The Chicago School That Never Was

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A central problem in the development of political science has long been how to emulate the objectivity and rigor of natural science while simultaneously retaining relevance for conducting public affairs. For some observers, however, the very notion of a natural-scientific orientation to the study of politics is antithetical to its relevance to practical politics. Woodrow Wilson (1911, 10) struck at the heart of the matter when he proclaimed that "I do not like the term political science" in his 1910 APSA Presidential Address. "Human relationships . . . are not in any proper sense the subject matter of science. They are the stuff of insight and sympathy and spiritual comprehension" (10–1; see also Ubertaccio and Cook 2006).

In contrast to Wilson's perspective, the members of the Chicago School of Political Science—which arose at the University of Chicago in the 1920s and 1930s—envisioned the model of natural science as integral to a political science for practical use (Almond 2004; Heaney and Hansen 2006; Karl 1974; Monroe 2004; Neblo 2004; Ross 1991; Simon 1985; Somit and Tanenhaus 1967; Tsou 1951; White 1942). The faculty of the Chicago School—most notably Charles E. Merriam, Leonard D. White, Harold F. Gosnell, and Harold D. Lasswell—were among the first political scientists to conduct randomized field experiments, to employ advanced statistical techniques such as multivariate regression and factor analysis, and to combine qualitative methods (like ethnography and content analysis) with statistical methods (e.g., Gosnell 1927; Lasswell 1927; White 1929). They relied on these advances to make seminal contributions to the study of elections, public opinion, propaganda, political psychology, political parties, urban politics, African-American politics, public administration, comparative politics, and the causes of war. An unresolved question for the Chicago School, however, was how political science as a discipline could regularly translate these scientific results into a form useable by political actors (Gunnell 2006, 479).

Charles Merriam, who served as chairman of the University of Chicago Political Science Department from 1923 to 1940, believed that the science-practice divide could be reconciled by structuring universities to interface directly with the public sector. When Merriam spoke of building a "school," his intentions were not merely to postulate an abstract system of thought or to assemble an invisible college of colleagues. Rather, Merriam was thinking of bricks and mortar, along with a concomitant administrative reorganization of the social sciences and professional schools to advance a science of politics. To this end, Merriam spent seven years of his chairmanship (1925–1931) pushing for the creation of an official "School of Politics" or an "Institute of Government" at Chicago, which might have looked something like a modern day school of public policy. Merriam's proposal was never adopted, at least not to the full extent that he had envisioned it.

The methodological innovations of the Chicago School spread widely throughout political science and became the backbone of the behavioral revolution that would sweep the discipline in the 1950s and 1960s (Dryzek 2006, 489–90). Merriam's model of political science research as the linchpin of the relationship between political scientists and government officials, however, failed to diffuse as broadly or as successfully. I argue that the failure to establish a School of Politics helps to explain the limited long-term success of Merriam's ambition to create a political science for practical use. The deficit of this disconnect is still felt today. This article tells the story of the Chicago School that never was by exploring Merriam's motivations for proposing it, the unfolding of the proposal, and the implications of its aborted life.

Political Science for Practical Use

Shortly after Merriam commenced graduate studies at Columbia in 1896, the university's president, Seth Low, ran for mayor of New York City (Karl 1974, 26). Like many of his fellow students, Merriam joined the campaign on Low's behalf, which would ultimately inspire his future career path. Low exemplified the ability of a scholar to move seamlessly between the academic and political realms and helped stimulate Merriam's belief that participation in politics is a prerequisite to being a scholar of politics. The Columbia faculty Merriam studied under—especially John W. Burgess—reinforced his belief that a science of politics could serve practical and democratic goals (cf. Burgess 1898; 1908). This perspective was typical of nineteenth-century political science (Ross 1991). In keeping with this view, it was not long after Merriam graduated and joined the faculty at Chicago in 1900 that he immersed himself in city politics.

