“To Bring the Gospel of Reform Home”:

Public Affairs Research Centers at Bowdoin College

Bobby Guerette
At the start of the twentieth century, Bowdoin College was not only a small college in Maine, but also a small college for Maine. In 1914, nearly seven in ten of the College’s 397 students called the state home.¹ In that same year, the college chose to strengthen its ties with Maine by establishing the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government. College officials intended for the bureau to connect the College with local government by developing promising students into civic leaders and by researching municipal practices. Yet a historical sketch of the bureau and its successor, the Public Affairs Research Center, shows that these institutes were not sustained over time. By 1978, no public affairs research component could be identified in the college’s catalogues.

If, at the start of the twentieth century, the College defined its mission in relation to the public affairs of the state of Maine, why did that component of its mission seem to dissolve by the final quarter of the century? This study reveals three related reasons. First, faculty interest in municipal government declined over time, corresponding

with a general trend away from the subfield in the political science discipline. As a result, the faculty had no one willing to lead the project. Second, and perhaps more importantly, the College chose not to invest in organizations that increasingly focused their activities away from students. Third, these events did not occur in a vacuum. The decline of civically oriented research institutes at Bowdoin symbolized national decline of the Progressive Era ideals that characterized the bureau’s early activities.

The Bureau for Research in Municipal Government

In 1914, when the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government first opened on the Bowdoin College campus in the town of Brunswick, it reflected characteristics of the Progressive Era in American history. While the bureau was intended to train students for government service, its creators had more than just typical government service in mind; the bureau’s creation was in step with a national trend of trying to root out bad government. “In a sense, this was a missionary activity,” observes Professor Richard E. Morgan, who was involved in later public affairs institutes at Bowdoin. Its proponents, according to Morgan wanted “to bring the gospel of reform home.” The same occurred at other higher education institutions throughout the United States. A parallel organization could be found in Cambridge, Massachusetts, where Harvard had established its own Bureau for Research in Municipal Government. Outside of the Northeast, the bureau fit within a larger trend in social sciences, including the celebrated “Wisconsin idea,” through which the University of Wisconsin intended to train experts to fill state government positions. And in the West, Stanford University strove to develop civic-minded graduates who would replace corrupt

2 Richard E. Morgan, interview by author, Brunswick, Maine, 11 April 2006.
state officials. Paralleling this effort to graduate civic-minded experts was the creation of an entire new field of study—the social sciences.

It is hardly surprising, then, that Bowdoin’s Bureau for Research in Municipal Government had progressive ideals at the center of its operation. In its initial years, college officials had high hopes for the bureau. In his President’s Report for 1917, Bowdoin’s William DeWitt Hyde offered the governing boards an in-depth explanation of the bureau’s activities. Students, according to Bowdoin’s progressive president, were the bureau’s central audience. “The primary purpose of the bureau,” Hyde wrote, “is to furnish adequate facilities for training students in the use of first hand materials relating to town and city government.” The bureau’s other purpose, which Hyde noted was a secondary priority, was “to supply information upon application to citizens, civic organizations, and officials in Maine municipalities.” In this formulation, the bureau was part library and part think-tank. The library portion, according to Hyde, was represented by the collection of “laboratory materials, charters, laws, reports, ballots &c.” and faculty members were directed to be careful with what they chose to collect, so that the bureau would not “become a useless mass of miscellaneous pamphlets.” The Municipal Research Series, which consisted of bulletins published and distributed to Maine localities and civic organizations, represented the bureau’s think-tank component. For decades, these bulletins, which contained research and recommendations for local government, were an essential part of the bureau’s work. One such publication, for instance, entitled “Retirement Plan for Employees of Maine Towns,” sought to answer “many of the questions which have confronted the author as he has acted as a member of a committee to recommend a [retirement] plan for the Town of Brunswick.” Another publication examined the cost of primary elections throughout the state.

