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The value of alumni networks in responding to the public administration theory and practice: Evidence from the COVID-19 pandemic in China

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ABSTRACT

There has been a good deal of research on the role of nongovernmental organizations in addressing public concerns and issues. However, alumni networks, mainly regarded as a platform for in-group benefits between alumni and their alma maters, have attracted little attention in terms of their potential utility to the broader public. But the unexpected vital role of alumni networks in addressing the recent novel coronavirus (COVID-19) in China provides some insights into the value of alumni networks in both the practice and theory of public administration. Along with the successful practice in China, this essay attempts to understand how alumni networks can be used to assist in shared struggles in general, helping to solve major public challenges in practice in contexts beyond China, and to extend the understanding of alumni networks as potential areas of study through existing theoretical frameworks in public administration (e.g., collaborative governance and nonprofit organizations). The essay also provides directions for a future research agenda on the value of alumni networks for public administration.

KEYWORDS

Alumni networks;
collaborative governance;
COVID-19 in China

Alumni networks have commonly been considered as mainly serving the in-group benefits of alumni and their alma maters. Mostly demonstrated in the management and sociology literatures, research on alumni networks in American higher educational institutions has historically focused on the reciprocity between graduates and their alma maters. Many institutions invest vast amounts of resources to build sustainable connections with their alumni after graduation (Rowland, 1977), especially in light of the decline in state and federal support for higher education (Miller, 1993; Rudolph, 1990). In turn, alumni gifting remains a major source of revenue for many universities.

However, this in-group reciprocity does not preclude the public function of alumni networks. On the contrary, apart from the traditional structures led by formal administrative agencies, the informal network as construed as alumni identification paves a new way for network governance to realize the creation and transmission of public value. This can be exemplified by the outstanding performance of alumni networks of Chinese universities in assisting the government to address the novel coronavirus (COVID-19).

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Alumni networks of Chinese universities incorporated social responsibility into alumni identification, which rendered them institutions to create public value. Withholding the management tools of government agencies, these alumni networks facilitated the creation of public values in terms of diverse technical support to government operations through social capital. And with better command of mass media and higher prestige as result of their flexibility and broadness in controlling social capital as compared to government agencies, alumni networks not only magnified the creation of but also expanded the transmission of public values.

The practical evidence also suggests the possible theoretical contribution of alumni networks to the field of public administration. First and foremost, the case of alumni networks of Chinese universities suggests the harmonious interaction between public value theory and network theory by linking social capital management with public value governance. Compared with network governance dominated by formal administrative agencies, informal network structures such as those in alumni networks have greater flexibility to promote public values. They are more capable of accumulating the social capital necessary for public value creation and the commitment needed to the promote the greater good of the public as compared to their government-led counterparts. Moreover, the practice of alumni networks in China makes it possible to conceptualize the application of public-value-embedded informal network structures to the various topics in the field, including collaborative governance and nonprofit management.

To illustrate this, the article is divided into five parts. First, classical network theory and its relation with public value is presented. Second, the primary focus of alumni network literature in providing in-group benefits is discussed. Third, the practice of alumni networks in addressing and responding to COVID-19 in China is provided to illustrate the role of alumni networks as a distinctive informal network in generating and promoting public value to serve the general public. In the fourth section, the possible theoretical contributions of alumni networks to topics in public administration are presented. Finally, several suggestions on a future research agenda for alumni networks in public administration are proposed. To be sure, there may be cultural factors that influence and underlie the cohesiveness, indeed symbiosis of alumni networks in China, but this essay can shed light on how alumni networks throughout the world can work together to serve the needs and interests of their societies, especially with their characteristics which are distinct from those of from traditional governance regimes.

Network theory and public value

Network theory has been addressed widely in the field of public administration (see e.g., Agranoff, 2007; Agranoff & McGuire, 2001; Zia et al., 2011). Robert Agranoff was a pioneer of intersectoral collaboration in networks, which helped pave the way for research and theory development on collaborative governance. Isett, Sparer, Glied, and Brown (2011) point out that different types of networks have emerged in the field including policy networks, where public and legislative agencies, along with private sector organizations, work together to advance the public interest within a particular policy domain. Collaborative networks are comprised of public sector agencies, nonprofits, and private, for-profit organizations that work to provide a public service or good that

would otherwise not be provided. A third type as Isett and colleagues (2011) discuss are governance networks, where public, private and nonprofit organizations work interdependently toward achieving a core, common objective.

