

Final Essay

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“Knowledge will forever govern ignorance: And a people who mean to be their own Governors, must arm themselves with the power which knowledge gives”. This view, expressed by James Madison represents the desire that led me to the University of Kansas Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. I came to the program short on idealism, desiring the knowledge to help me navigate “the system”. I am leaving with a reinvigorated spirit and a belief that good public administration holds the key to building better communities and improving lives.

I did not begin my MPA journey as the *tabula rasa* that Aristotle describes in the *De Anima*. I had my own preconceived ideas about the role and context of public administration and management. These preconceptions were highly influenced by nearly ten years of experience in local government, as well as an undergraduate internship with a United States Senator. At the heart of these beliefs laid the notion that government could serve more people if it simply performed tasks more efficiently. I observed red tape and mindless bureaucracy as hurdles for administrators to overcome to accomplish tasks that mattered.

I discovered this belief it to be incomplete and simplistic. It now represents one piece of my continually evolving understanding of public administration. This essay critically analyzes the KU MPA program’s contribution to my understanding of public administration. This is accomplished through the conceptual framework of three major themes highlighted in the program’s stated “KU Philosophy” which include leadership, public service, and a commitment to efficiency and equity in advancing the public good. The discussion of each theme draws upon my academic and professional experiences with focus on major perspective changes attributable to the MPA program.

## **Public Leadership**

The first theme of the KU MPA Philosophy is leadership. Philosophies closely associated with political science heavily influenced my pre-MPA conceptions of leadership. Leaders were simply those who controlled and allocated power. Although I did not condone it, many of the leaders I observed through the years used tactics not far removed from Machiavelli's *The Prince*. They felt it was better to be feared than loved when the ultimate goal was the obtainment and expansion of power. As Wildavsky observed, in public administration power often expresses itself through the budgetary process. This leadership philosophy applied to the public sector can result in the allocation and protection of resources despite their benefit towards the greater good.

Through the course of the program, my understanding of leadership evolved well beyond the simple exercise of political power. Although there are numerous responsibilities of public leaders, none is more critical than working to preserve the public trust. Representative democracy simply cannot function effectively without public trust. Unfortunately this critical component is so fragile, it takes years to build yet can erode rapidly through scandal or incompetence. Leaders in public administration have the responsibility to nurture trust through integrity, transparency and accountability.

### *Public Leaders Need to Admit Mistakes and Learn From Them*

Integrity has many components. In this context, leaders can build trust simply by being honest with the people they serve. One observation I have made in my years of public service is the inability for government to admit its own mistakes. We often hide behind hollow professional association awards or cite statistics skewed towards favorable outcomes. Mark Funkhouser stated government should be right more often than it's

wrong, but when it's wrong it should admit so and learn from its mistakes. How can government improve if we are never wrong? It cannot. Public leaders have become so sensitive to bad publicity it becomes natural never to admit error. When public leaders do not admit mistakes, citizens are insulted and public trust erodes

### *Transparency Builds Trust*

Public leaders have an absolute responsibility to conduct the people's business in an open, transparent environment. Unhindered access and increased information enables active citizen participation in government. This goes beyond the obvious need to adhere to open records and meeting laws. Creating public information that is accessible *and* meaningful contributes to transparency.

For example, publicly releasing an unreadable budget or certified annual financial report does not constitute transparency. Public administration leaders must go beyond stale reports with numbers veiled in unnecessary complexity. Painting an accurate picture of how we are performing as a government, presented to the people we serve, is a step towards real transparency. Information is the key to transparency. Accountability is difficult, absent open access to accurate information. The Johnson County government's Health Care Fund will serve an example.

Johnson County is self-insured. A Health Care fund exists to pay employee medical claims. Primary funding comes from general county revenue along with employee premium contributions. The current Health Care fund balance is roughly 150% of annual claims. The result is a balance \$15 million higher than the county policy established "secure funding" goal. An unreleased performance audit reveals this bloated balance to be the result of simple contribution calculation errors and the belief that is

better to have too much money, than too little. Because this was an “off budget” fund, it received little to no outside attention. Accessible, open and accurate information could have prevented an inefficient use of taxpayer money. This lack of transparency could conceivably lead to damaging the fragile trust relationship between citizens and the government.