The College ensured that the bureau would be used for teaching by linking it to a top academic program. At the time, the College offered a course for seniors called “Municipal Problems.” This Department of Government offering was limited to “the ten men possessing the greatest promise of scholarship and leadership,” Hyde wrote. Indeed, in 1917, eight of the enrollees were ranked among the senior class’s top ten students. Hyde believed the course’s students demonstrated “the greatest promise after graduation of being leaders in the city, state, and nation.” The Bureau for Research in Municipal Government was intended to help strengthen this promise by providing the students with “material for special investigations.” One student, a native of Portland, for instance, was appointed to that city’s charter revision committee. Hyde said the appointment was beneficial to the student, since he was able to receive training, and it was also beneficial to the city since the student was able to offer the city access to the bureau’s data collections.

The bureau seemed to have initially thrived because of the work of one man: Orren Chalmer Hormell, Ph.D. Hormell served as a professor of government—initially, the professor government—and was the bureau’s founding director. His work as director of the bureau spanned nearly four decades; (he retired from the faculty and the College in 1952). Morgan recalls that Hormell was “deeply involved” in the Progressive Movement and documents from Hormell’s papers indicate that he was outspoken in his belief that professionals—not partisan politicians—should be responsible for the business of local government operations. According to one scholar, many progressive reformers believed that local government was susceptible to corruption, requiring citizens to fight “against the waste, extravagance and sometimes corruption which characterized 'politician’ government.” Prior to reform, Hormell argued towns’

10 Ernst C. Helmrich, First Parish Church Memorial Service for Orren Chalmer Hormell (1879-1975), p. 6, December 1975, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections & Archives, Bowdoin College.
financial accounting systems were sloppy. “The customary method,” Hormell wrote, “of reporting business transactions and drawing up the annual reports fails completely to furnish the two essentials for efficient government: first, a guide for municipal business; and second, exact information to the citizens.”

Hormell’s disgust with the failures of municipal government represented his progressive ideals. “In democratic America we must rely upon popular control to make and keep our government efficient; and intelligent popular control is impossible without exact information,” he wrote in his 1915 report on municipal accounting, echoing progressive ideals about democratic government. “The government of American cities was the one conspicuous failure of the United States,” Hormell believed. It was this belief that led to his work assisting in the construction of the town manager system of government.

Hormell believed that the town manager system of government, which placed the daily operations of town government in the hands of a trained, hired professional, was a necessary component of municipal reform. Under Hormell’s plan, citizens continued electing a board of selectmen—a “part-time, amateur executive”—but the town manager was the appointed “full-time, professional administrative agent” of the board. “If our experience has proved anything it is that in America we cannot elect experts....” Hormell claimed, “the administration of city affairs must be raised to the level of a business profession before men of ability will adequately train for it.” Hormell’s ideas as well as his development of Auburn’s city council and city manager form of government in 1917 led him to be called the father of the town manager form of government in Maine.

The system Hormell built in Auburn proved to be immensely successful, with the Lewiston Journal heralding the success of the

16 Skinner, “Auburn.”
17 For details on Auburn’s system, see Helmrich, Memorial.
system even 50 years later. According to James Wilson and Robert Crowe, both future administrators of the bureau, the municipal manager system helped to eliminate the “favoritism, poor administration, and undemocratic machinations” that accompanied the family dynasties and political machines that developed when there was no full-time professional responsible for administering a town’s business.18 Hormell’s success in implementing this reform would lead Ernst Helmrich to state in a eulogy at Hormell’s 1975 First Parish Church memorial service, “In the field of municipal government, he was one of the leaders.”19

Hormell did not conceive of his involvement in municipal reform as antithetical to teaching. In a 1950 address, he declared, “In a college such as ours, there should be no irrepressible conflict between scholarship and research. Teaching is paramount, but the successful [teacher] needs the intellectual fertilization of research.”20 Although little historical has material survived on the qualities of the bureau’s teaching role, Hormell’s claim that “teaching is paramount” provides evidence that at least during Hormell’s 36-year tenure, the College’s civic goal of preparing student leaders had not dissolved. “He [Hormell] aroused in many the desire and confidence to go on to Graduate School, to Law and Business School, and into Government Service,” according to Helmrich.

