



ADVANCING MEANINGFUL SOCIAL EQUITY

Abstract

An essay addressing the advancement of social equity by local government to provide meaningful change.

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The idea of social equity has been part of the human experience since the beginning of time. There have always been people in power and people that have been oppressed by those with that power. Ancient Chinese philosopher Confucius chronicled a discussion with, Tsze-chang, a ruler in his time. Tsze-chang asked Confucius how a person in authority should act and Confucius shared five good things and four bad things.

Tsze-Chang said, “What are meant by the four bad things?” The Master said, “To put the people to death without having instructed them; this is called cruelty. To require from them, suddenly, the full tale of work, without having given them warning; this is called oppression. To issue orders as if without urgency, at first, and, when the time comes, to insist on them with severity; this is called injury. And, generally, in the giving pay or rewards to men, to do it in a stingy way; this is called acting the part of a mere official.” The Master said, “Without recognizing the ordinances of Heaven, it is impossible to be a superior man. Without knowing the force of words, it is impossible to know men (Confucius 2017).”

The discriminations and inequalities have been overt in the United States from the country’s inception through the Civil War and continuing for more than one hundred years until the Civil Rights Act of 1964 (Caro 2002). This did not mark the end of explicit racism and inequality. Although the obvious has diminished it has been replaced by tacit ignorance and failure to acknowledge that many systems that exist today are rooted in institutional racism and failure of government to review policies and procedures through an objective lens.

Public administration has evolved over time. Social equity has become an important value embraced and lifted by public administration scholars and practitioners. New Public Administration brought forth the awareness that administrators should seek to change those policies and structures that systematically inhibit social equity (Fredrickson 2017). Administrators should be committed to good management, social equity values, things to be achieved, and rationales (Fredricksen 2005).

In *Public Service Values*, Howard Box examined the public service and the public interest. “The future that a majority of people would choose at a particular point in time, given adequate information and an opportunity for dialogue with others before making a decision.” Values of participativeness, representativeness, transparency, and social equity (Box 2015)

Public administration associations have more recently adopted meaningful tenets that support social equity. The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Code of Ethics has twelve tenets. Two of the tenets highlight the importance of social equity.

Tenet 1. We believe professional management is essential to effective, efficient, equitable, and democratic local government.

Tenet 4. Serve the best interests of all community members.

The direct reference to “equitable” in Tenet 1 demonstrates the importance of social equity. The use of the word “all” in Tenet 4 firmly establishes the high regard of social equity by the ICMA (International City Management Association n.d.)

In 2018 the National Academy of Public Administration (NAPA) completed its work in identifying the greatest problems facing public administrators. These “Grand Challenges” were complex and identified as likely to take a decade or more to meet the goals and objectives of each challenge. “Foster Social Equity” was one of the twelve challenges that was recognized by NAPA (National Academy of Public Administration 2018).

NAPA provided an outline for public administrators to focus on for each of the Grand Challenges. The framework included:

- Incentivize tangible results by exploring, identifying, and disseminating social equity frameworks and metrics;

- Build awareness of social equity issues and indicators to foster organizational cultures that value and reward social equity;
- Develop frameworks to proactively assess and improve the social equity dimensions of public policy, program design, and organizational implementation;
- Provide practical advice on how public administrators can lawfully promote social equity within their agencies and programs;
- Educate and motivate administrators and policymakers to include a social equity lens in public management and throughout their careers;
- Address specific social equity issues, including affordable housing, criminal justice, education, and access to technology; and
- Ensure that social equity is considered in actions to address each of the other Grand Challenges in Public Administration (National Academy of Public Administration 2018).

The River Forest Village Board of Trustees passed a resolution in 2021 to form the River Forest Diversity, Equity, and Inclusion Ad Hoc Committee (Village of River Forest 2021). The committee's organizational structure was flawed from the outset. Every resident that submitted letters of interest to participate in the committee was made a member. The large committee of volunteers experienced a lack of participation with members never attending any meeting. There were also resignations from the committee after in-fighting and accusations that some members were intent on pushing agendas and themes without consent or input from other members.

The organizational structure made it more difficult to fix the problem. The sheer size of the committee made success unlikely. The Ad Hoc committee was advisory only. There was no

formal strength in their decisions and no real bearing on the Village Board to do anything other than acknowledge that the committee made recommendations.

Staff directly involved became disillusioned with process based on inefficiency of the committee. There was a lack of incentives for success which contributed to the problems for the committee. Additionally, staff leadership of the committee changed hands several times due to employee turnover. The lack of staff direction and input due to turnover contributed to unsuccessful outcomes.

The Village Board needed to take a personal stake in the goals and objectives of the committee. Ownership was not evident, rather deferring to the committee and its results, although they were advisory only (Village of River Forest August). An intensive meeting of leadership, the committee, and Department heads would have helped.

There are other government bodies that have successfully worked toward social equity. The ICMA's Economic Mobility and Opportunity Cohort is a group of ten communities across the country that "individually and collectively explored ways to enhance their residents' financial security, sense of power and autonomy, and sense of belonging to their communities" (Mitchell, Acheson and Goddeeris 2023).

In El Paso County, Texas, the administration focused on childcare options for working families. San Juan County, Utah identified the need to balance representation in government based on population. The Native American population was underrepresented so the administration worked toward community participation in elections and staff hiring to make improvements. In Chesterfield County, Virginia, the administration focused on economic

mobility. Support of workforce development, financial literacy, affordable housing, and education were targeted (Mitchell, Atcheson and Goddeeris 2023).

Other successful social equity strategies include those used in Johnson County, Kansas. The administration focused on staff-Listening Sessions. The results were evidenced in an improved work environment, development of a talent pipeline, and enhanced services for employees and the community (Postoak Ferguson 2023).

The administration in Franklin County, Ohio, formed a partnership with the county, NAACP, Creating Central Ohio Futures, & Columbus Building & Construction Trades Council. Training paths for students in skilled trades were developed. The program has a 90% success rate and leads graduates into apprenticeships in trades with good paying jobs (Wilson 2023).

The Village of River Forest can look to these successes to better focus on social equity and reinvigorate the efforts into diversity, equity, and inclusion. The Village should also look to the framework offered by the National Academy of Public Administration, specifically, the Grand Challenge of “Foster Social Equity” (National Academy of Public Administration 2018). The paths to success with the NAPA guidelines are to attain tangible results. Administrators would lead concerted effort for elected officials, staff and line personnel, and community to participate in meetings and surveys. Training of staff to foster enhanced organizational cultures and social equity is also important. Administration and staff would review policy, program design, and organizational implementation with a social equity focus and make changes where needed. Administrators would collaborate with area Administrators to share programs and policies and perform peer review. Programs would be specified, such as access to technology, to begin successful and sustainable efforts (National Academy of Public Administration 2018). A small “win” in one area of social equity would provide a synergistic effect on others.

The River Forest Village Board has an opportunity to reenergize their efforts in advancing meaningful social equity. An investment should be made in researching and developing a new plan, reviewing what worked and what did not, as well as looking outward to realize successes by other communities. “Whereas power can be explored empirically and debated pragmatically, it appropriately remains a philosophical and moral issue as well” (Denhardt 2020). “Courageous educators who discuss equity on equal terms with other public administration values will lead to courageous public administrators willing to do the same” (Norman-Major 2011).

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