

*What Have I Really Learned in Five Years?
My Experience in the University of Kansas MPA Program*

Bill Ebel
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Introduction

As I reflect back on my experience in the University of Kansas Edward O. Steene program in public administration I realize that it has really become a part of my life. I have taken courses in the program through almost every semester for the last five years. One night every week has been dedicated to furthering my understanding of public administration and what it means. Throughout the program it became clear to me that one goal that I had was to experience as many different professors in the program as my course work would allow. I looked for those courses that were taught by “new” professors and I found this to be extremely rewarding and broadened my understanding and experience greatly. They say that “variety is the spice of life” – I tried to emulate this and was glad I did.

When I entered the program I was a newly retired career military officer having served twenty-two (22) years of my life in “public service”. What I came to understand is that even though I was a public servant I really had no concept of what public administration was. It soon became evident that it was certainly something much deeper than belonging to an eclectic group of people focused on the national defense of our nation. That was almost too broad to become meaningful or directly associated to public administration. It was through my experiences in the program that I was finally able to formulate a concept of what public administration is. In this final essay I would like to share my ideas about what is public administration is and I will focus my discussion on local municipal government. Secondly, I would like to highlight the challenges that public administrators will face in the next few years especially at the local level. For if we are to be effective and responsible public administrators we must realize what the future brings and how we must prepare for it. In doing this it is my intention to summarize what I have really learned in the last five years of my academic life.

Who is the Public?

Before we can discuss what public administration is we must answer the question “Who is the public we serve?” If public service is at the core of what a public administrator does then who is it that a public administrator serves? If we look in Webster’s dictionary we see phrases such as “having to do with the people as a whole” or “for the use or good of everyone”. We could easily interpret “public” as equivalent to “everyone”. If that was the case then we would be obligated to serve everyone equally or at the least, the same. In this context then a public policy or the execution of a public policy would have to affect everyone equitably. If it only affected a small group or a neighborhood then it would not necessarily be for “everyone”. Since this is both impractical and unfeasible we can reject the concept that public means “everyone”.

We might also interpret or define public as referring to “anyone” or “someone” in the society or jurisdiction who has made themselves knowledgeable, available, or visible. This is the group that is easily recognizable. They usually are well versed on an issue and carry a public agenda. They have made themselves public through knowledge and exposure. In this definition then public could mean some or it could also mean everyone; for that matter it could also mean no one. It would be difficult if not wrong to make policy or implement policy that would only serve some part of the society based only on exposure or availability. This definition then, is too dynamic, possibly too restrictive and therefore also not feasible or practical.

Then who is the public? It is my opinion that we need to define public in terms of something more relevant and applicable to public administrators. Based on the previous discussion I would argue that what makes the public then is innocence, helplessness, or passiveness. This definition of public would refer to those persons within a jurisdiction whose lack of information, technical knowledge, unavailability, or time for critical deliberation renders them more or less vulnerable and subject to the powers and decisions of the public administrator. This then is who

public administrators serve and why they serve is to account for the welfare and consideration for those who are unaware of the consequences and impacts of both policy formulation and implementation. The public administrator cannot serve everyone and it cannot serve just someone. Instead, the public administrator must serve those who cannot be engaged whether they are the majority or the vocal minority.

What is Public Administration?

If we now agree on who it is the public administrator serves, then we can now engage in a discussion of “What is public administration”?

First and foremost public service is a profession. The science and art of public administration changed significantly at the turn of the 20th Century and over the last one-hundred years has developed into a legitimate profession. Administrators are technically trained in the theory of public administration including areas such as finance, budget, research, policy analysis, and leadership. There are professional organizations that have been formed and are chartered to share information, ideas and lessons learned. These professional organizations also provide a forum for serious discussion on public administration issues. Public administrators are also expected to be leaders and adept at skills such as negotiating, consensus building, communications, conflict resolution, political dynamics, and organizational development. The days of cronyism, nepotism, and political appointees have been replaced with a network of professional public administrators who transcend the gap between politicians and professional staff.

Second, public service is unique profession. It is unique in the sense that it is completely open to public scrutiny, disclosure, interpretation, and criticism. Every decision, every supporting document is made available to the public for examination. All decisions are conducted in a forum of open and reportable public discourse. This transparency, however, is essential to the field of public

administration because it forms an immediate level of trust and credibility with the public. There is no other profession where this occurs either in the private sector or in the non-profit sector. Finally, public administration is a unique profession in that it involves an intimate relationship between the citizen and the public administrator. In many other professions the average citizen may not have an ultimate choice or decision but in public administration the citizen is the foundation of the profession. This relationship may often be through citizen representation in the form of an elected official, but essentially it is a profession conducted through the partnership of public administration professional and everyday citizen.

Third, public administration is community focused. The fundamental role of the public administrator is to, in partnership with its citizenry, build and maintain a community. The public administrator does this in close partnership with the elected officials of the community, but the goal and outcomes are still community based. The public administrator must have deep commitment to the community - its viability; its growth; its maintenance, and its reputation. His perspective must be at the community level whether looking internally within the community's borders or looking externally within a regional perspective. His loyalty is not necessarily to the elected officials but to the community as a whole and it is critical that public administrators understand the difference.