In addition to his teaching and research, Hormell was himself an active citizen. Documents reveal that he participated in Republican politics, but encouraged students to join either of the major party’s working ranks. He was a member of the Advisory Council of the Maine Supreme Court, a deacon at the First Parish Church, and spent at least one sabbatical from Bowdoin working with the Maine division of a youth service organization called the U.S. Boys’ Working Reserve.21 While at the camp’s mobilization headquarters in Winthrop Center, Hormell wrote to President Sills requesting a meeting in Brunswick.

19 Helmrich, Memorial.
20 Quoted in Helmrich, Memorial.
21 Individual note cards mentioned participation in these organizations in the Hormell Papers. For war service, see Orren Hormell to Kenneth Sills, 20 September 1918, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections and Archives.
to discuss the problem of reintegrating undergraduates returning from service during World War I; his letter indicated a concern for civic service and a concern for the students’ well-being.

Perhaps Hormell’s commitment to civic service was re-enforced by what seemed to be a close link between Maine government and the College. In a 1921 letter to President Sills, for instance, Maine Governor Percival Baxter called himself one of Sills’s “oldest and best friends.” Later that year, Sills asked Baxter to speak with Bowdoin students in the college chapel and to dine with them at a fraternity house.22 Nevertheless, by the time Hormell left the College in 1952, the progressive spirit that he embodied had withered nationally.

In his analysis of the Progressive Era, historian Michael McGerr found that progressives frequently sought unattainable goals. “Progressivism, the creed of a crusading middle class, offered the promise of utopianism—and generated the inevitable letdown of unrealistic expectations,” McGerr has written.23 As a result of World War I, as well as a series of domestic crises, including labor strikes, inflation, and race riots, “Americans turned against the progressive blueprint for the nation,” according to McGerr.24 Arguing that since the fall of progressivism, the United States has not experienced a movement with similar ambitious goals to change American political, social, and economic life, McGerr writes, “We have been scaling back our expectations ever since that age of bold reform.”25 Suitably, this postwar lack of a bold vision for civic reform seemed to be reflected by the progression—or, more accurately, regression—of the bureau.

Once Hormell retired in 1952, no one stepped up with feet large enough to fill his shoes. Professor Morgan, who graduated from Bowdoin in 1959, has only a vague recollection of the bureau’s existence during his undergraduate years at the College. According to Morgan, Athern Daggett succeeded Hormell as the major figure

22 Percival Baxter to Kenneth Sills, 7 February 1921, and Kenneth Sills to Percival Baxter, 14 November, 1921, Sills Papers, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections and Archives.
24 Ibid., p. xvi.
25 Ibid.
in the Department of Government, and he “was not interested in the bureau.” A fundraising publication suggests that although the bureau’s emphasis was still on students, its focus moved from reinforcing a program for students who would fan out across Maine and fill government positions to the more removed task of “preparing the student for subsequent training in public service.”

Thus, students were expected to go to graduate school or law school before entering public service, representing a shift in the locus of responsibility for fostering public service preparation from the undergraduate realm to the graduate realm.

A program that James Wilson, the bureau’s director, tried to establish in 1960 reflected the shift that the bureau experienced away from training undergraduates for roles in municipal government. Wilson contacted individuals and organizations with the hope of starting a legislative internship program in Maine, although the proposed program may have been a last-ditch effort to gain funding for the bureau. Wilson wrote to U.S. Representative Frank M. Coffin about his discussions with the Ford Foundation. According to Wilson’s correspondence, the foundation was backing away from strictly academic programs. “The representative indicated that they were not interested in supporting research activities at this time, but were particularly interested in a legislative internship program,” Wilson wrote. Yet the program Wilson proposed was for graduate students rather than undergraduates. While the program objectives were similar to the bureau’s, including training experts who would be of assistance to legislative officials, the program would not apply to current Bowdoin students.

