Reconsidering and Expanding the Ethical Codes for Public Administrators:
Are There Universal Principles?

James H. Svara
School of Public Affairs
Arizona State University
james.svara@asu.edu

Public administration has had an uncertain relationship with ethics. If public administration is viewed as any apparatus for carrying out the will of the ruler, it can be amoral or even a vehicle for exploitation or subjugation of the population. From this perspective, public administration is an instrument that can be used to accomplish whatever goals the leader determines, as Weber (in Gerth and Mills 1946, 229) warns us. On the other hand, public administration can be viewed as a field and a practice grounded in values that state the aspirations the field seeks to achieve and the constraints within which it operates. Fundamentally, public administration supports the governance of society by helping to shape law and policy, executing the law and providing services to the public, and linking citizens to authoritative decision-makers. This view seems obvious when public administration is linked to qualifiers like “democratic” or “humane,” but it can be argued that public administration as an activity has always presumed certain standards to which it is held. As Confucius argued in the fifth century B.C., even when the elite in society were hereditary rulers, that good government could be achieved by “separating the administrative from the political functions and entrusting them to virtuous and well-trained ministers and assistants” and that the “main aim” of government is “the happiness of the people” (Gladden 1972 I, 149-150). Administrators who are corrupt, arbitrary, aloof, or self-serving violate those standards and undermine the ideals and the purpose of public administration. Ethics and administration are inseparable in the abstract, and when they are separated in practice, it is clear that problems will result that harm the ruler and the ruled and discredit administrators.

The development of a code of ethics for public administrators is a possible means of making explicit what values administrators should advance, what standards they should meet, and what responsibilities they have. This paper seeks to explore the standards that might be included in such a code and whether the ethical standards are unique to specific countries or may have universal applicability. The focus of the discussion is the United States and the approach taken by the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) to develop a code of ethics, but the issues raised and the alternative approaches suggested have relevance in other countries as well. It can be argued that administrators do not need a code of ethics because they operate in a system in which their behavior is controlled by superiors, and this view has probably retarded the development of administrative ethics (Cooper 1994).
A counter argument of long standing can be traced to the political philosopher Shen Pu-hai who argued in the fourth century B.C. that the skillful ruler “does nothing” and by restraining himself encourages his administrative assistants to develop their own ideas and exert themselves (Creel 1964, 162 fn 45). Some observers see evidence of an active role by administrators in shaping decision making by their powerful superiors. Creel (1974, 104-105) offers this assessment:

Concerning the former Han period, Wang Yu-chuan says, “There were times when the Emperor exercised absolute authority, but generally the bureaucracy was the de facto authority.” Edward A. Kracke, Jr., writing of the imperial system in general, says:

Conceptually, policy was determined not by a preponderance of opinion but by a consensus achieved through objective discussion. Both policy suggestions and factual reports often originated with local officials, who were best informed on public needs, and passed through administrative channels to the Imperial Court.

The Emperor was the final arbiter, in most cases setting his seal to decision that had been made by his ministers.

Thus, there are indications from the earliest days of the recognition that the administrative organization has social responsibilities, and that the individuals who occupy administrative positions should not only have be virtuous in their individual performance but also contribute to meeting the larger social responsibilities of the bureaucracy.¹

The scope and definition of those responsibilities have changed over time, but administrators have always had a responsibility to link and to serve both their superiors and the members of society. It is possible to view the administrative system in a society as having independent moral authority to discharge its responsibilities looking up and looking out to the population as a whole. The legal requirement or political reality that a superior exercises final authority does not relieve administrators from acting as moral agents responsible for their recommendations, reports, and actions. The degree of formal authority assigned to “citizens” for self-determination does not alter the expectation that they be treated by administrators with fairness and consistency and listened to for purposes of determining their needs, their aspirations, and their satisfaction with government activities.

This perspective suggests that there may be universal principles of administrative ethics. The premise of this paper is that these principles can be the basis for a code of ethics developed by the administrative profession itself. The paper focuses on ASPA and its code, but it examines the implications for all associations of administrators.

The position of ethics in ASPA has been intermixed with the question of the association’s and the field’s professional status. Without a code of ethics, it lacked an essential feature of recognized or aspiring professions. It is not clear, however, whether the code that was developed in 1984 and modified ten years later resolves or complicates ASPA’s status as a profession (Van Wart, 1996). Does the existing code clearly express what kind of profession public administration is in the complex arena of public affairs? The position taken in a recent paper on the nature of public professionalism and the role of ASPA (Svara 2009) is that the code does not match the association’s aspiration to be the core organization for public
professionals. I have presented an approach that uses the existing ASPA code and offered revisions that make it even more detailed and specific (Svara 2012). In the present discussion, I offer another approach to rewriting the code of ethics that stresses a statement of principles as the body of the code along with illustrative practices. I invite readers to comment on the appropriateness of the proposed principles in the American setting and in other countries. Whatever approach is taken, it is important for a code of ethics to address both the personal qualities and social responsibilities of ethical public administrators.

