



CALL FOR PROPOSALS

Leading and Learning Toward a Future for All – A 25th SELC Anniversary Celebration
May 28th-30th, 2026

Co-hosted by
Rutgers University – Newark
John Jay College of Criminal Justice
NAPA Standing Panel on Social Equity in Governance

Conference Co-Chairs:
Jason D. Rivera - John Jay College of Criminal Justice
Marilyn Marks Rubin - Rutgers University-Newark

NEWARK, NEW JERSEY

Proposal Submission Deadline: January 18, 2026

Over the last 25 years, the National Academy of Public Administration's (NAPA) Social Equity Leadership Conference (SELC) has brought practitioners, scholars, public servants, policymakers and students together to advance social equity policies and initiatives. Through deliberative discussions, presentations and workshops, the SELC has embraced the dual importance of leadership and learning. As John F. Kennedy said, "Leadership and learning are indispensable to each other."

Throughout the world, we are witnessing shifts in governance and democracy, what it means to be a citizen, and who is deserving of civil and human rights. In this changing global environment, leadership in public service and advocating for justice to enhance equity in practices and policies are profoundly important. This year, we embrace the call to enhance social equity in public service by focusing on learning from each other to help us lead our institutions and communities toward the future in ways that benefit all.

The 2026 SELC will focus on how and what we can do to address the challenges facing social equity in public service today and into the future. As we celebrate the 25th anniversary of the SELC, we seek to advance social equity and to build a path that will lead to a better future. As such, we particularly encourage proposals from practitioners and community leaders, as well as academics and students. Proposals that highlight intersectional dimensions of leadership are especially welcome.

CONFERENCE TRACKS

1) Leadership in the Public and Nonprofit Sectors

Conference Track Co-Chairs: Maria J. D'Agostino and Luke Jones

Advancing social equity through public institutions requires leadership at all levels. Leadership in this context extends beyond positional authority to include everyday practices, decisions, and commitments that shape equitable outcomes. Effective leadership requires resilience, adaptability, and a sustained commitment to high standards of personal and institutional performance. This is particularly challenging during times of significant change across government. This track explores the critical role leaders play in shaping policies, practices, and cultures that promote fairness, opportunity, and meaningful participation for all communities. We invite submissions that address topics such as building leadership competencies, strengthening performance management and accountability, motivating and developing the workforce, fostering collaboration and coalition building, and other strategies for advancing equity through public and nonprofit leadership, not just at the top. Topic suggestions for this track include, but are not limited to:

- How public and nonprofit leaders keep equity at the center when responding to institutional disruptions
- Measuring equity in performance systems that link distributive and procedural equity goals to performance management frameworks
- Skills and behaviors that enable leaders to advance inclusive governance while engaging marginalized communities and maintaining coalitions
- Ethical dilemmas in leadership decisions involving tradeoffs between efficiency, accountability, and equity
- Leadership in motivating a mission-driven workforce
- Leadership in aligning equity commitments across sectors

2) Pursuing Equity and Safeguarding Civil Rights

Conference Track Co-Chairs: Kim Desmond, Wendy Nicholson and Kim Walton

Incidents that reflect challenges to government associated with equity and civil rights are increasing, many relating to due process. In addition to whether governmental actions violate civil rights, the question is whether these actions infringe upon the advancement of social equity for all. With an emphasis on inclusivity and intersectionality, participants will engage in dialogue that elevates diverse voices and transforms insights into action through storytelling and other forms of communication. Sessions will showcase pragmatic tools, innovative leadership, and collaborative approaches that sustain outcome-driven practices, preserve the integrity of civil rights protections, and build bridges across differences, safeguarding equity as both a human-centered and operational imperative. Topic suggestions for this track include, but are not limited to:

- Examining and clarifying the language of “equity” in order to frame the work within a broader civil rights context
- Emerging approaches to activism, advocacy, and organizing that illustrate how younger leaders are shaping the future of civil rights
- Strategies to preserve equity commitments in the face of financial pressures and changing policy landscapes
- How overlapping identities shape access to opportunity and protection through inclusive practices

3) Challenges to Higher Education in a Changing World

Conference Track Co-Chairs: Dominic Bearfield, Patrice Bourdeau-Quispe and Christal Hamilton

In the U.S., recent policy shifts at all levels of government have the potential to alter the way public administration is taught and which research topics are considered taboo. The U.S. is not, however, the only country facing challenges to higher education. Increased polarization, politicization, the use of propaganda, and emerging technologies raise concerns for institutions worldwide. How institutions of higher learning navigate through these challenges will determine the relevance of public administration research, professional practice, and viability. We invite submissions that explore how we can provide skills and knowledge for the next generation of public servants, educators, and community leaders to lead into the future. Proposals that highlight intersectional dimensions of challenges to higher education in a changing world are especially welcome. Topic suggestions for this track include but, are not limited to:

- Overcoming challenges to academic freedom
- Case studies that highlight strategies for dealing with challenges
- Effects of polarization on the curriculum
- Use of propaganda in the classroom
- How emerging technologies are incorporated into the curriculum
- Funding challenges, including research funding, facing higher education institutions

4) Impacts of Federal Policy Changes on State & Local Governments and Nonprofit Organizations

Conference Track Co-Chairs: Katherine Barrett and Margaret Simms

Federal funding cuts, employee layoffs, grant cancellations and shifting responsibilities in intergovernmental systems create multiple strains on state and local governments as well as the populations they serve. While these changes cut across numerous government services and demographic groups, the impacts on health care, emergency management, education and human services, most strongly affect low-income and under-represented populations. In addition to providing an overview of policy shifts that prohibit the pursuit of social equity, this track will focus on what state and local governments are doing to advance practices and policies that adhere to social equity principles. Given that prohibiting words like equity, diversity and inclusion does not erase inequality, how much has the fight for equitable funding and services continued? We encourage proposals that advance social equity through self-sustaining strategies and financial models. Topic suggestions for this track include, but are not limited to:

- How current federal policies and practices are contributing to inequitable access to services and to harmful economic and social outcomes
- Changes in health care access, maternal and infant mortality rates, unemployment and poverty levels, especially among different demographic groups
- How state and local governments have been able to independently sustain and pursue social equity policies and practices
- Strategies that local governments are pursuing both in states that are working to advance social equity and those that are not doing so
- Actions being taken by local governments in pursuing social equity goals when states have preempted local decision-making
- How nonprofits and other organizations are adjusting to strategies being employed by states and localities to accommodate or counter the impact of federal policy and funding changes

5) Artificial Intelligence, Data, and Evidence

Conference Track Co-Chairs: Ratna Dougherty, Greg Porumbescu and James Wright

There is a growing trend in public administration to use artificial intelligence (AI) tools to help monitor and provide services to the public. These tools, as well as increased use of data and evidence, are increasingly being employed by governments at all levels and by non-profit organizations to be more responsive and accountable to the public. The increasing emphasis on AI, data and evidence raises concerns about equity and how this new focus should be used in ethical and equitable ways. This track explores how AI, data, and evidence can center the voices of underrepresented populations as we explore the ethical and practical uses of technologies by all levels of government and the nonprofit sector. We seek submissions related to how local, state, national and international agencies and governments can utilize technologies that not only serve traditionally underrepresented populations but also work with them to design better public service delivery. Topic suggestions for this track include, but are not limited to:

- Community-centered AI design where underrepresented communities are involved in designing public service delivery
- Evaluations of AI tools used by local, state, federal governments and nonprofit organizations to identify and mitigate potential bias, especially against historically marginalized groups
- Evidence-based policymaking with equity as the focus of how data and evidence are used to shape policies that correct systemic inequalities and serve the needs of vulnerable populations
- AI, data and evidence deployment in social safety net programs (e.g., housing, healthcare, unemployment) and how these tools are evaluated for fairness and inclusion
- Research or case studies on how automated decision-making systems may reinforce discriminatory practices and strategies to prevent such practices
- Examination of research or praxis from non-U.S. contexts on equitable AI implementation, particularly from the Global South or indigenous communities

6) Governance, Equity, and Human Rights Around the World

Conference Track Co-Chairs: Felipe Blanco, Pooja Paswan and Renzo de la Riva Agüero

Threats to democratic governance, sustained inequality, and human rights abuses around the globe are defining challenges, reflecting democratic backsliding, rising authoritarianism, political polarization, climate change, violent conflict, and widening socioeconomic disparities. Public administrators, policymakers, and civil society stakeholders must grapple with growing unemployment, declining incomes, precarious government services, climate-induced poverty and migration, human trafficking, and refugee protection. This track invites academic research and practitioner insights that examine how governments, nonprofit organizations, and international organizations—at all levels, in the U.S. and abroad—safeguard human dignity and promote equity, peace, and development. Topic suggestions for this track include, but are not limited to:

- Migration, refugee protection, and climate-induced displacement
- Democratic backsliding, authoritarianism, and threats to governance
- Peacebuilding, inclusive governance, sustainable development, transitional justice, and post-conflict reconstruction
- Human rights abuses, ethnic cleansing, and genocide
- Climate-induced disasters and poverty
- Civil society, advocacy and grassroots mobilization
- Government capacity, service delivery and institutional resilience
- Global and comparative perspectives on governance and human rights

Five types of proposals:

1. **Individual paper:** Proposals should include presentation title and name of presenter. Paper should focus on topics related to one of the conference tracks. The Program Committee will group papers into panels based on similar themes. Audience participation will follow the presentations.
2. **Panel:** Proposals should include panel title, name of convener, and names of 3-4 individual presenters and titles of their presentations. Panel should focus on a theme that addresses one of the conference tracks. Audience participation will follow the presentations.
3. **Roundtable Discussions:** Proposals should include roundtable title and names of convener and 3-5 other participants. Roundtables should be interactive and conversational in nature (i.e. no PowerPoint presentations) and bring the audience fully into the discussion. Roundtables should be built around a theme that addresses one of the tracks.
4. **Workshops or Engaged Learning Session:** Proposals should include the title and names or names of persons delivering the workshop. It should include the purpose and method of the workshop, intended takeaways and the time required. The intention of these interactive sessions is to provide opportunities for hands-on learning and application.
5. **Poster Sessions:** Proposals should include poster title and name of presenter(s) as well as description of visual displays of research or a professional idea, model, initiative, or case. Presenters are responsible for printing their accepted posters and remaining with them during the dedicated poster session to discuss their respective content.

Submit proposals at this link: <https://www.surveymonkey.com/r/TKC85PC>

Proposals should include a 250 to 300 word abstract that includes:

- A short description of the individual paper, full panel, roundtable, workshop or poster
- A short statement about how the proposal impacts practitioners
- The names, affiliations, titles, and contact emails for yourself and your coauthors (if applicable)

Student Conference Support

We encourage participation by undergraduate and graduate students in panels, workshops, roundtables, and poster sessions. A travel grant from NAPA is available for students who present their research at the conference. The maximum funding provided by the grant is \$750. Up to ten (10) student travel grants are awarded each year. For more information, please contact Kaitlyn Blume at kblume@napawash.org.