26 “The Bureau for Research in Municipal Government,” January 1961. 1.11.2, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections and Archives. No other identifying information was available, though it appears that the document was included when grant-request letters were sent out.

27 Thelin, History, p. 283. The Ford Foundation’s interest in this program aligned with its preferred forms of patronage in the 1950s and 1960s; among the organization’s priorities was the funding of the social sciences. For more, see James Wilson to Frank M. Coffin, 21 April 1960, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections and Archives.

28 Document near the Wilson letters in Bureau for Research in Municipal Government file, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections and Archives
Although the bureau had lost its original focus by 1966, it continued to serve a civic function. Terry Davies, who served as an instructor in the Government Department and director of the bureau from 1963 to 1965, recalled that the bureau was a “somewhat neglected institution.” However, it still fulfilled a useful purpose for the state. Davies provided professional-level assistance to state legislators who often lacked legal training. For instance, he produced data demonstrating how the state could better collect federal grant money by having the legislature meet more regularly. Davies also recalls collaborating with a legislator who had written redistricting legislation based on only a world almanac and road map.

This role as a resource for state legislators was not enough to sustain the bureau, but the College was not willing to eliminate the concept of the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government altogether—in Morgan’s words, “You had to have some respectable burial.” In 1958, the College had established the Center for Economic Research. This organization was intended to do for the Maine economic sector what the bureau’s research activities did for local government—the center studied the Maine economy and published results in the *Maine Business Index* and the journal *Maine Business Indicators*. The brainchild of a group of businessmen and economists “who realized the need for a better understanding of the Maine economy and the availability of technical information about it,” the center was supported financially by grants from the federal and state government, along with corporate gifts. The center maintained little, if any, focus on students.

### The Public Affairs Research Center

In 1966, the College merged the Center for Economic Research and the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government. The Public Affairs Research Center, like its predecessors, was located on the first floor of the stately Department of Government and Department of Economics building, Hubbard Hall. However, the center seemed

---

29 Terry Davies, correspondence with author, 11 June 2008.
not to equally belong to both departments. Its first director was Dana Little, previously the director of research and planning for the Maine Department of Economic Development. The center’s faculty overseer was Professor of Economics James Storer. Its staff included an associate provided under a state technical services contract, a staff economist, a staffer who was exclusively employed under a Department of Labor contract, and a collection of student assistants and administrative assistants. Faculty also received compensation for their work for the center. As one might expect given its leadership and staff, the center focused more on developing Maine’s economy than on improving Maine’s governmental institutions. Professor Morgan began teaching at Bowdoin three years after the merger. “It was not in any sense, a real...formation of the Hormell operation,” he recalled, noting that most of what went on was economic in nature and that the center’s director did not teach. Such distance from the academic program would later undermine the center’s sustainability.

Like the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government of 1965, the center maintained an explicit civic function, which Little described as providing “a broader expression of the College’s service responsibilities to the community at large.” Little noted, however, “As yet, PARC has not had any particular impact on the day to day life of the College, if indeed such impact were anticipated.” The sense of student-centered dynamism found in the early days of Hormell’s organization—the collection of top students all preparing to become leaders—simply didn't exist. “In general, there has been little contact with the instructional [life] of the College,” Little stated. He suggested that such bonds could be made tighter by making the center’s director a member of the College faculty, and by requiring a one-third or one-half teaching load in the social sciences. “Such 'colleague’ status,” Little wrote, “is felt necessary for closer integration of PARC with the life of the College.”

32 Dana Little, “Report of the Director, Public Affairs Research Center,” 5 September 1968, 1.2.10.1, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections and Archives.
33 Ibid.
Why did the College’s new public affairs center focus mostly on economic research while abandoning municipal interests and largely discounting an undergraduate educational function? The answer is likely found in the center’s financial history and in faculty interest. Little’s report noted that the center was a “self-sustaining entity.” This suggests that because students did not finance the organization with tuition dollars, the center focused primarily on projects through which it could acquire grants from various funding agencies. Thus, it focused more on research items like *Maine Business Indicators* and less on a teaching function.

