In the Beginning

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— Dean John Williams, in his first annual report on what was then the Graduate School of Public Administration

HARVARD KENNEDY SCHOOL turns 75 in 2011. The school looks a lot younger than its years — both its architecture and its name hint at a more recent birth. But looks deceive. It was conceived in the middle of the Great Depression, born of the vision of its first great benefactor, Lucius Littauer, a Harvard graduate and former congressman, and Harvard President James Conant, of a training ground for men (equality was a long way away) dedicated to solving the economic and administrative problems of their day.

What was then the Graduate School of Public Administration began life in 1936 as something other than the world-famous graduate school and research center it has grown into. It was a sort of stepchild to Harvard’s government and economics departments, offered no degrees, and borrowed faculty from elsewhere. Its official beginning, on December 7, 1936, came with 12 faculty appointments (of faculty members who also held appointments elsewhere at Harvard). Its first students were a handful of public officials (known as Littauer Fellows). But even as it took its first, somewhat uncertain steps, all those decades ago, its direction would be strikingly familiar to us in 2011.

“We are not seeking to find in public administration a new content,” wrote John Williams, the school’s first dean, in his report on what was then the Graduate School of Public Administration to President Conant in 1938. “What we hope may justify the creation of the School is our attempt to find a new method of work. We are seeking a means not only to bring the different branches of the social sciences more closely together but also to bring the University and the public service nearer to each other.”

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