



Faculty Lunches with the Dean (No. 37) (Bill Rivenbark)

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This is the final set of blog posts about the first round of Faculty Lunches with the Dean. I will restart the process, but not until a little time has passed. I had lunch last week with four colleagues (Bill Rivenbark, Maureen Berner, John Stephens, and Cheryl Howell) who had not participated in the earlier rounds. This post summarizes a research project shared at lunch by Bill Rivenbark, and I'll get to the others in the coming days.



Bill continued his love affair with Italy through a six-month Fulbright Fellowship at the University of Salento (Lecce, Italy). His work as MPA Director has pulled Bill away from teaching and research, which he has missed, and the fellowship was a wonderful opportunity for him to reconnect and focus exclusively on that work. In addition to the research project, it also was an opportunity to organize and teach the MPA course on productivity improvement that he took over from David Ammons when he returned for the fall semester.



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For his research, Bill collaborated with his colleague in Italy, Roberta Fasiello, on a survey designed to identify the factors affecting the likelihood that local officials actually will use performance data in their decision making. The law requires the collection of performance data, but that does not always translate into it being used. They sent the survey to 161 mayors of municipalities in the Puglia region of Italy with a population of 5,000 or more. Bill and Roberta sent the survey three different times, and Roberta called every single mayor about completing it. In the end they received 50 completed surveys for a response rate of 31 percent.



Salento Coast

The survey collected information about the kinds of performance data that the municipalities collected—including whether it was data about outputs or outcomes. They also collected information about how often the mayors used the data in decision making. If officials responded that they used the data a lot, they knew in advance that they also would be asked to give specific examples of how they used it. The request for examples tried to get beyond the tendency of officials to say automatically that they used whatever performance data had been collected by their jurisdiction. 60-70% answered in a way that did not require them to offer examples, which suggests a more candid response about actual usage of the data.



University of Salento

Bill says the research led to two significant findings. First, local officials will not use performance data unless it focused on outcomes. Second, and possibly more interesting, local governments with greater citizen involvement are more likely to use performance data. The reliance on outcome measures aligns with previous research in the field, but connecting usage with the level of citizen involvement is a new insight. Does the involvement of citizens create some greater sense of accountability among public officials? How? Bill and Roberta have just resubmitted an article on the research to a peer-reviewed academic journal. Luckily for Bill, more research is required to unpack the relationship between citizen involvement and the usage of performance data.

He will return to the University of Salento this summer to continue his research with Roberta. They will hold a series of focus groups with the mayors to further their understanding of how citizen participation relates to performance management in local government. Bill says that his ongoing collaboration with Roberta is a fundamental goal of the Fulbright Program. Of course it is a burden for Bill, but one he is willing to shoulder in the interest of advancing research in the field of public administration. Special kudos to Willow Jacobson for holding down the fort as interim MPA Director in Bill's absence.



Lecce, Italy