The second reason the center’s mission strayed so far from that of the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government was the continual shift in the interests of political scientists. Though students may have been interested in municipal problems—Morgan noted that when a course on municipal government was briefly revived in the 1970s, it was “very popular”—the subfield fell out of favor within the field of political science. This trend was hardly new. In 1944, one scholar wrote that liberal arts college political scientists were moving toward a comparative approach to studying government, dismissing what they saw as a curriculum that had “degenerated into mere factual description of a series of governmental organs in operation in separate areas.”

Although a sense of a civic purpose continued—students were to “learn to understand the nature of responsible government and its institutional requisites”—the Progressive Era concept of creating reformers seems to have faded. Concurrently, municipal government coursework at the graduate level also shifted away from the goal of graduating civic leaders who embodied morality and reform. During the early part of the Progressive Era, for instance, Woodrow Wilson and others created a curriculum at Johns Hopkins University implemented a curriculum focusing on the importance of municipal administration and training civic leaders who believed in their ability to change local government for the better. The curriculum, according to scholar M. Curtis Hoffman, “influenced a generation of public servants, who,

35 Ibid., p. 356
in turn, contributed immeasurably to the Progressive era changes in American government.” However, “the attention of America’s intellectuals gradually turned to expanding and refining the role of federal government,” according to Hoffman, limiting the long-term impact of the Progressive scholars. This trend seemed to continue throughout academia during the rest of the twentieth century. Today, Morgan noted, municipal government is not generally a subfield for “a bright young man to make his way.” There is interest in state government, he said. “But municipal? No.”

Since it needed to rely on outside revenue for its funding, the center had begun to fail financially by 1970. Its financial troubles took place within the context of an economic downturn, with rapid inflation hurting the national economy and sloppy financial management hurting colleges. The center’s inability to acquire grants contributed to its closing. Dana Little resigned in 1970, writing, “It appears that the volume of outside research contracts will not justify the continued services of two full-time professionals at this time.” A decline in the volume of research contracts was not specific to Bowdoin; the unrest of the 1960s led federal agencies and state legislatures to pull many research contracts and financial support away from colleges and universities.

Although the center continued operating on a small scale, College administrators expected it to be self-sustaining. In 1973, President Howell wrote to the College’s provost, Olin Robinson, and claimed, “We finally succeeded in operating the place at no dollar loss to the College.” The expectation that the center would finance its own activities was in sharp contrast with other Bowdoin organizations, such as museums or the library, which were not expected to bring in enough revenue to cover their expenses. In apparent recognition

37 Thelin, History, p. 318-320.
38 Dana Little to Roger Howell, 29 January 1970, 1.2.10.1, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections and Archives.
39 Thelin, History, p. 312-313.
40 Roger Howell to Olin Robinson, 11 September 1973, George J. Mitchell Dept. of Special Collections and Archives.
that the center did not quite fit in at Bowdoin, the college considered “reconstituting” the Public Affairs Research Center in 1993 to offer joint-faculty student seminars, promote undergraduate engagement in research, and “stimulate and encourage student interest in public service of all kinds.”41 Sixteen to twenty-five students at a time would receive two academic credits for working in the center, and two to six faculty members would be released from teaching to focus exclusively on the center’s efforts. “The College will be strengthened by this expansion, and by the opportunity to offer positive, more advanced and intensive opportunity to some of its students,” the proposal stated. The center would try to work with officials to involve students in public service, and the focus would be kept on activities in Maine.

Although the proposal required a significant commitment of faculty resources, it would have refocused the center’s attention on student development. The proposal was probably too grandiose, however, and it was never implemented for two central reasons: money and faculty interest. In his 1977 President’s Report, for instance, Howell wrote about the ongoing process of “program review,” which was supposed to help the College find a way out of its “financial pinch.”42 Given financial difficulties, we can be sure that the College would not be redirecting faculty resources to the Public Affairs Research Center. Furthermore, it seems that few faculty, if any, were willing to invest their time in leading the center’s reconstitution. Morgan, for instance, was on the center’s board at the time and recalls, “In those 1970s conversations, nobody wanted to take this on.”43 In other words, the Public Affairs Research Center lacked money from and, perhaps more importantly, committed faculty leadership. Had the Economics Department wanted to continue the center’s operation, the institute could have had a different fate, recalled former Dean of the Faculty Al Fuchs.44 But “nobody made that case,” he said. The center, according to Fuchs, had strayed too far from the work of faculty and students.