An overarching question in this discussion is whether it is possible or desirable to have a shared code of ethics that crosses national boundaries. Some aspects of public administration are universal, but a counter argument is that administrative ethics must be grounded in the regime values of specific countries or draw upon values shared in distinct philosophical traditions from major cultures of the world (Painter and Peters 2010). It is possible that a principle-based code may be more applicable in a wide range of countries, whereas detailed practices are more country-specific. We will explore this possibility.

ASPA, Professionalism, and the Importance of Ethics

From the beginning, ASPA has filled a niche as a general purpose organization dedicated to public affairs (Svara and Terry 2009). It now operates in a much more crowded field, but still has a unique contribution to make because of its boundary-spanning character and enduring values that are salient to its diverse membership. ASPA’s most important qualities are its potential greatest weaknesses—its generalist, boundary-spanning mission and its sectorally and organizationally diverse membership.

The young scholar Woodrow Wilson proposed an active role for administrators in helping to shape policy decisions below the level of constitutional questions, and he called for administrators to have “great powers and unhampered discretion” because these are the “indispensable conditions of responsibility” (Wilson 1887, 213). Furthermore, he offered guidance for ethical standards.

The ideal for us is a civil service cultured and self-sufficient enough to act with sense and vigor, and yet so intimately connected with the popular thought, by means of elections and constant public counsel, as to find arbitrariness or class spirit quite out of the question (217).

It is unfortunate that Wilson’s views have typically been treated in the textbooks as advocacy for a limited role as instructed agents in a dichotomized world of political masters and amoral administrative servants (Svara 1999, 85-86).

From the beginning in the development of public administration in the United States, practitioners and scholars have grappled with the issue of how public administrators can take on their broad-ranging responsibilities in an ethical way. William Mosher (1938, 333) anticipating the founding of ASPA in the next year identified qualities that the “profession of public service” needed to develop. These qualities presumed the presence of an association of likeminded persons who shared a common body of knowledge; an esprit de corps; a code of ethics; and commitment to a neutral (but not value-free) relationship to political superiors and an impartial attitude toward citizens so that “all members of the public [would] be served
without fear or favor.” He called for the growth of “a professional consciousness . . . in the minds of the great body of civil servants.”

As noted earlier, ASPA’s standing as a professional association was hampered for an extended period by its lack of a code of ethics. That gap was closed in 1984 when ASPA adopted a code of ethics. There is still a question, however, about whether ASPA’s code matches the normative challenges of the field it purports to cover. There was not resounding support for the quality of the original code, which stressed bureaucratic rather than professional values (Bowman 2000). Chandler (1982) considered a code proposed by Professional Standards and Ethics Committee in 1981 to be broader, stronger, and clearer than the Principles adopted by the ASPA National Council later in that year. The principles became the basis for the code that was adopted in 1984. At the time, Cooper (1987, 327) characterized it as “a conglomerate of prescribed virtues and modes of conduct” which though useful as individual points failed to provide “a coherent ethical identity for public administration.” To Pugh (1991, 21), it “represents a skein of behavioral guideposts” limited by “moral ambivalence and ambiguity.” It still reflected the limited conception of administration from the dichotomy model. Later, Cooper (1994, 16) would describe the first code as “a less than excellent document,” but one that had prompted discussion and debate among ASPA members about ethics and helped to legitimize ethics as a significant field of study. The code was slow to take hold among administrators (Bowman 1990), and there was little evidence that it was used to guide behavior (Gortner 1991, 143).

The code was revised in 1994 with increased emphasis on principles and professional values, and both awareness and utilization increased. The drafters sought to incorporate as much as the 1985 version as possible and shorten it to a one-page document. To make the code more useful to members, the content was organized around five major canons or principles derived from what the committee saw as the five major sources of ethics in the public sector: notions of the public interest, law and formal ethics codes, personal integrity, organizational dynamics, and professionalism (Van Wart, 1996). The code was approved in 1994 and has been the basis of ASPA’s approach to ethics since that time.

Bowman (2000, 680) offered this assessment of the new code drawing on results of a survey of administrators in 1996:

The ASPA statement is one of the few attempts to reinforce the legitimacy of public administration, articulate government service as a public trust, and attend to the need to take administrative discretion seriously…. In short, the code provides positive moral authority. It clearly indicates the importance of the principles that it embodies. As such, the point is precisely not to levy discipline. An overwhelming majority of respondents, in fact, concur that the precepts — as now written — are appropriate and use its principles.