Merriam regularly participated in the events of the City Club of Chicago—founded in 1903 as nonpartisan forum for public issues—which afforded him entrée into city politics and introduced him to many of those (within and beyond Chicago) who would figure centrally in his career (Karl 1974, 52–3). He was a frequent speaker at the club, addressing topics such as the "Municipal Revenue System of Chicago" (on January 6, 1906) and the "City Charter" (on June 14, 1907; City Club of Chicago, 1903–1909). In 1906, he was commissioned by the club to report on the city's revenue situation (Merriam 1906). This report, along with his short book on *Primary Elections* (1908), earned Merriam the esteem of progressive reformers in the city. These affiliations facilitated his appointment to the drafting committee of the Chicago Charter Convention (Merriam 1907) and then his election (and reelection) to the city council as alderman from 1909 to 1917. In 1911, he secured the Republican nomination for mayor, but was narrowly defeated in the general election by Carter Harrison (Karl 1974, 61–83). His narrow defeat (in a year that trended Democrat), gained Merriam national attention and helped to earn him a position as a power broker within Illinois politics. Howard Taft, Theodore Roosevelt, Woodrow Wilson, and Robert M. LaFollette regularly courted his support throughout the 1910s.

The spirit of the Progressive Era that surrounded Merriam called for new ways to use science to solve social problems. Non-university-based research institutes

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began to emerge with the objective of bringing scientific wisdom to bear on public policy debates. The Russell Sage Foundation, for example, was founded in 1907 with the objective of improving the "social and living conditions in the United States of America" (Hammack and Wheeler 1994, ix). Under the leadership of scholars such as Mary Van Kleeck, Russell Sage quickly established a thriving program of social science research investigating child hygiene, recreation, and industrial relations (Hammack and Wheeler 1994). Along similar lines, the Institute for Government Research (which later became the Brookings Institution) was founded in 1916 as a center for nonpartisan expertise on issues such as government budgeting and public personnel management (Critchlow 1985). With most of these institutes concentrated in the East, there was a great unmet need for social scientific expertise to address the problems of the burgeoning Middle West.

After 10 years of active involvement in Chicago politics and government, Merriam began to advocate a more systematic role for political science—and social science more generally—in the practice of local government. He credited the progress of "social politics" in the United States—including minimum wage laws, public health standards, and workplace safety laws—to "the advance of science, whether in the form of public sanitation or of social science" (Merriam 1913, 685). In the area of crime prevention, for example, he foresaw great value in having academics guide the conduct of governmental statistical research. In reporting on the investigation by the Chicago Council Committee on Crime (of which he was a member), he noted: "There had never been in Chicago any attempt at a stock taking, in which the statistics furnished by the various departments and agencies dealing with the problem of crime, were brought together and examined with a view of determining how far the crime problem was being adequately met" (Merriam 1915, 346).

Merriam believed that academic involvement could correct these deficits. A statistical study undertaken by the commission allowed for the identification of broad patterns in the Chicago criminal justice system, such as the facts that the majority of all offenders were under 13 years of age, the majority of those arrested and tried were petty offenders, and that 80% of all imprisonment was due to nonpayment of fines (ibid., 347). This analysis helped contribute to the commission's conclusion that "the present policy organization and methods are inadequate to deal with the crime situation in Chicago" (ibid., 351) and to recommend a sweeping set of reforms to the police force. For Merriam, this work underscored how academics could bring science to bear on solving public problems through consultation.

With the loss of his aldermanic seat in 1917 and his inability to resecure the Republican nomination for mayor in 1915 or 1919, Merriam redirected his attention toward the University of Chicago, political science, and social science more broadly. Among other endeavors, Merriam sought to make the application of scientific knowledge in government more than just a personal crusade but, also, a vital role for the academy (Merriam 1921; 1925a; 1926b). Merriam became a leader in a growing movement that aspired to institutionalize this progressive agenda within the academy and government. Within a decade, this agenda began to materialize in the funding programs of the Rockefeller Foundation and the Spelman Fund, the creation of the Social Science Research Council, and the convocation of the National Conferences on the Science of Politics (Fisher 1993). The open question for Merriam was, exactly how would these ideas be given material life at the University of Chicago?