Fourth, public administration is citizen-centric. Although community focused the public administrator must have a passion for citizenry and be able to communicate with the citizen. The citizen is the basic element of a democratic government and as such the public administrator must be able to relate to the citizen and cultivate that relationship within the community. It is important not only to develop a firm grasp of what the community needs, but to also be empathetic to what the individual citizen wants. This is an extremely difficult thing to do because the two are often in conflict. To be successful the public administrator must have an appreciation for natural tension and understand how to use it to the community's advantage.

Fifth, public administration is ethically founded. Whether you are a moral idealist, a deontologist, or a consequentialist, the profession of public administration is grounded in ethical decision making and ethical practices. It is clear if you accept the first premise that public administration is a profession, then true professionals are bound together through a code of professional ethics. Public administration is no different than any other profession where the public formulates an unconditional trust with the practitioner. As a steward of the community's resources and entrusted with the welfare of the community and its citizens, the public administrator must behave and act within an ethical framework. And as stated earlier since public administration is transparent, for the public administrator to be effective and to develop a strong level of trust between with the community he must have within himself a strong ethical foundation.

Finally, public administration is critically dependent on effective leadership. Possessing and demonstrating good leadership skills is an essential quality for any professional public administrator. Having a good understanding of just the concepts central to good public administration will not benefit a community if those charged with the welfare of that community do not demonstrate effective leadership. Leadership attributes such as the having desire to lead, character, core values, and emotional intelligence are all fundamental to the profession of public administration. These leadership skills and behaviors are also directly related to how effective a public administrator is at managing public organizations. It is my opinion that leadership is the glue that holds together other critical areas of public administration. Without good leadership, public administrators will find it difficult to succeed in the areas of government responsiveness, government effectiveness, and the understanding of political and social issues.

In summary, public administration is many things, but what my five year experience in the program has demonstrated to me is that public administration is a unique profession; it is both community focused and citizen-centric; and finally, it is based in ethical leadership.

Future Challenges in Public Administration

While studying public administration for the last five I it was through my coursework that I was able to examine historical cases and even present day cases of many challenges and issues that face the profession of public administration. Amidst all of this examination it was important to visualize what the future holds for public administration. There are many challenges for the future and the future will hold many unknown challenges that we are unaware of today. However, as I see it there are five major challenges that face public administration in the next five to ten years. These challenges are (1) the role of cyber-government; (2) the need for creative financing in providing public services; (3) emerging diversity in our communities; (4) a rapidly aging infrastructure and (5) the requirement to re-establish trust and confidence in public servants.

Today's youth are immersed in technological advancement and automated systems. There are technological devices for communication, education, transportation, entertainment, and social interaction. The generation of today carries their whole social, academic, and work lives in one or two digital devices. The Internet has already been in existence for over ten (10) years and to the current generation of young people they judge effectiveness by the ability to "connect" and the speed of the process. They do everything digitally from banking, news gathering, to retailing. They find little use for waiting in lines and taking the time for long conversations; even writing has been decompressed into a new language of abbreviations and phonetic quips (text messaging). Most recently, a new internet enterprise named UTube was sold to Google for \$1.2 billion. UTube allowed anyone the ability to deploy home videos on the internet for social interaction and entertainment or news.

What this all means is to public administration is that the public's comfort with technology and the Internet requires the development of more and more cyber-government. Public administration and government in the future must not only be connected to the public, but it must

also be mobile. Local jurisdictions are quickly entering the world of providing wireless networks and providing access to government not just from home but from “anywhere”. What was first called “e-gov” for the ability to provide services electronically over the Internet has metamorphosed into “m-gov” which allows those same government services to be provided anywhere and at anytime. In fact, some governments are deploying digital programs that are intended to provide real-time customer service to their citizens. The integration of technology with customer service and service provision requires forward thinking public administrators who are in tune with technological advancement and its ability to provide better government services. If they do not, they will quickly become ineffective, out-dated, and obsolete.

The traditional financing mechanisms of property tax, income tax, sales tax, and user fees have served public administration for many years and will continue to be the foundation of any strong local financial model. However, these revenue sources are somewhat limited and very volatile. Public administrators must continually look for new ways to generate new revenue streams. The best place in the future to look is at the private sector. The future for public administration means more financing mechanisms aimed at public-private partnerships. In a capitalistic society the burden of government cannot fall primarily on the individual citizen. Some burden must fall responsibly on private corporations and business. Today more and more public-private arrangements are being developed that are both creative and entrepreneurial. In some cases public assets have actually been sold to private entities purely as a profit making venture. There are both consequences and benefits to these new financial mechanisms and the public administrator of the future must fully understand all the effects.

The demographics of the United States are changing rapidly. The number of immigrants in the United States is increasing by over 2% a year. More and more aliens are crossing our borders

both legally and illegally. If you look at the major urban centers across the United States ethnic neighborhoods are still in tact and growing. Immigration issues are dominating the local political scene especially in border States. The issues include amnesty and guest worker programs, securing the US borders, sanctions against employers of illegal aliens, and condemnation of political leaders who subvert and undermine the efforts to control and contain illegal immigration.