*Public Leaders Foster Accountability through Governance*

The third element public leaders build trust through is accountability. Accountability in its simplest form is the extent to which one must answer to a higher authority. There are several competing models of accountability in the public administration context. One model relies entirely on internal controls. This philosophy is grounded in the belief that administrative tasks are so complex and specialized they can only be regulated through professionalism, internal rules and codes. Another model suggests the achievement of accountability only through legislative oversight or political controls.

The key, as is often the case lies somewhere in the middle. James Madison expressed the need for both in Federalist 51 stating, “A dependence on the people is, no doubt, the primary control on the government; but experience has taught mankind the necessity of auxiliary precautions”. Good governance systems are an emerging tool to finding the right balance of these conflicting models of accountability.

In public administration, governance is the means by which the people exert control over their government. Public leaders create good governance systems through the avocation and creation of a balance of professionalism and public oversight. These systems recognize the extremely complex and specialized tasks administrators perform

while also understanding the need in a democracy for the government to be politically responsive to the people. An effective performance audit function is an emerging contributor to good governance. Public leaders who embrace the creation of accurate information on the performance of government enable the empowerment of citizens in relation to their government. In the process, trust between the people and the government is strengthened.

### **Public Service**

A commitment to Public Service is the second stated theme of the MPA program's KU Philosophy. The WorldNet Dictionary lists two meanings for public service: 1) employment within a government system and 2) a service performed for the benefit of the public or its institutions. Before the MPA program, I believed public service to generally to be closer aligned with the first definition. I viewed public service as important but believed in the public administration context it simply to be the act of implementing policy formed at the political level.

The program enhanced my understanding of public service to more closely resemble the latter definition. This implies public administration in *action* to benefit the public good rather than simply being a passive conduit of policy formed at the political level. Because the language of the statutes we operate under are so often purposefully written vaguely, public servants have tremendous discretion. With this power comes a great responsibility to do the people's business in as fair and just a manner as possible. This discretion requires us to be thoughtful public administrators as opposed to robotic apparatchiks. The works of Bellah and Putnam are two of many influential scholars contributing to the view of public service in an action context.

*Public Service Through Institutions*

To Bellah, the heart of a good society involves the collective efforts of the people working towards the common good of all its members. Disenfranchised citizens, corruption and the widening social equality gap are challenges facing our society today. Strengthening institutions that contribute to the greater good is part of the answer. However, the American individualism long ago observed by Tocqueville, makes this difficult.

Strong individualism often contributes to conflicts with institutions rather than working to improve them. This leads to a lack of trust and a fear of our institutions. This old way of thinking represents a short sidedness that Bellah rightfully challenges us to ponder. If institutions are essential to facilitate real societal change, then we cannot turn our back on them. Rather, public servants must actively work to improve them so that they may be utilized collectively as forces of change.

*Public Service Through Increased Social Capital*

The concept of social capital as proposed by Robert Putnam is another theory key to the betterment of society. Social capital allows people to work together through social networks, norms and trust to pursue the goals that they share together. Increased social capital is highly correlated with civic engagement in community affairs. This is a powerful influence on the performance of the government. Serving a well-informed and civically engaged constituency constantly challenges local government to perform at higher levels of expectation.

Public servants can nurture social capital by actively engaging its citizens and encouraging civic associations. Critical to the successful engagement of citizens is the

need to actively reach out those most likely not to civically participate. Activist public servants need to find creative ways to seek input from those we typically do not hear from, the underprivileged. Too often, these groups are completely left out of the decision making process. This pattern of behavior results in a viscous cycle of inequitable resource allocation and the further erosion of trust. Through increased social capital, government is held accountable and therefore serves the people in a more effective manner.

### **Efficiency and Equity**

The third and final element of the MPA's KU Philosophy is "Commitment to efficiency and equity in the advancement of the greater good". This presents a paradox for public administrators. Both efficiency and equity are important core values yet at times they conflict. We return to the need for thoughtful administrators to measure the importance of each in the context of the situation, working towards a balance that benefits the greater good of the citizens we serve.

