Although the role of the college administrator as public servant is an undergirding motivational concept that is reportedly embraced by a number of higher-echelon college and university administrators, Daniel James Palmer points out in his article “College Administrators as Public Servants” that it is a complex and sometimes elusive concept. While we do have instruments that are well designed to assess individual commitments toward servant leadership, and while several of those instruments are particularly designed to assess factors that are closely related to public administration, we need to recognize at least two survey design limitations that can substantially affect the outcomes of research in this area.

First, while it is always tempting to create larger study populations by combining administrative roles, especially at the higher-echelon level, it is clear that there is a likely difference of perspective among administrators who have not yet achieved the college or university presidency when compared with those of presidents themselves. Logic tells us that the college president has achieved his or her aspirational goal. It may well be, of course, that a sitting president aspires...
to a different presidency (one perhaps at a larger institution of greater status), but the fact is that a sitting president has achieved the highest administrative position in the American higher education system. Deans and vice presidents, both of whom would also be considered higher-echelon administrators, have not yet achieved that highest professional status, and—although many do not or will not aspire ultimately to a college or university presidency—their perspectives may be substantially different.

A second consideration when conducting research of this sort is the complexity created by the advanced educational level of the study participants. Given the very real fact that this population is highly educated and highly intelligent, we might expect that some individuals will respond in ways that they think are politically or professionally “correct.” Thus, studies that seek to understand internal motivational values should include data and assessments beyond questionnaires.

While there is no reason to believe that either of these considerations detrimentally affected Palmer’s study, they certainly are considerations that should be kept in mind as we consider what is a very worthwhile question: to what degree are college and university administrators driven by or influenced by the concept of public service as an undergirding professional motivator?

Palmer points to a significant number of important studies on the college and university presidency. Several of those studies are particularly relevant for understanding the way college and university presidents view their public service responsibilities. Less available are similar studies conducted at the dean or vice president level. For individuals at these levels, it might well be hypothesized that there are other especially significant competing values that undergird one’s administrative service. For example, among deans and vice presidents—those who have not yet achieved the highest available professional role in American higher education—there is the question of whether an individual can be categorized as career bound or place bound. That is to say, is an administrator likely to remain at a single institution or within a single very close geographic area for the duration of his or her career, or is that person likely to move between institutions or throughout broader regions in order to succeed in advancing to higher administrative roles? Perhaps we would find a difference between career-bound and place-bound administrators in their orientation toward public service.

While the concept of the administrator as public servant is important, we find it less frequently discussed on campuses among the administrators below the level of president. In fact, among deans and academic vice presidents, we find an equally compelling undergirding motivation: that of fidelity to academic discipline. Thus, another question to be raised is the degree to which administrators who come from the academic areas of the college or university are influenced by and the degree to which their motivation is determined by a commitment to the intellectual life rather than a commitment to public service.

Palmer has done a fine job of initiating an important conversation in a forum outside of that which usually talks about the nature and behavior of college and university administrators. Given the fact that there are well over 20,000 such professionals in the United States today, and given the fact that public colleges and universities play an important role in the life of cities, counties, and states, the consideration of administrator characteristics from a public administration perspective is one that deserves continuing examination.