

Wes Grooms, Ph.D.

Research Statement

My research agenda broadly regards understanding how public affairs (e.g. urban planning, policy, and administration) educational programs and professional practice contribute to the rendering of discipline-specific normative (e.g. socially just, equitable, inclusive) outcomes from urban governance. My current research has two primary foci: the first is theorization about public sector practice within contemporary socio-political contexts. The second is evaluation of accredited public administration and urban planning education.

I have published two co-authored papers in the first area, one in *Planning Theory*, “Toward a Political Urban Planning: Learning from Advocacy Planning and Growth Machine to ‘Plannitize’ Urban Politics” and the other in *Administrative Theory & Praxis*, “Public Administrator Practice as Recognition: A Philosophical Case for Public Sector Cultural Competence.” Other areas of theorization are how community-based, ground-up planning solves comprehensive planning’s inability to continually capture societal values; community-based outreach projects will contribute empirical evidence to this work.

Related to this is my ongoing theoretical work on the nature of planning; in short, just what *is* planning? I presented on this topic at the 2018 conference: Alternatives to the Present: A Conference on Architecture, Urbanism, Sociology, Development, and Planning. My contribution was a pre-recorded video outlining my current conception of “Politics as Planning Practice.” The politicization of ostensibly non-normative issues such as environmental policy further informs this theory building, which I foresee resulting in a fully articulated theory of governance.

Work in the second area of research began with my dissertation, “The ‘Just City’ or Just a City? Evaluating Social Justice and Equity in Planning Education,” which focused specifically on identifying the role accredited planning education plays in achieving normative planning goals. A foundational phenomenon of this work is the obligation accredited urban planning degree programs have to implement certain programmatic characteristics as part of the accreditation process. These constitute a mission-driven performance management system. Despite this, past assessments of planning education have not utilized the principles and methodologies inherent to performance management. In response to this gap, I conceptualized planning accreditation standards, accredited graduate degree programs, the professional code of ethics, planning practice, and normative planning theorization as the component parts of a singular national planning program. This permitted a first of its kind assessment utilizing formal evaluation techniques. I evaluated three previously ignored, yet substantive, aspects of accredited graduate planning education. First, a pilot opinion survey of my construction permitted discovery of the rates of valuation of competencies associated with social justice and equity held by planning practitioners, faculty, and students. Second, a sample of accreditation self-study reports (n=21) allowed assessment of both the extent of justice and equity content incorporation in these programs; third, this sample was also analyzed to ascertain the extent to which they adhered to performance management principles.

In the first paper from my dissertation, I constructed program logic models to analyze which of the national planning program’s component parts had been included in previous assessments of its performance. Doing so corroborated my hypothesis that past evaluations’ disregard for formal evaluation techniques contributed to exclusion of inquiry on normative topics. The second paper reported the results of a pilot survey that rectified this absence of normative subject matter inquiry. In line with my hypothesis, student desire to address these normative concepts through practice was higher than that of faculty, which was higher than that of practitioners. Unexpectedly, planning faculty – rather than students – were the most likely to have entered planning to serve as agents of social change. Another unexpected finding of note is

apparent practitioner bias against explicitly labeled normative competencies as compared to identical, but unlabeled, competencies. The final paper reports findings confirming my hypotheses that adherence to program evaluation principles such as alignment between program mission, goals, and objectives, as well as specific characteristics of objectives (e.g. that they were specific, measurable, attainable, related, and time-specific – SMART) would be uniformly poor, and that programs overstate their social justice and equity content levels. In sum, eschewing use of formal evaluation techniques produces assessments of program performance that are incomplete, and therefore inaccurate. The resultant dearth of inquiry on these normative issues likely contributes to planning practice's poor performance in achieving its normative outcome goals. Further, planning education programs lose operational and evaluative benefits due to improper implementation of these principles; the identification of an apparent concession of educational program leadership in favor of responsiveness to practice is but one example.

I am currently completing revisions of the first two manuscripts from my dissertation for resubmission to *Journal of Planning Education and Research (JPER)*; both have been presented at recent Association of Collegiate Schools of Planning (ACSP) annual conferences. The third dissertation chapter will produce two manuscripts, one directed to *JPER* and the other to the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*. I anticipate writing a book on the broad topic of evaluating and managing accredited educational programs upon completion of a replication of my dissertation project on accredited graduate public administration (MPA) degree programs. Because I intend this work to serve both as curricula and pedagogy, my initial proposal for this volume will be to Cengage. As the secondary focus of this work is improved program delivery of competencies associated with just and equitable public sector outcomes, I will also solicit Sage. I expect the proposal will be delivery-ready within three years.

My future work will focus on conducting a deeper exploration of the political nature of the practice of the public affairs disciplines. The first area of investigation here will be the comparative study of the policymaking priorities, strategies, and results of legislators based on their educational and professional backgrounds. My hypothesis is that legislators with public affairs educational and/or professional backgrounds will have higher rates of attempting to produce both normative outcomes and evidenced-based policies from urban governance than legislators not having public affairs backgrounds. I have already assembled a list of individuals elected to office who possess such degrees to interview for this step in my research agenda. The next area involves further research into the contextual constraints of planning and public administration practice regarding their social welfare goals.

By breaking free of historical deference to the bounds of professional public sector practice, my scholarship seeks to determine whether normative public affairs theorization 'has gone far enough.' As such, it serves as an argument against claims that normative public affairs theorization 'has gone too far,' and as a response to assertions it 'is ineffectual.' I anticipate the results of my research will corroborate my hypothesis – posited in the previously mentioned paper in *Planning Theory* – that public affairs education programs must evolve and expand to serve as fields of study for elected and appointed political officials in addition to their historic focus on administrators. Identifying and implementing the actions necessary to create 'political' concentrations or certificates, and establishing student internships in city legislator and/or political advocacy group offices, are potential applications of this research. It will also inform my long-term research agenda: building an auspicious and serviceable bridge across the politics/administration dichotomy, through the development of an implementable model of governance better able to render normative outcomes from our democratic, pluralistic context.