Thus, ASPA made progress in elaborating a code of ethics that reflects the values of public administration, but the question is whether it has gone far enough. A review of the code starting in 2001 identified some possible changes that would have broadened the scope of the code somewhat (Van Wart 2003). At the end of the review, no changes were made.ii

Another effort is currently underway to review the ASPA code and suggest possible changes.iii Two possible approaches are being considered—a substantial change in content and
format, on the one hand, or a revision of the current code, on the other. Plant (2011) offers arguments to support limited and incremental change:

- The code is fundamentally sound. Its chief virtue is its organization around five pillars of ethical conduct in public service: serving the public interest; respect for the constitution and the law; demonstrating personal integrity; promoting ethical organizations; and striving for professional excellence.

- The code has become institutionalized. Research has shown that it is commonly used in MPA courses, is increasingly relied upon by practitioners as a guide in professional activities, and serves as the most generic and sweeping statement of ethics in governance of any professional code.

- No significant groundswell of opposition to the code has emerged since its adoption. Criticism exists but has not led to a major effort among ASPA members to change or abolish it. Tampering with it may create unnecessary conflict and divisions within the association.

- The code can be improved by providing for a mechanism for continuous upkeep. This will avoid the criticism that it is static and out of touch with the operating realities of the field.

- The code fits well with the type of professional association ASPA represents: a broad-based umbrella without specialization or credentialing.

A second approach would focus on major principles to provide more clarity and focus to the code. Before considering these alternate approaches, it is useful to assess how codes of ethics have been evaluated.

Assessing Codes of Ethics

A major criticism of codes of ethics is that they are too narrow and negative (Plant 1994) and reflect a low road approach to ethics emphasizing what one should not do rather than the positive actions that reflect a high level of ethical commitment (Rohr 1989). Cooper (1987, 322) stressed the importance of organizing a code around achieving the “internal goods” for a profession or practice. They are the positive purposes that a practice is organized to advance, and they are achieved by striving to meet standards of excellence associated with these goods.

A related criticism of codes of ethics in general is that they focus on micro- rather than macro-ethics. The latter define the “social responsibilities of professionals as a group” and what they should do to “influence social policy” (Ladd 1980, 156). Another way of thinking about the distinction is to contrast codes that cover only the personal qualities of administrators with those that also cover the broader social responsibilities. One could argue that all codes should consider such overriding values. In the case of public administration, the need for macro-ethics is especially important. Only the field of public administration--represented by organizations such as ASPA or the Chinese Public Administration Society (CPAS)--is broad enough to consider and set ethical standards for the wide range of administrators involved in public service through governmental and nongovernmental organizations (Svara 2009). Other specialized groups of public administrators may operate within an implicit normative
framework, but the impact of these broad values is reduced if they have not been articulated. The questions are whether a code of ethics for all professionals that serve citizens and help shape the public interest can be set, what such a code of ethics would look like, and how would it compare with the existing code.

In the following discussion, I will critically examine the ASPA code and a recent statement of the Core Value System for Communist Party officials in the Peoples Republic of China and compare them with other public official associations that clearly express macro-ethical standards. In the final section, I will propose a principled-based code of ethics to broaden the standards for public administrators.

Assessment of the ASPA Code of Ethics

The chief shortcoming of the ASPA code is the weakness of macro-ethical standards. The code is not narrow and narrow with many “don’t” statements like the 1958 Code of Ethics for Government Service (Svara 2007). But if it does not take the low road, it is largely a middle road approach that is not broad enough to cover all the important values of the field nor high enough to fully inspire. It is fairly comprehensive (with five sections that enunciate principles and 32 specific tenets stated as commitments), but it overlooks some macro issues and restricts the scope of other areas covered.

Possible shortcomings in the current code are listed here.

- In section I, the code identifies the principle of “public interest” but the specific commitments speak more to providing “public service.” Despite this emphasis, the value of serving the public could be more fully developed, and there is only limited attention to promoting democracy.

- Section II is entitled “Respect the Constitution and Law,” which urges administrators to “respect, study, and support government constitutions and laws.” However, it specifically mentions only the Constitutional principles of “honesty, fairness, representativeness, responsiveness, and due process” and not protecting personal freedoms. The code does not mention equity or social justice nor refer to other broad principles as guides to behavior.

- Section III covers “personal integrity” and addresses virtues and avoiding conflict of interest, but it does not clearly state that public administrators are moral agents responsible for their actions (Thompson 1985; Stewart 1985) nor does it identify the duties of the conscientious administrator. There is no mention of other principles that guide behavior drawn from major ethical traditions.

- In section IV on “ethical organizations,” there is no commitment to advance and improve the mission of the organization.

- Finally, section V on “professional excellence” omits any reference to displaying leadership. In fact, the word “leader” does not appear anywhere in the code.

Beyond these larger omissions, many of the tenets are limited in their scope. The following are examples of statements in the ASPA code that could be broadened in scope.
• The expected policy contributions of administrators (in Section II, tenet 2) are limited to working to change laws that are “counter-productive and obsolete” rather than more generally to developing and changing laws to advance the public interest—a commitment that might well be included in the Public Interest section of the code.

• The code asserts that administrators should “take responsibility for their own errors” (Section III, tenet 5), but not more generally take responsibility for their actions.