There has indeed been a plethora of research on networks in public administration. But Wachhaus (2009) has argued that notwithstanding the form or type, there is no coherent theory of networks, and he finds they have been conceptualized in quite diverse ways. He argued there is “no commonly used definition of networks,” raising questions as to whether there are common elements that comprise networks (Wachhaus, 2009, p. 61). He identified several attributes of networks that have been advanced in public administration, including for example, “complex,” “exchange,” “nonhierarchical,” “collaboration” and “trust.” Interestingly, he found one attribute ascribed to “values” that is rarely identified in research on networks: “social capital.” In the context of effective networks, social capital attributes include a shared sense of identity, shared norms and values, and reciprocity.

Based on these characteristics, networks that create and build on social capital undergird good government, economic progress and help promote public values. Indeed, Robert Putnam (1994, 2000) conceptualized social capital as building value, trust and solidarity within civic communities. Citizens are engaged in and committed to addressing and promoting public issues that are valued by the community. He further found that social capital itself enhances the effectiveness of government action. He states that “From agricultural extension services in the last century to tax exemptions for community organizations in this one, American government has often promoted investments in social capital, and it must renew that effort now. A new administration that is, at long last, more willing to use public power and the public purse for public purpose should not overlook the importance of social connectedness as a vital backdrop for effective policy” (Putnam, 1994, p. 18).

Today, we often think of social capital as the effective functioning of social groups through interpersonal relationships, a shared sense of identity, a shared understanding, shared norms, shared values, trust, cooperation, and reciprocity. Lin (1999) conceptualizes social capital as assets in networks. She states that “social capital is captured from embedded resources in social networks” (Lin, 1999, p. 28). In effect, it is an investment in social relations with expected returns; while reciprocity is a return, so too is public value.

Public value generally refers to the value that an organization or network contributes to the common good of society (e.g., Bryson, Crosby, & Bloomberg, 2014; Moore, 1995, 2013; O’Flynn, 2007; Stoker, 2006). Public values have also been broadly defined where the research is virtually boundaryless (Jørgensen & Bozeman, 2007). Casey (2015, p. 108) points out that “public values range from a broad definition focused on the normative consensus that emerges in a particular governance context about the rights, benefits, and prerogatives to which citizens are entitled; the obligations of citizens to each other, the society, and the state; and the principles on which government policies may be based.” In addition, today, as Ayres (2019, p. 279) points out, “the concept of public value is no longer limited to the public sector or the lone manager. Instead, it is used by all types of leaders, organizations and networks, including non-governmental organizations and private sector firms” (also see Crosby, Hart, & Torfing, 2017).

Network arrangements involving nongovernmental organizations have a greater ability to create public value, because they are not hamstrung by governments' use of direct or coercive policy tools to guide the governance networks (Casey, 2015). And networks are organized horizontally, not hierarchically, as Wachhaus (2009) has argued. Moreover, when government organizations are part of the network equation, they "authorize," as Casey (2015, p. 107) points out, public values. She points out that public agencies govern the "the decision of what ought to be provided by the public sector, what is publicly valuable, and how value is realized in the public interest" (Casey, 2015, p. 107). Our use of networks builds on Wachhaus' (2009) identification of the value of social capital. But instead of a formalized creation of public value by the government, we see it as an organic process that emerges from a particular need that serves and fulfills the public interest. Traditional theories, such as collaborative governance and network theory, fall short because they do not often include in-group socialization. They miss the emotional, personal connection. Traditional networks tend to be technocratic, but what are the implications when we ignore the human side of networks? We see that directly in the failure of traditional networks to address the problem of COVID-19 in China; so, alumni networks stepped in.

Alumni networks as a platform for in-group benefits

The current literature views alumni networks in three areas: alumni identification, alumni giving for university development, and career development of individual alumni.