43 Richard E. Morgan, interview by author, Brunswick, Maine, 11 April 2006.
44 Al Fuchs, interview by author, Brunswick, Maine, 5 June 2008.
“It was less and less involved with the life of the College,” he said. At the end of the fall semester, in 1976, the center’s final director, Carl Veasie, left the college, ending the story of twentieth-century public affairs centers at Bowdoin College.45

Conclusion

The closing of Bowdoin’s Public Affairs Research Center did not end the story of public affairs centers in Maine. In 1965, the University of Maine in Orono established a Bureau of Public Administration within its political science department. As with Bowdoin’s Public Affairs Research Center, undergraduate education in public affairs was not the bureau’s primary mission. The organization’s three main services were career development for current municipal and state officials, research for Maine government, and the publication of results of its career development and research work.46 The center did have some benefit for undergraduates since it was also home to the Maine State Government Internship Program, which placed undergraduates in temporary state government internships. The center’s operation continued until 1990, when it was merged with the university’s public policy center.47

In 2003, Colby College in Waterville launched the Goldfarb Center for Public Affairs and Civic Engagement. While its activities are wider-ranging than Bowdoin’s previous organizations, including not only teaching and research about politics but also work in community service programming such as mentoring, Colby’s course catalogue claims that the center has “organized and focused Colby’s efforts to foster active citizenship at all levels.”48 Bowdoin is in the middle of

45 Veasie termination date is found in Howell, President’s Report 1976-1977. According to the author’s interview with Morgan, Veasie was pushed out to the University of Maine.
its own resurgence of creating public affairs institutes. In the fall of 2008, the Joseph McKeen Center for the Common Good will open, which, according to the center’s director Susie Dorn, will provide opportunities for students to discover through public engagement the ways in which their talents, passions, and academic pursuits can be used for the benefit of society. The college also anticipates establishing the Maine Center for Social Research, which will provide students with opportunities to conduct research projects that meet the needs of Maine communities. Noting that similar ventures were previously unsuccessful because they “were largely seen as resources for communities to call on,” Professor Craig McEwen said the Maine Center for Social Research is an “educational venture, not a service venture.” As such, the missions of these new undertakings focused primarily on the academic, civic, and leadership development of students.

This study suggests that a focus on students and their educational pursuits may make new organizations sustainable over time. The Public Affairs Research Center’s closing represented less of an abrupt choice by the College and more of the result of a long spiral into irrelevance. Government research institutions at Bowdoin College failed because both faculty and students lost interest in them. After Hormell’s long tenure, for instance, faculty seemed unwilling to commit to the Bureau for Research in Municipal Government or, later, the Public Affairs Research Center. This void was due to the decreasing status of municipal government as a subfield of political science and possibly even to the fact that the era of progressive municipal reform had faded. Moreover, as the organizations shifted their focus away from undergraduate students, they became financially unsustainable. Both organizations relied heavily on outside finances—indeed, by at least the 1950s they were expected to pay their own way. This model became untenable once research contracts became scarce in the 1960s and 1970s.

By 1976, Bowdoin College’s 1914 vision of a great mechanism to form future local leaders had been lost. Given the turmoil in national politics in the early 1970s, culminating with the resignation of

---

of a U.S. president, it is ironic that the era also saw the end of an institution formed to create leaders who would rid government of corruption. Professor Hormell, President Hyde, and the reformers of the Progressive Era might have been right after all. Perhaps Bowdon’s newly established Center for the Common Good and Maine Center for Social Research will provide a new vision for the College’s civic function in the twenty-first century.