• It specifies that administrators should “involve citizens in policy decision-making” (Section I, tenet 4) but makes no references to ensuring a level playing field for political actors or to affirmative efforts directed at those with fewer political resources.

• The code refers generally to applying “ethics, efficiency and effectiveness in serving the public” (opening statement in Section IV), but it does not refer to the concept of stewardship or the responsibility to reexamine the efficacy of established programs and practices.

• There is a commitment to develop organizational means for dissent and protect others from reprisal (Section IV, tenet 4), but nowhere is there a commitment to expose wrongdoing.

• Merit principles are supported because they provide protections for administrators, but not to advance the quality of the workforce (Section IV, tenet 5.) There is reference to the sections of the bylaws that deal with enforcement by the National Council at the end of the code, but no explicit statement that the code represents standards that members of ASPA should follow.

   There are also some examples of prohibitions without a corresponding statement of positive values.

• Administrators should “oppose all forms of discrimination and harassment,” but only be committed to promoting affirmative action (Section I, tenet 2) and not all approaches to advance inclusion.

• They should “eliminate unlawful discrimination,” but not promote equality (Section II, tenet 3). They “prevent all forms of mismanagement of public funds,” but there is no mention of promoting better use of funds.

   In sum, the ASPA code has many positive features and is an overwhelmingly positive assertion of the values of the field. It fails, however, to fully express the macro-ethical standards that the broadest and most inclusive association in the field of public affairs could be expected to provide. These could be added, and the other shortcomings of the code could be remedied to make it stronger overall.

   **Ethical Values in Current Chinese Public Administration**

   In recent years, there has been criticism of “traditional” administrative values in China and concern that the changes occurring in China in the past quarter century have both advanced the civil service but also produced new ethical shortcomings among public administrators. Qianwei Zhu (2000, 1945) argues that the post-revolutionary period was characterized by the
principle of democratic centralism “by which the individual obeys the organization, the minority obeys the majority, the subordinate obeys the superior, and the whole Party obeys its Central Committee.” The party dominated the bureaucracy in ways that limited the development of an independent, professional civil service. Public administrators should adhere to their own standards and draw on their expertise to provide straight-forward analysis and recommendations to superiors. Administrators faced the dilemma that has been common over time in many countries of establishing the appropriate differentiation from political leaders and establishing their professional independence. Economic reform in post-Mao period weakened the control of the bureaucracy by the party and challenged the monopoly of power previously enjoyed by the government. The private sector has accumulated enormous economic resources. Despite major steps toward administrative reform through the Temporary Regulation of the State Civil Service in 1993, economic reform has produced paradoxical outcomes, according to Zhu (2000, 1956): “while promoting the process of professionalization of civil servants, it has also tended to produce elements that could prevent or even sabotage the process.” Corruption and self-interested behavior became commonplace among administrators.

There is no formal code of ethics adopted by CPAS, but in 2006, Hu Jintao, paramount leader of the Peoples Republic of China as the President and also the highest official in the Communist Party, released the Core Value System. This list of “Eight Honours and Disgraces” was intended to be the “new moral yardstick to measure the work, conduct and attitude of Communist Party officials.” It was promulgated as the moral code for all Chinese, especially Communist Party cadres, but non-communist personages are encouraged to adopt it as well. The elements of the Core Value System, which is designed to promote cultural harmony in the country, are the following:

- Love the country; do it no harm
- Serve the people; never betray them
- Follow science; discard superstition
- Be diligent; not indolent
- Be united, help each other; make no gains at other’s expense
- Be honest and trustworthy; do not sacrifice ethics for profit
- Be disciplined and law-abiding; not chaotic and lawless
- Live plainly, work hard; do not wallow in luxuries and pleasures.

These standards appear to focus primarily on the personal qualities of administrators rather than their social responsibilities. There are requirements to serve the people and love the country, but even these may be converted into the traits of helpfulness, reliability, and patriotism. The core value system contains many characteristics of exemplary administrators, but not of a socially responsible administration that is committed to strengthening institutions and improving processes of interaction between administrators and superiors, on the hand, and
administrators and citizens, on the other. The principles in comprehensive code of ethics must address social responsibilities as well as personal qualities.

Codes with Strong Macro-Ethical Standards

Based on historical traditions of filling an instrumental role defined by superiors, it may seem inappropriate for public administrators to fully articulate their social responsibilities. Given the broad scope of responsibilities exercised by administrators in the modern state, however, public administrators have a substantial impact on governance and the governmental process. Administrators do not simply implement policies and deliver services, they also contribute to shaping the society. In the United States, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) provides an example of how responsibilities in governance can be articulated, and two other associations of professionals in government—those representing planners and social workers—offer extensive statements of their social values.

The longstanding code of ICMA has three strong statements of its overall purpose and the contributions it intends to make to the society (with the number of the tenet in the code):

1. Be dedicated to the concepts of effective and democratic local government by responsible elected officials and believe that professional general management is essential to the achievement of this objective.