Alumni networks and alumni identification

A widely examined area related to alumni networks is alumni identification. On the basis of the organizational identity model, scholars have examined alumni identification from two theoretical perspectives, one being the perception of belongingness to an organization (e.g., Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and the other as the behavioral expectation according to the perceived role in a group setting (e.g., Stryker, 1980/2002). Defining organizational identification in terms of membership, the focus on perceptual organizational identification relates alumni identification to the sentimentality of social identity (see, e.g., Tajfel & Turner, 1981/1985). From this standpoint, alumni identification is associated with self-image and self-esteem (Burke & Franzoi, 1988; Gould, 1975).¹

Under the second theoretical model, symbolic interactionism emphasizes the significance of role identity in alumni identification. Here, the behaviors expected for a particular role in a classification (e.g., such as graduate) determine organizational identity (Stryker, 1980/2002). More specifically, role salience, self-definition, and social expectation generate role identity, and in turn organizational identification (Callero, 1985). Thus, alumni identification is more likely to be achieved when individuals are portrayed as highly valued, revered graduates who are expected to contribute to their alma maters (Stryker & Serpe, 1994).

Alumni networks and university development

Aside from the research on alumni identification, another extensively studied area includes the effect of alumni networks on university development. One set of studies examined alumni giving behavior. Some studies explored the factors directly affecting alumni's giving behaviors with some overlap with the alumni identification literature, including individual factors such as income and level of satisfaction as a student (see, e.g., Gaier, 2005; Skari, 2011; Weerts & Ronca, 2008) and institutional factors such as prestige of the university (see Baade & Sundberg, 1996; Holmes, 2009; Liu, 2006). Another set of studies attempted to explain the donor motivation from the social identity perspective. This research discusses the importance of alumni identification in increasing the willingness of donating (Levine, 2008; T. Porter, Hartman, & Johnson, 2011) and strategies to enhance alumni identity in order to stimulate donor motivation such as annual bequests (Harrison, Mitchell, & Peterson, 1995) and branding (Stephenson & Bell, 2014).

Alumni networks and alumni career development

Some studies have examined the interaction between alumni networks and individual career development. For instance, Nann and colleagues (2010) found that alumni networks benefit students in career startups at both the organization and individual levels. Nearly all startup founders who are university graduates are to some extent still affiliated with their alma maters after successful startups (Porter, Whittington, & Powell, 2005). Moreover, Rubens et al. (2011) found that structural and relational characteristics vary across different universities, which results in different career choices among their alumni. Some research also found an interaction between program design and alumni's job satisfaction and found significant differences in career satisfaction across coursework quality, program quality and major (Herman & Renz, 2007).

As currently conceptualized, the research on the value of alumni networks is restricted to alumni themselves, their alma maters, and students who might benefit from alumni donations. However, even though the link between public interest and alumni networks has not been examined, this does not suggest that the in-group benefits of alumni networks cannot extend to the public sphere. Alumni associations of Chinese universities during the coronavirus epidemic, now a pandemic, provide a useful case to exemplify the value of alumni networks to the public interest and more broadly to the field of public administration.

The value of alumni networks in promoting public values: Responding to the COVID-19 pandemic in China

The novel coronavirus has plagued China since late December 2019, and eventually became a global public health pandemic. Despite the rampant spread throughout the European and American continents, the situation in China as the first country with reported cases has been substantially attenuated. With little doubt, this could not have been achieved without the tremendous endeavor and sacrifice of the frontline medical staff. However, the extraordinary efforts made by alumni networks of Chinese

universities in both coordinating and collecting life-saving resources cannot be overlooked. Although it is too early to evaluate their effect on the pandemic, alumni networks, especially those of higher education institutions, have proven to be a great complement to the public sector in generating and promoting public values during the crisis.