The Campaign for a School of Politics

"Science and politics seem to be extreme opposites," Merriam complained, such that "in order to overcome this obsession so disastrous to present social organization, it is necessary to take the most drastic and impressive measures that are available" (Merriam c1924, 5). He believed that a solution to this problem was to establish a school which "would have a dramatic quality in that it would emphasize the scientific aspects of politics, and express with the utmost clearness the idea of the relationship between science and government" (ibid., 4).

Merriam first articulated his vision for the School of Politics in a 1924 memorandum which specified a threefold mission. First and foremost, it would lead the way in undertaking "fundamental research in the field of political relations" (ibid., 1). This research would be interdisciplinary in nature and would take advantage of "fundamental changes in methods of studying politics through the fusion of the new scientific methods and results with the older forms of political inquiry" (ibid., 3). It would be directed at the most pressing problems of government, such as those dealing with elections, taxation, policing, the causes of war, and modes of international organization. Rather that forming a school exclusively to tackle city administration or international diplomacy, Merriam was keen on emphasizing that its work must transcend the concerns of any single level of government since "the fundamental problems of government are not primarily geographical in character, but are problems of human nature underlying various forms of political organization" (ibid., 6).

Second, the school would not investigate public problems merely in the abstract, but in consultation with leading actors in government and civil society. A role of the school would be to transform the sporadic consultation that already existed into more regularized, institutionalized relationships. "An effectively staffed school of politics," Merriam believed, "would command the respect of governing officials, and in time would become a center of conferences and consultation between officials and research men" (ibid., 2–3). Strengthening the bonds between academics and public servants was necessary to ensure that scientific analyses would be trusted in government and employed in cases where they could provide the most benefit.

Third, the school would directly educate high school teachers, political scientists, and public administrators to replace the existing "hap-hazard system of training" with the proper knowledge of the purposes and methods of science in government (ibid., 3). These newly trained individuals would promote scientific government directly through their involvement in the polity and indirectly by helping to enhance the system of civic education in the United States, one of Merriam's long-standing passions (Merriam 1931b; 1934a). These efforts would ensure that the school gave birth to a new generation of scientifically- and civically-minded citizens.

Merriam had grand plans. In his first detailed proposal (1925b), circulated in January 1925, Merriam advocated a major reorganization of the university to accommodate the school. He envisioned bringing the Department of Political Science and allied social science departments, along with the School of Commerce and Administration and the Law School, under the administrative umbrella of the school. Non-degree-granting institutions affiliated with the university, like the Harris Foundation and the Local Community Research Committee, were included too. The school would sponsor public lectures, a *Journal of Government*, a library, and outreach to interested individuals and

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institutions through associate memberships. It would host a council of 30-plus civic agencies in Chicago and Illinois, such as the Bureau of Public Efficiency, the City Club of Chicago, and the Illinois League of Women Voters.

Merriam was optimistic about the prospects for his scheme and had reason to believe that he would obtain the needed institutional support from the university. In a letter to Leonard White, his lieutenant in the Department of Political Science, Merriam reported that:

> You will be interested to know that I have talked with President [Max] Mason the other day and that he is in favor of going ahead at once with the drive for the school of politics. He thinks there is nothing to be lost and much to be gained by taking steps in the very near future. (Merriam 1926a)

White responded quickly in an ebullient manner uncharacteristic of his typical correspondence:

> I do not intend to continue to bombard you with letters at the rate at which you have been receiving them recently, but I cannot refrain from expressing my enthusiasm at the results of your interview with President Mason.
>
> I cannot help but feel that the next months are going to be productive of a great event; all of the stars seem to be moving in their course in that direction. It certainly will be a tremendous achievement if the various threads which you have been so carefully weaving during the last few years can be brought together and established on a permanent foundation. Needless to say, I shall be anxious to know how the chief [i.e., Merriam] moves in the game, and shall proceed westward with high hopes for the future. (White 1926)

Much to Merriam's chagrin, the requisite support was never forthcoming from President Mason, who resigned to accept the presidency of the Rockefeller Foundation in June 1928. The arrival of a new president in 1929, Robert Maynard Hutchins, would create a new set of obstacles for Merriam's proposal. Hutchins' educational humanism and focus on general education clashed with Merriam's scientism and practical aspirations. Nonetheless, Merriam promoted the school in his *Annual Report*, though it failed to garner much attention again for two years.