2. Affirm the dignity and worth of the services rendered by government and maintain a constructive, creative, and practical attitude toward local government affairs and a deep sense of social responsibility as a trusted public servant.

4. Recognize that the chief function of local government at all times is to serve the best interests of all of the people.

These statements are aspirational and provide broad guidance regarding the purpose and role of the local government administrator.

There is strong emphasis on the social responsibilities of professionals in the Code of the American Institute of Certified Planners—one of the few long-standing codes along with ICMA’s found in an association of public officials (Plant 1994). AICP has members in both public and private sector positions, and its certification is often a condition for hiring or awarding a commission to a planner. The long and detailed code distinguishes between the opening section of its code which presents a “statement of aspirational principles that constitute the ideals” to which members of the association are committed. The members pledge to “strive to act in accordance with our stated principles,” but the failure to meet these principles “cannot be the subject of a misconduct charge or be a cause for disciplinary action.” The second section presents rules of conduct to which all members are held accountable. Failure to comply with these can result in ethics charges and investigations. I will focus here on the opening section following the discussion of the code in Svara (2007).

Overall, the members of AICP espouse the goal of “building better, more inclusive communities.” The introductory section spells out responsibilities to the public, clients and employees, and to the profession and colleagues; and it recognizes the impact that the actions
of planners have. The responsibility is grounded in the obligation to advance the public interest. To meet this obligation, the members aspire to meet principles that include the following:

a. We shall always be conscious of the rights of others.

b. We shall have special concern for the long-range consequences of present actions.

c. We shall pay special attention to the interrelatedness of decisions.

d. We shall provide timely, adequate, clear, and accurate information on planning issues to all affected persons and to governmental decision makers.

e. We shall give people the opportunity to have a meaningful impact on the development of plans and programs that may affect them. Participation should be broad enough to include those who lack formal organization or influence.

f. We shall seek social justice by working to expand choice and opportunity for all persons, recognizing a special responsibility to plan for the needs of the disadvantaged and to promote racial and economic integration. We shall urge the alteration of policies, institutions, and decisions that oppose such needs.

g. We shall promote excellence of design and endeavor to conserve and preserve the integrity and heritage of the natural and built environment.

h. We shall deal fairly with all participants in the planning process. Those of us who are public officials or employees shall also deal evenhandedly with all planning process participants.

These statements articulate the quality of planning to which certified planners are committed, the kind of society they seek to promote, their obligation to promote change, and their responsibilities to the public.

The National Association of Social Workers also grounds ethical tenets in broad statements of principle. NASW guides and instructs its members with a very long and comprehensive code statement. The code provides an outstanding example of one that is broad and challenging in its scope and depth. It begins by linking the code to the practice of social work: “professional ethics are at the core of social work” and affirms that the profession has the “obligation to articulate its basic values, ethical principles, and ethical standards.” Similar to the AICP, the code organizes standards in the areas of responsibilities to clients, to colleagues, in practice settings, as professionals, to the social work profession, and to the broader society. It is distinctive by starting with a full elaboration of the profession’s core values and a set of broad ethical principles based on them. They are presented in Table 1. The code goes on to specify in great detail (over 50 general statements and over 150 detailed sub-statements) the ethical standards that apply to the activities of social workers. Like AICP, it makes the distinction between standards that are enforceable guidelines and standards that are aspirational but leaves it to the individual to decide which is which rather than separating the code into two types of statements.
Proposing a Public Administration Code that Expresses the Social Responsibilities

As noted earlier, the ASPA code is a sound statement with positive qualities, but it falls short of articulating the full range of responsibilities that administrators should be committed to fill. It also could be given more specificity in certain important areas of action. The approach presented here is meant to illustrate how these shortcomings can be addressed in a revised code. It contains three parts: an expanded preface, principles, and practices. This proposal departs from the current ASPA format in providing nine principles that represent major obligations followed by a larger number of specific practices in a separate section not organized by the principles. I ask the reader to consider whether the principles are universal expectations that could be applied in any country. It is likely that many of the specific practices reflect the values, tradition, and law of specific countries.