Alumni identity and public value creation

For one thing, alumni networks can generate public values through their distinctive approaches. First, public values can be internalized during the in-group socialization process of alumni identification in conjunction with empathy across alumni networks. From an affective standpoint, the organizational identification and role identity of alumni drive those graduates to contribute to their community by helping their peers strongly or weakly tied in the general population, which further motivates them to serve the public. Located precisely at the center of the epidemic, Wuhan University and Huazhong University of Science and Technology (HUST) were significantly affected by the virus, with myriad students and faculty locked in their residences and threatened by a shortage in food and water supplies. Alumni could not overlook their alma maters facing this plight, which motivated them to provide necessary supplies not only to students and faculty, but also to all the residents of Wuhan, who were also on lockdown (HUST, 2020; WHU, 2020a).

Prestige as one of the important aspects of social capital facilitates the creation of public values throughout alumni networks. The more prestigious an alumni network, the higher social recognition it has, and the greater motivation it possesses to serve the general public. Alumni from the leading national educational institutions have a strong sense of honor, and in turn are extremely responsive to the needs of their alma maters. From its inception, the spirit of Peking University is closely linked to the nation's fate. The idea of serving and sacrificing for the country and society is ingrained in the identity of PKU alumni. The close linkage between the school and the country instinctively ensured that PKU alumni would actively engage in supporting frontline workers during the epidemic. This resulted in the provision of over 35,000 medical masks for 24 mobile cabin hospitals and 501 local communities in Wuhan (PKU, 2020a).

Profession is an essential element of alumni networks and can be key to the creation of public values. Alumni with public-interested professions are more likely to assume the duty of serving the public in their identities during the alumni identification process. Medical school alumni networks were especially vital in battling the coronavirus pandemic in that they not only provided professional medical assistance but they also served the public because of their professional values. As one of the first persons to recognize the coronavirus, Dr. Li Wenliang, with his professional acumen and courage and motivated by his professional ethics as a doctor, reported the suspected outbreak to his colleagues in a closed alumni chatgroup on the WeChat social media site. The local government chastised him for blowing the whistle on the severity of the virus. After the outbreak, he continued to work at the frontline, threatened by the infection; ultimately, he gave his life in the effort to battle the pandemic (Green, 2020). It is the professional value embedded in the identity of medical school alumni that encouraged frontline

medical staff like Dr. Li to remain committed to their posts at the frontline, which helped to attenuate the pandemic.

Alumni networks promoting public values

Technologically speaking, apart from its merits in creating public values, alumni networks provided several avenues for collecting social resources, which eventually contributed to the creation of public values. First, compared with their formal administrative counterparts, there are very few institutional barriers or interest conflicts in alumni networks for the collective creation of public values. In Wuhan, believed to be ground-zero of the coronavirus, where the frontline hospitals were always short of medical supplies despite government and military support, the Peking University (PKU) Alumni Foundation of Canada established a direct connection with Wuhan Union Hospital, in conjunction with local assistance from the Hubei Alumni Association of PKU. Their efforts led to the development of a tripartite platform to receive medical equipment from overseas alumni donors (PKU, 2020b).

In addition, having a more flexible and diverse command of social capital as compared to government agencies, alumni networks provide broader approaches to materialize public values. Alumni networks provided a wider supply chain for technical assistance as well as for the collection of life-saving resources during the crisis. Through the collaboration between and among the domestic branches of Wuhan University's (WHU) alumni associations in Shenzhen and Wuxi, oversea branches in Australia, New Zealand, and the pacific entrepreneur alumni association, WHU's alumni network helped procure 20,700 sets of medical protective clothing and 2500 sets of operation gowns (i.e., Personal Protective Equipment or PPE) from Russia, the USA, and Italy. These coordinated efforts helped significantly in preventing the spread of the virus among medical staff at the frontlines (WHU, 2020b).

