

2024 Deil S. Wright Lecture Focuses on Future of AI and Local Government



By Andy Bradshaw

UNC MPA faculty, staff, and alumni gathered at the UNC School of Government on October 25 to participate in the 2024 Deil S. Wright Public Service Forum. The forum—held annually and focusing on a timely topic affecting public administration—convened a panel to discuss the current landscape of artificial intelligence (AI) as it relates to the policies and programs in public service and local government.

David Yokum, North Carolina's Chief Scientist in the Office of State Budget and Management, Professor of the Practice, and Director of The Policy Lab at the UNC School of Data Science and Society, led the discussion on the promise and potential pitfalls the increased use of AI technology poses for public officials in the future.

Additionally, City of Sanford Mayor Rebecca Salmon and Thomas Mirc, ShadowHornet Strategic Advisors Managing Director and UNC MPA alumnus, participated in a panel discussion with Yokum, each giving their perspective on the future use of AI from the public and private sector, respectively.

As AI becomes an increasingly known quantity worldwide, Yokum spoke about how its rapid increase in accessibility merits a dialogue about its continued use moving forward.

"I think what's capturing everyone's fascination and worry now is that within the last few years these tools are now readily commercially available," he said. "It is something that you can download on your phone right now if you want. The tools are just right there to use."

Yokum framed his lecture around four services AI delivers that will change the processes and outcomes of how public administration delivers policy: operational efficiency, predictive ability, personalization of government services, and generation of public policy. Each, he said, poses an opportunity and a threat that will either enhance or reduce the quality of and delivery of those services.

AI's ability to create enhanced operational efficiency, Yokum said, leads to the promise of more efficient delivery of services. Examples of the services it could bring include increased availability to create auto-reports, detect fraud, and identify buildings with satellite imagery.

"The peril with this is it's unclear who the efficiency is for," he said. "It could be efficient for government, but not necessarily for the consumer."

AI also has strong predictive ability, which may help governments create enhanced predictions of traffic patterns, population growth, and business models.

The risk, Yokum said, is that these predictions are never fully neutral.

"This may lead to a better triage of services the government can provide, but there's always a potential for bias in predictions since it is impossible to get feedback from all people."

Speaking on AI's personalization of the delivery of government services, Yokum mentioned the convenience and comfort associated with an increase in the government using personalized chatbots for customers.

This ability of AI models to predict why one seeks out a source, he said, also poses a risk of siloing information—decreasing the shared perception of what government provides to communities.

"I worry in some sense about a world where information from government is getting fractured in this way," he said. "If different people are seeing different bits, do we lose a kind of common conception of what government is for all of us?"

Lastly, Yokum discussed AI's capacity to generate public policy. This, he said, gives government the ability to make informed policy recommendations from synthesized information. However, he expressed concern that AI's focus on past data could constrain the creation of solutions that could have future public policy benefits.

"I worry about stagnating on policy ideas. So yes, AI is generative, it's creating things in some sense, but it is still predicated on prior data, and so there's a constraint on what's possible to be generated."

After Yokum concluded his talk, Mirc spoke on the panel about how public officials are uniquely positioned to respond to the exponential growth of AI in the best interest of the communities they serve.

"The private sector is excelling at creating solutions and failing in applying those solutions to creating value in society," he said. "And it represents one of the greatest opportunities for the public sector to exhibit leadership into the next generation."

Mayor Salmon agreed that local government officials must exhibit leadership in utilizing AI to make good policy—while simultaneously finding ways to maintain accountability and open lines of communication with the public.

"It's about public trust. People want to know that somebody is accountable for the decisions that are being made," she said. "And when things go wrong, they want to know who to go talk to, who will fix it. I think underlying a lot of the concerns about AI is a sort of a feeling at some point of, 'Who's accountable for these decisions?'"

Closing out the forum, Yokum listed two dilemmas government needs to account for if it wants the trajectory of its relationship with AI to proceed in the right direction.

"The first is that it's a little absurd to expect citizens at an individual level to engage in every sort of review of AI models," he said. "We need to think again about the infrastructure of other entities outside of government that are responsible for reviewing what government is doing with AI."

Secondly, Yokum posed a question to the audience about how AI may change feelings of personal efficacy and community connection moving forward.

"We need to consider how AI influences our self-perceptions of ourselves and community norms in ways that are upstream of government," he said. "What does it mean to contribute to society if computers do all the manual and intellectual labor for us?"

The forum concluded with a question-and-answer session, during which Mirc, Salmon, and Yokum answered queries about the topic. A reception and continued conversation regarding AI and its future role in governance followed the forum.

In 2002, the UNC MPA Alumni Association honored Professor Deil S. Wright for his 34 years of teaching MPA students by creating the Deil S. Wright Lecture in Public Administration. Each year, a distinguished professional from the field of public administration enriches the educational experience of students, alumni, faculty, and interested members of the community through this lecture. In 2023, the MPA program piloted a new format for the event and invited multiple speakers to participate in a panel discussion. The format aims to improve the integration of subject matter within the concurrent MPA Immersion course by fostering deeper discussions of the material.

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