Merriam made his case for the School of Politics with renewed vigor in 1931 (*Annual Report* 1931). He boasted that the school would exude "the symbolic value of a dignified and impressive organization . . . on the basis of actual accomplishment in political research" (ibid., 10). Siting the school in Chicago would capitalize on the city's central location within the United States and its complex urban problems. Merriam saw the need for the School of Politics as all the more urgent due to the widespread social discontent of the Great Depression, especially the "wide lack of confidence in the integrity of public officials" and the "wide lack of professional competence" (Merriam 1931a, 1). To make the proposal more palatable, Merriam withdrew the reorganizational component of his idea and specified a minimum initial operating budget of only $122,000 (down from an earlier amount of $4 million).

President Hutchins agreed to meet Merriam in September 1931 to discuss the School of Politics (Servi 1931). The formal outcome of the meeting was to refer the proposal to the Committee on Equipment and Instruction, where it died shortly thereafter. Merriam subsequently dropped the proposal from his *Annual Report* and never publicly advocated for it again.

Exactly what transpired in the meeting between Merriam and Hutchins, and in the committee's deliberations, remains a mystery. Yet Hutchins made his objections to Merriam's proposal quite plain a few years later in *The Higher Learning in America* (Hutchins 1936). Writing shortly after the publication of Merriam's *Political Power* (1934b), Hutchins bemoaned:

> Power becomes the great word in political science; and the prediction of what the courts will do takes the place of justice as the object of the lawyer and the legal scholar. The scientific spirit leads us to accumulate vast masses of data about crime, poverty, and unemployment, political corruption, taxation, and the League of Nations in our quest for what is known as social control. A substantial part of what we call the social sciences is large chunks of data, undigested, unrelated, and meaningless. (Hutchins 1936, 101)

This passage summarizes Hutchins' critique of Merriam's science of politics, which he thought distracted the university from its fundamental intellectual ends (Ashmore 1989, 155–6).

Hutchins argued that the goal of universities ought to be general education toward the cultivation of good intellectual habits, not vocational training for particular professions (Hutchins 1936). He believed that universities ought to provide professional education only in fields with their own intellectual content, such medicine and law. In Hutchins' view, public administration did not have its own intellectual content and, therefore, training in this field ought to be conducted outside of the university (Hutchins 1936, 56). The School of Politics thus fell victim to the clash between two great educational reformers—Merriam and Hutchins—in their battle to remake the University of Chicago, and higher education more generally.

The failure to marry graduate education with policy analysis was not unique to the University of Chicago. The founding in 1924 of the Robert S. Brookings Graduate School in Washington, D.C. was similar to Merriam's effort at Chicago in that both programs sought to create synergy between training public administrators and improving public administration. The major difference was that Brookings brought graduate education to an existing research center, whereas Merriam sought to build a new research center around an existing graduate program. The experiment at Brookings was short-lived, however. Robert Brookings was concerned that the school had become too focused on the granting of Ph.D.s to the neglect of providing nonpartisan policy advice to government. At Brookings' behest, the graduate school ceased to exist in 1927. Its programs were largely eliminated, with only a few advanced graduate students continuing to study at the newly created Brookings Institution (Critchlow 1985, 80). The imperatives of policy-relevant research and graduate education thus proved to be exceptionally difficult to balance. At a leading policy institute, graduate education was viewed a distraction from providing advice; within a leading university, policy training was viewed as counter to the proper ends of education.