Moreover, highly prestigious alumni networks have distinct access to the populations that dominate the necessary resources for promoting public values. The informal relations based on the shared identities of top-tier universities allowed alumni networks to become a viable way to assemble social resources from elite groups. As the top Chinese universities with global prestige, PKU and WHU fostered social capital among leaders in different fields scattered around the world. When the epidemic was rampant, alumni networks of these two universities successfully stimulated a sense of social responsibility among these social elites. The PKU Entrepreneur Club and the Educational Fund of PKU established special funds for the protection of frontline medical teams in Wuhan, which was actively spearheaded by renowned entrepreneurs such as Michael Yu, the founder of New Oriental, one of the greatest education companies in China. The fund received over 100 million RMB (over \$14 million) in donations from entrepreneurial graduates of PKU in only three days (PKU, 2020c). Similarly, the entrepreneur alumni network of WHU led by Taikang Life Insurance and Zall Development Holding Co., Ltd., launched a comprehensive informational supply chain system for epidemic prevention in Wuhan. Not only did the two leading enterprises provide a professional tunnel for the procurement of medical resources and research and development of the epidemic, they also opened their own emergency response hospitals specialized in receiving

COVID-19 patients, which greatly eased the pressure on public hospitals (WHU, 2020b).

Transmission of public value through alumni networks and their environments

With the fast development of information and communication technology, alumni networks play an increasingly important role in the transmission of public values beyond public agencies. Several environmental factors further enhanced such a significant role of alumni networks as exemplified in tackling the pandemic. The use of social media breaks geographical barriers and links subgroups within the entire alumni network, which allows for cross-border procurement and important information exchange. WeChat, Weibo, Twitter, Facebook and other social media outlets connected alumni branches scattered throughout the world, which immediately enlarged the search scope and increased the allocation accuracy for the procurement of life-saving resources.

The global prestige of higher education institutions also augmented the active engagement of their alumni. The overseas graduates of highly-ranked universities tend to regard their alumni identity as a sense of honor, which intrinsically encourages them to actively respond to their alma maters in the international arena. In turn, through global alumni networks, overseas alumni experience a sense of belonging within the broader alumni community, which further enhances their close affiliation to the network.

In addition, alumni networks allow for the practice of participatory democracy. For instance, collaboratively initiated by the Hubei branches of the alumni associations of Renmin University and an additional five universities in China, a proposal to extend the spring holiday vacation due to the coronavirus was adopted by the Hubei Government, which effectively circumvented the recurrence of the outbreak (RMU, 2020). As a vehicle for collecting public wisdom, value and social capital, alumni networks implicitly and explicitly increased the responsiveness and efficiency of the local government during the public emergency crises.

Studying alumni networks through existing frameworks

Evident in controlling the COVID-19 epidemic in China, the potential of alumni networks in addressing public issues reveals their value for theoretical development in several areas of public administration. Subject matters in the field that can gain insights from alumni networking include collaborative governance and nonprofit management.

Alumni networks and collaborative governance

As highlighted earlier, the existing literature of alumni networks focuses on alumni identification as its antecedent (e.g., Mael & Ashforth, 1992) and in-group reciprocity as its outcome (e.g., Herman & Renz, 2007; Stephenson & Bell, 2014), but its “network” structure as a functional body has rarely been examined. This can be partly explained by what distinguishes alumni networks from what is commonly regarded as a “network,” typified by those addressed in collaborative management (Agranoff & McGuire, 2003; Bryson et al., 2014; Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2015; Emerson &

Nabatchi, 2015; Emerson, Nabatchi, & Balogh, 2012; O'Leary & Vij, 2012). However, it is such distinctions that can contribute to and broaden the research on collaborative governance in its application globally.

For one thing, alumni networks differ from traditional collaborative networks in terms of their "purposiveness," which might mitigate the risks that the latter confronts during collaborative public service provision. As defined by Agranoff and McGuire (2003), networks in collaborative management are multiorganizational arrangements to solve problems that cannot be solved by a single organization, which implies that it is established with a clear purpose (also see Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; O'Leary & Vij, 2012). Every network is formed in terms of nodes and ties, and in a network with purposive activity, ties are the exchange of information flows, resources, energy, and authority purported to achieve the collective goals, and the nodes are the agencies and organizations as intersections of those ties (Scott & Davis, 2015). The structure of networks with purposive, coordinated activities carries multiple risks such as high vulnerability to future uncertainty after goal achievement (Latour, 1999) and imbalanced benefits among participant groups within the network (O'Toole & Meier, 2004). Therefore, public service delivery under such purposive networks is apt to errors and lack long-term stability.

