not to instruct workers on the proper way to perform their occupations; rather, Wilson entered the field to listen to the workers.

Placing greater emphasis on field work is something Wilson would likely do if he was designing a public policy curriculum. Learning theories of public policy is important, but students must be able to understand the intersection of theory and reality. Many grand theories have been proposed that have failed when applied to the real world. Observing how reality fills the lacuna of classroom lessons is paramount for future policymakers. Plus, spending time in the field may make students more interested in the facts than advancing a particular philosophy. Time in the field has the additional benefit of helping students discover their passions.

Unlike many academics, Wilson did not devote most his academic career to writing for scholarly journals. Although Wilson did publish a substantial number of articles, he preferred writing for popular publications because he wanted to reach those outside of the academic community. Wilson authored books that reached beyond the walls of academia and wrote frequently for *Commentary*. His work also appeared in magazines like the *American Spectator*, *The New Republic*, and the *Wall Street Journal*. "Broken Windows: The Police and

Neighborhood Safety," authored with George L. Kelling, is probably Wilson's best known work and was printed in the *Atlantic Monthly*.

Public policy programs should follow Wilson's lead; accordingly, schools of public policy should teach their students to write for the general public. Modern technology makes reaching the public easier than it was during Wilson's career. Public policy schools should capitalize on the new forms of media. Writing for most popular electronic media is different than what is taught in academic institutions; thus, public policy schools should offer classes training students to write for blogs and Twitter. Schools of public policy should not disregard traditional, formal writing as students will need this skill to inform and influence policymakers. However, policymakers often take their cues from the general public, especially if the policymaker is an elected official. In addition to written electronic media, public policy schools would be wise to teach their students how make documentaries as this can be done at little expense. Moreover, documentaries have the potential to make tremendous emotional impacts. This can help generate support for a proposed policy.

Not only did Wilson write in popular publications, Wilson studied topics of concern to the average American. Scholars often dedicate their careers to studying esoteric topics such as the separation of powers or federalism. These are areas deserving investigation, but most Americans are not concerned with these topics. Their lives are not directly touched by whether the president has the power to suspend laws. All that is significant to the nonacademic is whether the law is suspended, not the procedure. Wilson focused his intellectual efforts on subjects everyone felt, like crime, the family, and morality. Public policy schools should emphasize material relevant to the general public. Students in public policy need to understand issues people outside of the field care about.

James Q. Wilson would have agreed with Professor Evans suggestion that public policy should consolidate various fields of study. Wilson helped pioneer this approach; likewise, Wilson demonstrated the key importance of adding morality to the public policy curriculum with equal weight to subjects such as econometrics and cost-benefit analysis. Policy schools should continue to advance Wilson's approach as the field further develops.