All this will change the face of America and change the way in which public administrators deliver services. Public administrators will need to be able to evaluate and determine multiple programs that provide the same service but are also dependent on geographic ethnic neighborhoods. What one neighborhood needs may not be what another neighborhood needs. Communications will be challenged as English slowly becomes a second language. Most importantly, methods will need to be established that ensure fair and equal collection and distribution of resources and distinguish legal immigrants from illegal immigrants. Administrators will need to work closely with elected officials to establish policies that are both constitutional and practical. A recent poor example occurred in the city of Hazelton, Pennsylvania where this past year the City passed an ordinance that will fine landlords \$1,000 for renting to illegal migrants, deny business permits to companies that give them jobs and make English the city's official language. As was expected, this ordinance was quickly challenged in federal court and ruled unconstitutional. Traditional thinking is not going to solve the issue of blended communities in the future.

As our country ages so does its infrastructure. Basic services such as transportation, water distribution, wastewater collection and treatment all require vast infrastructures that require perpetual maintenance and replacement. Cities are finding that growth can be both a blessing and a burden as local resources get stretched farther and farther to maintain billions of dollars of public infrastructure. How do public administrators manage this aging infrastructure? First they must

understand maintenance theory and apply its principle in practice. Second they must find dedicated revenue sources for replacement programs based on these principles.

Our nation has over 54,000 community water systems. These systems consist of a substantial amount of infrastructure, including collection devices, drinking water treatment plants, wells, pumps, storage facilities, transmission and distribution water mains, service lines, and other equipment to deliver water. They provide about 90 percent of Americans with their tap water. Approximately 3,000 of these community systems provide more than 75 percent of the nation's water. Our nation's drinking water infrastructure is an asset that all Americans rely on every day. It is a cornerstone of both our nation's economic well-being and our public health. Largely buried underground and invisible to the average American, it is also an asset many have taken for granted.

The greatest challenge facing community water systems today is aging pipes and other water infrastructure. It is not uncommon in older systems to find pipes that were laid in the 19th century. Due to patterns of investment made to serve population growth beginning well over a century ago, water utilities are experiencing an urgent and increasing need to repair and replace this aging infrastructure. As many communities are finding, failure to repair and replace aging infrastructure can result in a loss of valuable water resources, significant economic impacts, and increased risks to public health.

Municipal decay and blight are almost always directly related to deteriorating infrastructure. Sometimes it is difficult to tell which comes first. Local jurisdictions must find new ways to provide resources and revenue streams to maintain the aging infrastructure. A recent example is in the State of Illinois where public infrastructure is being privatized and sold to private industry. Although many issues arise when public services are completely privatized it is apparent that the individual

taxpayer cannot shoulder the financial burden alone. Another example is the state of Missouri's attempt to reconstruct and rebuild over 800 bridges and have the private sector pay for the bridges up front and maintain them for 25 years. The state would not make a payment until all 800 bridges were completed and in operations. This is a huge shift in public financial risk and one that symbolizes the future. A final example is in the State of Oregon where a pilot program is outfitting cars with GPS devices that track where the automobiles travel. From the historical GPS data individuals are charged a monthly fee based on the streets and road they traveled the most during a specific time period. It is this type of creative public-private financing that will challenge public administrators in the future to take long term ownership of the public's assets.

Finally public administrators in the future must reestablish the trust and confidence of the public. In many jurisdictions across the country public administrators have lost their effectiveness as they become self-centered instead of community focused and citizen centric. They forget that their role is to provide professional advice and council to elected officials whose role is to represent citizenry and establish good public policy.

As privatization becomes more acceptable, and it will, the opportunities for corruption and graft increase proportionality. This axiomatic process and theory if left unchecked will lead to a further erosion of trust and confidence between the public administrator and the citizen. It is imperative then that public administrators ensure that the future contains processes and systems that provide both functional and ethical oversight and create an environment of ethical behavior within their organizations and within their communities. For public administration to remain a profession it is imperative that the public have an inherent belief that local government, both politician and administrator, will spend its funds wisely and that they will be both ethical and efficient. Without this, profession of public administration loses its relativity and importance.

One key to revitalizing public trust and confidence is education and communication. Providing “civic nutrition” will sprout potential civic empowerment and create communities forged and built on engaged citizenry. Public administrators cannot hide in ivory towers, nor can they be absent from politics. This means focusing energy and providing constant education and communication programs to foster an environment of openness and trust between the public administrator, the elected official and the citizen.

Conclusion

These past five years have been an incredible journey of wonderfully fused experiences, an explosion of new relationships, and periods of great academic discussion and thought. My whole vision of public service and public administration has been both enriched and enlightened. What has been most rewarding, however, is the realization that the profession of public administration is complex, dynamic, and ever changing; more importantly it is in the hands of great people who truly want to continue the legacy. To be successful they will have to develop a unique blend of corporate savvy and public understanding.

All I have attempted to do in this paper is share both what I have learned and what I have gained in knowledge about a profession that I know a little more about than when I started. I still have a lot to learn....