As compared to collaborative networks, alumni networks are established on the basis of the identification of a particular social classification in which any purposive goal is not necessarily needed (Tajfel & Turner, 1981/1985). Unlike the information exchange for specific purposes in traditional network structures, the experientially embedded alumni identities or even their professional sub-identities across individuals, as demonstrated in the alumni networks of Chinese medical schools, comprise the ties and maintain the long-term stability of alumni networks. And the nodes within these unpurposive networks are not restricted, thus lending themselves to high structural flexibility. In addition, with alumni networks, individual group benefits are independent of their positions within the network; this diminishes the likelihood of conflict between and among different groups, which ensures the efficiency of public service delivery under this framework. Thus, the "un-purposiveness" of alumni networks provides opportunities for the students of collaborative governance to reexamine the interactions between the components within collaborative networks and refine the structure of collaborative governance.

In addition, alumni identity that is internalized throughout alumni networks can enhance trust among different participants, which promotes public values under collective regimes. In collaborative networks, sectoral difference can increase the formation of dyads, which can threaten trust and power symmetry (Emerson & Nabatchi, 2015; Leach & Sabatier, 2005; O'Leary & Vij, 2012; Ostrom, 1998; Ran & Qi, 2019; Vangen & Huxham, 2005), mutual understanding (Emerson et al., 2012), legitimacy (Bryson, Crosby, & Stone, 2006), and commitment (Ansell & Gash, 2007) as key components of shared motivation for collaborative governance. In traditional network structures, this also hinders the capabilities of formal administrative agencies to lead network governance and authorize the embedded public values.

Alumni networks, on the other hand, can moderate the negative effect of sectoral differences. First, alumni identity implicitly blurs sectoral boundaries. Thus, when alumni

from different sectors collaborate, shared alumni identity can improve mutual trust, which is important to the promotion of public values. Moreover, through alumni associations, alumni networks offer innovative approaches to the institutional arrangements of collaborative governance. Compared with networks tied to purposive actions, informal structures based on in-group identification such as alumni networks are less conflictual and, given alumni identification, cross-sectoral exchanges are less volatile. This also prevents the promotion of public values from being deviated by the interest conflicts as a result of sectoral differences.

Alumni networks and nonprofit organizations

Within public and private spheres, alumni networks and nonprofit organizations are inextricably linked. In the proper context, alumni networks can expand or complement research on nonprofit organizations. Comparatively, alumni associations as formalized networks bear fewer financial risks and their philanthropic characteristics are less likely to be eroded by entrepreneurship. Alumni identification can span across sectoral boundaries, which in turn diversifies the sources of funding alumni associations can generate. More importantly, as illustrated in the case of COVID-19 in China, alumni associations lead to questions as to whether the characteristics of nonprofit organizations are malleable. Lohman (2007, p. 439) argues that there are “literally dozens of ... studies of nonprofit organizations [that] make interesting, useful, and valuable contributions. But do they clearly and convincingly make the case for the ‘nonprofit organization’ as a distinct and recognizable form?” (also see Anheier, 2005; LeRoux & Feeney, 2013; Salamon, 1999).

In addition, organizations in the context of alumni networks might outperform traditional nonprofit organizations in terms of enhancing organizational accountability (see Koliba, Mills, & Zia, 2011). Apart from ensuring external responsiveness, alumni associations can also generate internal accountability in terms of accounting and other financial matters (Lohmann, 2007). The shared alumni identity can directly transform into organizational commitment which can increase the sense of responsibility to the organization (Reichers, 1985).

Another possibility of studying alumni networks in the context of nonprofit organizations relates to their role in promoting the public value of nonprofit organizations. Low administrative costs are one of the principal predictors of fiscal distress in nonprofits, which can affect the ability of nonprofits to provide services and indeed affect their status as charitable or philanthropic institutions (Greenlee & Trussel, 2000; Hodge & Piccolo, 2005; Trussel, Greenlee, & Brady, 2002; Tuckman & Chang, 1991). However, alumni associations might possess comparatively higher spontaneity to sustain their philanthropic capabilities. Philanthropy can be motivated by in-group behavior (Bekkers & Wiepking, 2011), and this can emanate from either the public value of universities or the sense of social responsibility from alumni identification.