Preface

The ASPA code contains a short introduction:

The American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) exists to advance the science, processes, and art of public administration. The Society affirms its responsibility to develop the spirit of professionalism with its membership, and to increase public awareness of ethical principles in public service by its example. To this end, we, as members of the Society, commit ourselves to the following principles:

A broader statement can be offered that more fully defines the field and the broad roles that it fills in society with additions to the ASPA version highlighted:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Value</th>
<th>Principle</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Service</td>
<td>Social workers' primary goal is to help people in need and to address social problems.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Social Justice</td>
<td>Social workers challenge social injustice.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Dignity and Worth of the Person</td>
<td>Social workers respect the inherent dignity and worth of the person.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Importance of Human Relationships</td>
<td>Social workers recognize the central importance of human relationships.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Integrity</td>
<td>Social workers behave in a trustworthy manner.</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Competence</td>
<td>Social workers practice within their areas of competence and develop and enhance their professional expertise.</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Public administration is the overarching knowledge, values, and standards of practice that apply to serving society and advancing the public interest and to securing sound, democratic governance. Public professionals serve governing board members and elected officials; develop proposals for programs and policies to meet public needs; involve citizens in identifying and addressing social problems; deliver services to the public as staff members in governments, NGOs, and private companies; and manage the governmental and nongovernmental organizations that provide services to the public. Practitioners of public administration are dedicated to advancing the science, processes, and art of public administration and improving the performance of individuals and institutions that serve the public in a democratic society. Public administrators are committed to increasing awareness, understanding, and commitment to values and standards that should guide all those who serve the public, shape the quality of public life, and support democratic governance. To this end, we commit ourselves to the following principles and practices:

The revised preface to the code adds improving the performance of individuals and institutions that serve the public and places the practice in the context of democratic society. It expands the commitment to develop the spirit of professionalism not only with its members but also with the members of other associations of public officials. It seeks to identify key ethical principles that should guide all those who serve the public and shape the quality of public life.

Principles

The current ASPA code is organized around five principles: Serve the Public Interest; Respect the Constitution and the Law; Demonstrate Personal Integrity; Promote Ethical Organizations; and Strive for Professional Excellence. The revised version I propose contains nine principles and both clarifies and expands the five original principles as well as adding new ones. In the version that follows, changes and additions to the ASPA code are highlighted.

Code of Ethics for Public Administrators

PRINCIPLES OF PUBLIC PROFESSIONALS. We accept our obligation to—

I. **Respect the Constitution and Law.** Respect, support, and study governmental constitutions and laws that define the legal requirements of public officials and public agencies.

II. **Advance the Public Interest.** Seek to promote the long-term interests of the society as a whole. Public professionals should subordinate personal interests and institutional loyalties to the public good.

III. **Support officials in the organization, governing boards, and elected office.** Provide honest and complete information and independent recommendations based on an
objective assessment of all alternative options for policy adoption and choices for policy implementation and offer the information needed to assure accountability.

IV. Promote Democracy. Encourage the participation of all citizens, assist residents in our dealings with public organizations, and respond to the public in ways that are complete, clear, and easy to understand. Recognize and support the public's right to know the public's business and offer objective explanations of the likely impacts of policies being considered for adoption.

V. Advance social equity. Treat all persons equally with fairness and due process and respect individual rights and freedoms. Seek to reduce inequality, unfairness, and injustice based on significant social characteristics.

VI. Serve the Public, beyond serving oneself. Provide services to the public with impartiality, consistency, courtesy, respect, and dedication to high standards.

VII. Act as stewards of public funds. Use resources wisely to promote effectiveness and efficiency, and prevent all forms of mismanagement or waste.

VIII. Demonstrate commitment to duty, principle, and personal Integrity. Adhere to the highest standards in all activities to inspire public confidence and trust in public service.

IX. Support ethical organizations and professional excellence. Take personal responsibility to help public organizations and the professionals within them achieve the highest standards of ethics and public-serving performance.

The nine principles serve to highlight some areas of commitment that get slighted or overlooked in ASPA’s five principles. Four principles are added: supporting officials, promoting democracy, advancing social equity, and acting as stewards. One is “elevated”—serving the public—, and the public interest principle is clarified. Two of the original five have been combined—supporting ethical organizations and professional excellence. The nine principles broaden the scope of the major obligations that administrators have.

I would argue that each of these obligations should be asserted at the level of a major principle of the field, and none should be subordinated to another principle. The first principle asserts the fundamental obligation of public administrators to respect the constitutional and legal framework of the country or jurisdiction, as stated in the ASPA code of ethics.

The second principle—advance the public interest—shifts language of the ASPA code from “serving the public interest” to “advancing the public interest.” Stated in this way, it is clear that public administrators should seek to promote the long-term interests of the society as a whole in all their actions (Bailey 1962; Wamsley et al. 1990). As with other principles, this

---

1 This phrase is in the current ASPA code but it is elevated to the level of a major obligation. Previously, it was offered as an example of advancing the public interest.

2 These are two separate principles in the ASPA code.
one must be reconciled with others including the respect for law and constitutional order. Administrators work within the legal framework or seek to change it when existing law impairs the public interest. With this change, a new obligation that refers to serving the public is added as the sixth principle.

The third principle—support officials—recognizes the administrator’s relationship to authoritative policy-makers in executive and legislative offices and on governing boards. It also recognizes the administrator’s position in an organization with layers of authority. The principle asserts the dual responsibility to respect and support superiors but also provide honest and complete information and make independent recommendations based on an objective assessment of all alternatives whether the recommendations cover options for policy adoption or choices for policy implementation (Svara 2001). Public administration entails an obligation to support political and administrative superiors by “speaking truth to power,” not simply an obligation to obey superiors. Administrators should also support their accountability to elected officials and the public by providing information that clearly reveals how they have performed and what they have accomplished.