#### *Efficiency for Efficiencies Sake Helps Nobody*

Efficiency describes the need to maximize the ratio of inputs to outputs. There is no question government must be conscience of making efficient use of taxpayer dollars. A recent situation with the Kansas City, Missouri Housing Authority demonstrates this need. Public information requests revealed the agency spent hundreds of thousands of dollars refurbishing only two homes. An agency failure to properly plan, monitor contracts and prioritize needs resulted in final products with market values well below the investment costs. An inefficient process failed to maximize public benefit and resulted in decreased trust.



However, public administrators who beat the drums for efficiency without measurement of the role and context of the big picture do just as much harm as inefficiency. Peter Drucker stated, “There is nothing so useless as doing something efficiently which should not be done at all.” How true! The Johnson County Public Works department serves as an example.

Each year the department participates in equipment ‘Rodeo’ skill competitions. Departments from all over the metropolitan area demonstrate their efficiency in scooping bowling balls with backhoes, placing tennis balls on cones and navigating snowplows through timed obstacle courses. The winners advance in a competition towards the coveted Golden Eagle award. However, these tests of efficiency do nothing to promote the mission of the organization. No road is paved, bridge built or street swept. Training does not occur because the ones already efficient move on! All we have accomplished is the demonstration of our ability to efficiently perform tasks that help nobody.

#### *Fairness and Justice Through Social Equity*

Social equity describes the need for fairness and justice in the delivery of public goods. In many respects, public administrators are failing to adequately attend to this value. Public policies and programs are often evaluated by their effectiveness. Fredrickson rightfully challenges us to ask the important second question, for *whom* is this policy or program effective. Too often, the answer to this question lies with those who control power, typically those with the most resources. This results in policies and programs tilted to benefit land owners, developers and local power brokers. This phenomenon exacerbates urban neglect and decay in areas concentrated with those that

need our help the most, the underprivileged. Public administrators must find the courage to draw attention to these inequities.

One prevalent challenge to equity in need of further study is the use of economic development incentives. During the program, I had the opportunity to research the use of industrial revenue bond incentives in Johnson County, Kansas. Some are surprised to learn Johnson County utilizes nearly 100 active IRBs, resulting in the exemption of millions of assessed value. The study attempted to quantify the impact exempting one property has on another property in relation to mill levy. The resulting OLS regression model suggested a relationship. As the number of incentives increased, so to did the mill levy and resulting tax impact on the average property owner.

Perhaps the most important lesson I learned from this study was an absolute information void. The data needed to meaningfully analyze these incentives did not exist, nor did clear policies governing their usage. This trend is not unique to Johnson County. In many jurisdictions, local administrators enable similar incentives with little to no purpose other than an undefined desire for “Economic Development”. When we stray from equity, our actions need to be transparent. With increased information, citizens and administrators alike will be in a better position to judge if these inequities are justified.

### **Conclusion**

The KU MPA program greatly affected how I view and think about public administration. My pre-MPA perception focused solely on the need for public administrators to implement policy efficiently. My exposure to the MPA program informed, enhanced and altered how I think about public administration. The themes

highlighted in the MPA “KU Philosophy” provide a conceptual framework to evaluate these perspective changes.

Public leaders have a responsibility to nurture trust. They accomplish this through integrity, transparency and accountability. Public service is a personal calling for public administrators to work towards the greater good. Administrators do this through strengthening institutions that contribute to society, building communities and actively pursuing social equity. Finally, public administrators must be committed to efficiency and equity in advancing the greater good. Though at times these values operate in a conflicting environment, the apt administrator strives to efficiently distribute public resources fairly to all citizens regardless of social or economic status.

Managing family, career and the program was challenging in ways that are difficult to express. The journey increased my understanding of public administration in size and depth. More importantly, the KU MPA Program changed my life by reigniting my passion for good government. For this I am forever grateful. I now have the tools needed to become a part of positive change towards the greater good. It is up to me to develop the courage to put them to work!