Future research agenda of alumni networks in public administration

Alumni networks not only provide in-group benefits but they can also serve the public in meaningful ways. This essay addressed the successful practice and theoretical

potential of alumni networks for public administration research. Although this essay examined alumni networks in the context of China, as seen here, alumni networks can be of vital importance globally, especially for nonprofits or nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) and the running of nonprofit organizations. There are also additional areas where alumni networks might be considered throughout the world. For example, from an individual perspective, it is necessary to understand the value internalization and externalization processes of alumni networks; in other words, how does alumni identity formulate and extend to public value? This remains an empirical question. So, too, is the specific network properties of alumni networks. As discussed previously, alumni networks are distinct from the networks examined in the context of collaborative governance. It may be that alumni networks are a variation of ego networks; nevertheless, alumni networks are formed on the basis of alumni identification, which derives from socialization processes. But how do alumni networks sustain themselves? How can they respond to changing external environments? Answers to these questions can benefit the application of alumni networks to public administration theory and practice.

In addition, the public value embedded in the core of alumni identity can motivate university graduates to serve the public (McMahon & Walter, 2010). But the contribution of alumni networks to the public service requires further empirical testing. It may also be that alumni networks have some connection to public service motivation (PSM). Is there a public spirit to universities or their programs that inspire their graduates to pursue careers in public service? Do alumni networks of those programs or universities reinforce that motivation and commitment to public service? This is the case in China, where the mottos of many universities encourage graduates to contribute to the general society or serve the public. While cultural factors come into play when examining alumni networks, these and other issues are ripe for further research in public administration.

In addition, with the aim of further developing network theory from the value perspective of social capital, measurement issues, as Lin (1999) points out, will need to be addressed. She points out that “the divergence in analyzing social capital at different levels has created some theoretical and measurement confusions” (Lin, 1999, p. 33). To address these concerns, she suggests that in terms of networks, social capital should be conceptualized, as we suggest above, as the resources that emanate from the *social* structure which are mobilized for a particular action, in our case, addressing COVID-19. In this sense, we argue that it is the emotional and human connection with people that helps the network exert influence over a distinct challenge or problem. But we go further to suggest a connection between networks, social capital and public value. That is, networks built on social capital lead to the creation of public value, but we see the process as organic, emerging from a particular need that serves and promotes the public interest. This type of network relies on in-group socialization and the investment in social relations leads to such returns as reciprocity and public value. Certainly, more research is need here to further develop these ideas. But, building on the work of Wachhaus, examining the importance of social capital in networks can contribute an incremental step toward building a coherent theory of networks in any capacity as well as public value.

Conclusion

Recognizing the contribution of alumni networks in addressing the COVID-19 pandemic, this article attempts to explore its value in the intellectual inquiry of public administration as well as its practice more globally. Despite the fact that the current literature on alumni networks continues to focus on its in-group benefits, the findings here suggest that reciprocity can extend to the public sphere more generally. With the assistance of alumni networks, the COVID-19 pandemic in China was significantly attenuated. As illustrated in China's success, alumni networks, built on social capital and distinct from formal administrative agencies, can significantly facilitate the creation, and transmission of public values. In addition, the interaction between informal networks based on organizational socialization and public value governance suggests the study of alumni networks can contribute to public administration research in such areas as collaborative governance, nonprofit organizations, and public service motivation. Explicitly considering the interaction between alumni networks and society's critical shared struggles and immense public challenges can help governments throughout the world design better collaborative governance regimes and provide scholars with insights to extend relevant theories in public administration.

Note

1. Alumni identification was studied from a number of perspectives including the individual antecedents of alumni identification (e.g., satisfaction with the institution and frequency of contact with the institution; see Mael & Ashforth, 1992 and Dutton et al., 1994, respectively); the organizational antecedents of alumni identification (e.g., organizational distinctiveness and prestige; see Pickett, 1986); and the organizational outcomes of alumni identification (e.g., financial contributions and willingness to advise offspring's enrollment; see Ransdell, 1986).

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