Beyond the School of Politics

Although the School of Politics failed to materialize, Merriam and his colleagues continued to work within the Department of Political Science toward the goal of a political science for practical use. Above their responsibilities for teaching and research, for example, most of the department's faculty formally served in consultative and advisory capacities to government agencies and civic associations. As the department frequently emphasized: "One of the functions of the Political Science Department is to act in a consulting capacity for responsible governing officials, unofficial citizens, and civic agencies. This is an obligation sometimes interfering with research and sometimes aiding it, but in

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Table 1
Membership by Chicago Political Science Faculty on Federal Boards, 1930–1939

Faculty Member	Board, Committee, or Commission
Louis Brownlow	National Resources Committee President Roosevelt's Committee on Administrative Management
Charles Merriam	National Planning Board National Resources Committee National Resources Planning Board President Hoover's Commission on Recent Social Trends President Roosevelt's Committee on Administrative Management
Marshall Dimock	Department of Labor Commission on Immigration Proceedings
Floyd Reeves	Advisory Committee of the WPA Education Program American Youth Commission President Roosevelt's Advisory Commission on Education White House Conference on Children in a Democracy
Harold Gosnell	Central Statistical Board Works Progress Administration
August Vollmer	National Crime Commission National Law Observance and Enforcement Committee National Safety Council
Leonard White	Committee on Civil Service Improvement Committee on Professional and Scientific Personnel Joint Congressional Committee on the Investigation of the TVA United States Civil Service Commission
Quincy Wright	Foreign Bondholders Protective Council

Source: Annual Report 1930–1939.

Note: Excludes memberships with private foundations, civic associations, and state and local governments. Excludes consultancies or reports that do not involve membership.

any event one from which we cannot escape and which we do not desire to avoid" (*Annual Report* 1930, 10). During the 1930s alone, eight of the department's faculty members served on 20 distinct commissions, boards, or committees of the federal government, as reported in Table 1. White, for example, was a member of the United States Civil Service Commission and Merriam was a member of the Natural Resources Planning Board. This count does not include the many positions of responsibility departmental members held in national associations (such as the National Municipal League) or requests for studies to be conducted on behalf of federal agencies (such as the Office of Indian Affairs). To put these numbers in perspective, in 2006 the American Political Science Association was aware of only four political science faculty members who were currently serving on national commissions, boards, or committees (Brintnall 2006). Thus, there were as many (or more) Chicago faculty members serving in this capacity during each year of the 1930s as there are representing the *entire* political science profession today.[1]

The department proactively fostered opportunities for consultation by encouraging national associations to locate their offices on the University of Chicago's campus. In 1929, Merriam was able to entice the International City Managers' Association and the Bureau of Public Personnel Administration to set up shop on campus. A steady flow of new organizations arrived each year. Merriam, with the collaboration of his close confidants, Beardsley Ruml and Louis Brownlow, was able to secure of gift of $1,160,000 from the Spelman Fund of New York to construct a home for these organizations at 1313 East 60th Street (*Annual Report* 1938, 8; Bulmer 1980). Securing this grant was a notable achievement during a period of fiscal austerity, especially considering that it was the only new building constructed on the Chicago campus between 1932 and 1948 (University of Chicago Library 2006). At the time of its opening in 1938, the "1313 building" (or the "Public Administration Building") housed 17 national and international organizations, which are listed in Table 2.