The fourth principle—promote democracy—recognizes that public administration not only operates within a democratic system but must help to support and enhance it (King, Feltry, and Susel 1998; Crosby and Bryson 2005). Officials cannot meet their fundamental role of being responsible to the public unless they seek to assure that the public can exercise robust citizenship. They should encourage the participation of all citizens and ensure that persons who are impacted by a policy or administrative action have been informed and given the opportunity to participate in the decision-making process. They should assist citizens in their dealings with public organizations, invite assessment of performance, and respond to the public in ways that are complete, clear, and easy to understand. Administrators should recognize and support the public's right to know the public's business and offer objective explanations of the likely impacts of policies being considered for adoption.

The fifth principle—advance social equity—asserts the core administrative values of fairness and equality and the responsibility to respect individual freedoms and take actions to advance social equity. Acting on social equity means both treating all people fairly and equally in the present and future, but also seeking to remedy the accumulated effects of unequal, unfair, and unjust treatment of certain groups in the past. The remedies are limited by law and support for individual freedoms, but administrators can look for ways to correct past abuses by recommendations to elected officials and through responsible use of discretion (Johnson and Svara 2011).

The sixth principle—serve the public above self—, as noted, has been one of the specific actions included in the ASPA code, but deserves elevation to the level of a major principle. Rather than viewing citizens as subjects who must accept whatever treatment they receive from administrations, administrators should offer service that is based on impartiality, consistency, respect, courtesy, and dedication to high standards (Denhardt and Denhardt 2007). Appropriate compensation and benefits are due to public administrators, but they should not use their favored position or control over essential services to receive unwarranted rewards from public employment or protections that undermine accountability.
The seventh principle—act as a steward—reflects a traditional concern of public administrators, and it is still important to assert it as a central responsibility. The public entrusts its resources to administrators and can expect that their funds are used as well as possible. Administrators should be far-reaching in their search for ways to improve effectiveness and efficiency, including considering whether tasks should be performed by nongovernmental organizations or by other agencies or even discontinued. It also follows that administrators are dedicated to preventing all forms of mismanagement and waste.

The eight principle—demonstrate commitment to duty, principle, and personal integrity—refers to obligation to set and maintain standards of personal ethics in public life. Ethics is based on universal principles as well as virtues, and ethical commitment supports moral agency to accept responsibility for one’s actions, question improper orders, and act ethically even if others object. Adhering to the highest standards in all activities helps to inspire public confidence and trust in public service.

The ninth principle—support ethical organizations and professional excellence—focuses attention on the obligation to improve the organization, elevate the importance of ethics, and develop one’s own competence and commitment.

These principles are proposed for the purpose of prompting discussion about their appropriateness. Are there other principles that should be added or substituted for the nine included in this list? Do they adequately apply to persons who provide services to the public and help shape governance in nongovernmental organizations, or are they too government-centric? Finally, can they (or others) be viewed as universal principles that would apply to administrators in all countries?

Practices

In addition to principles that guide behavior, there are many specific practices that may either help to elaborate the meaning of the principles or instruct administrators about actions they should take. Unlike the principles that have broad relevance to administration in any country or culture, the practices are more likely to pertain to the legal standards, traditions, and values of particular countries. For example, the practice of reporting wrong-doing would be shaped by the legal requirements, avenues for dissent, and traditions of honor that exist in specific countries. In the United States, it is sometimes necessary to “blow the whistle” by reporting the problem outside the organization. In other countries, there may be a stronger commitment to correcting problems within the organization once they have been revealed to superiors. Thus, a distinction can be made between universal principles that would constitute a shared code of ethics among all public administrators and a statement of professional practices that may vary across countries. Furthermore, the practices in a country may be influenced by changes in law. The universal requirement to treat all persons fairly and equally and correct past injustice may be translated into specific programs that are altered over time in a specific country, as the definition and standard of “affirmative action” has changed in the United States (Myers 2011). Having a statement of professional practices that supports the code of ethics but

3 These are two separate principles in the ASPA code.
is separate from it permits flexibility over time as well as variation across countries. It could be changed more easily than the principle-based code of ethics.

The following list is offered as a proposal for adoption by ASPA in the United States. It incorporate many of the specific actions currently included in the current ASPA code as well as additions that address shortcomings in that code. Changes from the ASPA code are presented in *italics*.

