

An Ethical Path to Equity

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By **Parisa Vinzant**
November 20, 2020



What will the field of public administration choose as its agenda for the next four years?

The incoming Biden-Harris administration has made racial equity one of its four top policy priorities. Are we ready to carry out this mandate and elevate racial equity and justice in all aspects of the field, from teaching to practice and policy implementation?

It is troubling that in this moment of great possibility, the answer to these questions is unclear. We in public administration have been fighting far too long to get social equity and social justice fully enshrined within the field. With ever-increasing inequities that disproportionately impact marginalized Black, Indigenous, and People of Color (BIPOC)—a situation which COVID-19 has so cruelly exposed—we do not have the luxury of time to make statements that are not backed with specific action steps and plans.

The University of Cincinnati's social justice focused MPA program stands out for its commitment to tackling the problem and continues to be heralded for its uniqueness. But when will social justice and equity-centered programs like this become the standard? Under pressure by civil unrest and the #ScholarStrike that followed the murder of George Floyd, many academic institutions have scrambled to form diversity, equity and inclusion taskforces to examine how these principles could be more fully embedded into their operations, recruitment, hiring and programs. But without a sustained commitment from leadership at these institutions and within the field, it is uncertain how far these efforts will go beyond the performative.

An unprecedented window of opportunity has opened for us if we concentrate our efforts to clarify our vision of racial equity, create an actionable plan and carry it out with persistence and urgency over the next four years. Success will require a focus on complex systems change to shift power and centralize the goal of racial equity. In crafting our shared vision and plan, we must focus on short-term wins that build capacity and momentum for long-term systems change.

According to Johnson and Svara's 2015 book, *Justice for All*, public administrators should have a commitment to, "Advance fairness and justice and to correct instances of unfairness, inequality, and injustice." This definition of equity is reflected in ASPA's Code of Ethics and practices, which states that we have an ethical responsibility to strengthen social equity; oppose all forms of discrimination; improve and eliminate laws and policies that are unethical to promote the public good; and should strive to attain the highest standards of ethics and stewardship with our organizations.

The reality we face is that the forces for the status quo are deeply entrenched. For some, it is a matter of rigidity or inertia, an unwillingness to change a routine that has become rote even when the change would be beneficial. For others, however, it is an issue of self-interest in the status quo that enables power and money to continue to flow into the hands of the powerful and monied. The public administrator who does not make a conscious commitment to correcting racial injustice and inequity, by default, gives support to the status quo of racial injustice and inequity. To perpetuate harm in this way should no longer be tolerated.

So, the question then becomes, what will it take to make systemic racism a deal breaker in our field? For one, stronger accountability mechanisms could be established to connect racism to ethics, so that the failure to tackle systemic racism and deliver antiracist policies would be understood as a breach of ethical obligations.

Until professional and accrediting organizations make the obvious link between ethics and equity explicit and attach appropriate consequences, it is on each of us to make the needed shift in perspective: we cannot be considered ethical administrators if we do not implement the entirety of the ethical codes to which we are subject.

For example, to the, “Fully inform and advise,” tenet of the ASPA Code of Ethics, let us add the *burdens and benefits* language of the newly-created ICMA Ethics tenet that applies a racial equity lens and emphasizes the responsibility of public administrators to, “Inform their governing body of the anticipated effects of a decision on people in their jurisdictions, especially if specific groups may be disproportionately harmed or helped.”

Considering that COVID-19 is disproportionately killing Black people at over two times the rates of white people, the most ethical and equitable decisions would thus prioritize resources, including the allocation of mobile testing labs, to those communities hardest hit by the coronavirus. To *not* apply such an ethical and equity lens in this real-life example has the clear domino effect of causing more needless deaths of our most marginalized people as well as increasing the spread of the virus among the general population.

A new day is upon us in which we must fully accept our ethical responsibilities and marshal our collective will to dismantle systems of racism so that we may build antiracist and just systems, policies, programs and organizations. The benefits would be shared by all. For more information on this effort, click [here](#).

Author: *Parisa Vinzant, MPA, is an equity/inclusion consultant and technology/innovation commissioner in Long Beach, CA. She enjoys serving as the newsletter editor and social media manager for ASPA’s Democracy and Social Justice (DSJ) Section. Parisa applies a social/racial equity lens in her writing exploring topics ranging from ethics, democracy, technology, and community engagement. Contact her at info@vinzantgroup.com and [@Parisa_Vinzant](https://twitter.com/Parisa_Vinzant) (Twitter).*

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