The relationship between the inhabitants of 1313 and the Department of Political Science was bidirectional and productive. In 1938 alone, seven executives from the Public Administrative

Table 2
Occupants of the 1313 Building in 1938

Organization	Executive Director
Public Administration Clearing House	Louis Brownlow
American Legislators Association	Frank Bane
American Municipal Association	Clifford W. Ham
American Public Welfare Association	Fred K. Hoebler
American Public Works Association	Frank K. Herring
American Society of Planning Officials	Walter H. Blucher
Civil Service Assembly	G. Lyle Belsley
Council of State Governments	Henry W. Toll/Frank Bane[a]
Federation of Tax Administrators	Albert Lepawsky
Governmental Research Association	Robert M. Paige
International Association of Chiefs of Police	William P. Rutledge
International City Managers' Association	Clarence E. Ridley
Municipal Finance Officers' Association	Carl H. Chatters
National Association of Assessing Officers	Albert W. Noonan
National Association of Housing Officials	Coleman Woodbury
National Association of State Auditors, Comptrollers, and Treasurers	Carl H. Chatters
Public Administration Service	Donald C. Stone

Source: Annual Report 1938, 8.

[a]Bane assumed the position upon Toll's retirement that year.

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Building enjoyed the status of lecturers in the department, including Louis Browlow, Albert Lepawsky, Henry Toll, Lyle Belsley, Cark Chatters, Clifford Ham, and Herbert Emmerich (Browlow's deputy and eventual successor at the Public Administration Clearing House), enabling them to teach courses like "Techniques in Municipal Administration" and "Studies in Municipal Measurement" (*Annual Report* 1938, 9). During World War II, the close relationship between the department and 1313 served as a platform for faculty to assist is war planning, at least for the few faculty members who did not take leave to work directly for the federal government.

The establishment of the Public Administration Building did create an institutional presence for numerous associations that extended beyond Merriam's retirement in 1940. By 1963, 22 associations called 1313 their home (Thomas 2004). Yet with no formal institutional connection between the department and the associations—as well as the new agendas of post-World-War-II faculty (such as Leo Strauss, Hans Morgenthau, and David Easton)—collaboration and consultation began to fade. An era of "issue networks" in the 1970s lured many of these associations to Washington, D.C. (Heclo 1978). By the time the 1313 building was renamed the Charles E. Merriam Center for Public Administration in 1979, its occupants' missions had drifted considerably from Merriam's founding vision. Today the building's principal occupant is the Chapin Hall Center for Children, for which it is chiefly known.

What was Lost with the School of Politics?

The story of the Chicago School that never was deepens our understanding of the historical tension in political science between a discipline based on a model of natural science and a discipline that aspires for public relevance. Charles Merriam worked to resolve this tension, in part, by establishing institutions that would formalize the interaction between academics and public officials. While his efforts did succeed to some extent, especially as manifested through the erection of the Public Administration Building in 1938, his most ambitious proposal to establish a formal School of Politics was never realized. Without a permanent institutional connection to the research and teaching of the university, the relationships between 1313 and the academic community at Chicago gradually dissolved after Merriam's retirement. While such consultation is not nonexistent today, neither is it widely fostered by departments, universities, nor the discipline. This element of Merriam's vision for a science of politics appears largely to have been lost.

Individual political scientists no doubt could do more to infuse their work with practical relevance. However, the fundamental lesson taught by the Chicago School that never was is that *universities* possess tremendous power to foster work that matters to the public sector. For a time, the University of Chicago Department of Political Science was a vital resource for federal, state, and city agencies. Enabled by a supportive department chair and university environment, faculty members and graduate students in the department found substantial common ground between their research agendas and the contemporary problems of government.

Merriam's call for a political science for practical use was by no means unique in the history of the discipline. It was present in the aspirations of nineteenth-century political scientists, the initiators of the behavioral revolution, and the post-behavioral response (Easton 1969). Today, many within the discipline are sounding renewed calls for relevance, with the most visible responses including the founding of a new journal, *Perspectives on Politics*, and the report of the APSA's Task Force on Inequality and American Democracy (2004). These steps appear to be in the right direction. Yet a more complete embrace of the call for practical relevance would demand reconfiguring institutions to recognize and reward more fully those scholars that strengthen the bridge between political science and the practice of government.

Notes

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1. I leave open the possibility that there may be additional political science faculty members serving in a consultative capacity at the national level whom did not inform the American Political Science Association of their appointments. In any case, I think that the general point that consultation is no longer as widely practiced still holds.

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