**PROFESSIONAL PRACTICES TO PROMOTE ETHICS.** Public administrators are committed to--

1. Accept individual responsibility for our *actions and the consequences of our actions*.
2. Conduct official acts without partisanship or *favoritism*.
4. Guard against using public position for personal gain or to advance personal or private interests.
5. Avoid conflict of interest or its appearance.
6. Disclose any interests that may affect objectivity in making decisions and recuse themselves from participation in those decisions.
7. Work to establish procedures that hold individuals and the organization accountable for our conduct and support these procedures with clear reporting of activities and accomplishments.
8. Seek to correct instances of wrongdoing or report them to superiors. If remedies cannot be achieved by reporting wrongdoing internally, reveal the wrongdoing to external parties or to the public.
9. Encourage and facilitate legitimate dissent activities in government and protect the whistle-blowing rights of public employees, and work to provide organization members with an administrative means for dissent, assurance of due process and safeguards against reprisal.
10. Support merit principles that promote excellence in the selection and promotion of public officials and protect against arbitrary and capricious actions.
11. Oppose all forms of discrimination and harassment, and promote affirmative efforts to increase the representativeness of the public workforce and the full inclusion of persons with diverse characteristics.
12. Strengthen individual capabilities and encourage the professional development of oneself, of others, and of professional associations of public servants.
13. Promote the ASPA code of ethics as an evolving statement of the aspirations and expectations of public servants and use this code as a guide to identify serious shortcomings in the behavior of ASPA members that warrant sanctions or expulsion of a member from the Society.
14. Honor and support the ethics codes of other professional associations that include persons who work in public affairs and link the values and principles of ASPA to those of other associations.

Readers are asked to consider the advantages and disadvantages of separating principles and practices. If a separate statement were developed, what practices would you include in such a statement for your own country?

Conclusion

In sum, a code of ethics for public administrators could serve broader purposes than is currently the case in a code such as that adopted by ASPA in 1994. It could be more fully a macro-ethical statement of the social purposes of public administration as well as a list of the personal qualities that public administrators should manifest. From the writing of Confucius through the Northcote-Trevelyan report in the United Kingdom, there has been a call for administrators to be a body of competent and ethical professionals who would offset the favoritism, arbitrariness, and self-serving tendencies of hereditary rulers or elected officials. In the modern world as the policies formulated by government have become more complex and more dependent on the contributions of citizens and nongovernmental organizations, it is increasingly important for public administrators to meet their social responsibilities as well as being personally exemplary. They should be committed to a set of social responsibilities that accompany their sense of ethics as an individual public administrator. The code of ethics for public administrators should include the responsibilities that administrators have to enhance the process of government and meet their social responsibilities.

It is possible to view the administrators in a society as having independent moral authority to articulate the principles that set the standards for filling their responsibilities looking up to superiors and looking out to the population as a whole. It is generally recognized that administrators are not simply the agent doing the work of the principal. Furthermore, as moral agents, they have a collective as well as individual responsibility to do what is “right.” Governments should set standards for administrators and enforce them to encourage ethical awareness and development. Still, administrators should assert their own standards as well. They have a responsibility to advance the public interest, to promote fairness and social justice, and to support democratic practices independently of the will of current elected officials. It appears that the early experience with bureaucracy in China suggests that these expectations may be universal. The legal requirement or political reality that a superior exercises final authority does not relieve administrators from being responsible for the veracity and efficacy of their recommendations, reports, and actions. The degree of formal authority assigned to “citizens” for self-determination does not alter the expectation that they be treated by administrators with fairness and consistency and listened to for purposes of determining their needs, their aspirations, and their satisfaction with government activities.

Thus, it appears that these responsibilities are essentially the same in all countries, although democratic systems entail additional responsibilities. The principle-based code of ethics proposed in this paper presumes that administrators support the constitutional framework, advance the public interest, support other officials, promote democracy, advance
social equity, and act as stewards of public resources as well as serving the public above themselves, adhering to ethical standards, and promoting ethical organizations and professional excellence. A cross-national discussion by practitioners and scholars is needed to identify universal principles that support ethical administration and to determine how to advance the acceptance of these principles.

Endnotes

i In contrast to Confucius, Shen “placed principal emphasis, for government, not upon good men, but upon rational organization and technique” (Creel 1974, 57).

ii According to Van Wart (2003), specific suggestions were made to add provisions related to training, professional development, and citizen participation. Other suggestions would have substituted for the word “equity” for “ethics” in the preamble to section IV, separated dissent and whistle-blowing, clarified affirmative action, and addressed the balancing of the public’s right to know and the protection of privileged information. Finally, the possibility was raised of differential neutrality standards for ASPA members in merit administrative positions versus those in elected capacities.

iii ASPA President Erik Bergrud has appointed James Nordin and James Svara as co-chairs of a working group to review the code of ethics. The co-chairs have recruited a diverse group of practitioner and academic members of ASPA to undertake the review.


v See, for example, [http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-08/12/content_20692544.htm](http://www.china.org.cn/china/2010-08/12/content_20692544.htm) (accessed August 11, 2011).


vii A different approach is taken in a forthcoming paper (Svara 2012). In that version, I use the five principles in the current ASPA code and make a larger number of specific additions and revisions.
References


