

University of Kansas

MPA Final Essay

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April 2, 2007

"I am grateful that I live in such a country with a wonderful system of democracy. Not only am I given a voice as a citizen but also the right to serve within it as well. I have learned that what makes America so great is not only an institution of government but the people who are so willing to serve the public through it."

-Jennifer A. May, KU Entrance Exam

Prior to attending the University of Kansas and enrolling in the KU Master of Public Administration program, my knowledge of Public Administration had more to do with the Pendleton Act of 1883 and Civil Service Reform than it did with the intricacies of city management. My experience in the University of Arkansas' federally-focused Public Administration had undoubtedly shaped my views of government, yet I knew that I wanted to be a public servant at the local level. Today, as I near the completion of my MPA, I am even more enthusiastic about local government public service than I was when I first stepped onto the KU campus.

My understanding of the career I have chosen has, however, been molded, shaped, and challenged throughout the last two years in the classroom, in my part-time internship in Merriam, Kansas, and in my full-time position in Sugar Land, Texas. While I knew that I would be taking core Public Administration courses such as Budgeting, Public Finance, and Human Resources, I did not expect that my experiences in the KU MPA program would fundamentally challenge and transform my thoughts and understanding about city management, what is required to be successful, and the role of local government.

Of all the lessons I have learned during the last two years, three stand out, as these three have most changed my thought process and views of local government. First, I have learned that there are often no right answers, only competing values. Secondly, I realize now how crucial self-awareness is; it is not just some "touchy-feely" topic, it is a large component of success. And lastly, I no longer think that limited government is always the best government.

No Right Answers, Only Competing Values

In my entrance essay to KU, I wrote a lot about wanting to be an honest public servant the public could trust. I thought that my positive impact would come from "standing up for

what is right, not just what is easy or has always been done.”¹ I saw the world as black and white, and I thought that I was going to be the Clint Eastwood of public servants, riding in on my white, right horse to defend local governments from the outlaws on black horses. I thought that I, as part of the professional management, would have to constantly defend my professionalism, morals, and expertise from elected officials. Even as I was about to finish my on-campus coursework and begin my full-time internship, I thought that there would always be obvious “right” answers, or best practices, and that my job would be to memorize and strive to implement them.

I now know that all too often, however, there are not “right” answers; instead of right versus wrong, it is often a values conflict between two right choices. This idea- that there could be multiple right answers depending on what a person valued most- was hard for me to adjust to at first, as I was so used to being able to check my work with an answer key and know if I was right or wrong. In a culture of competing values, however, that is just not possible.

Instead, I learned that I must understand and appreciate that there are four values around which conflict is almost always centered; these values are: (1) Political Responsiveness- “the belief that government answers to the will of the people expressed through elected officials,” (2) Efficiency- “the desire to maximize the ratio of inputs to outputs in any management process,” (3) Individual Rights- emphasis on protecting citizens from “unfair actions of government officials,” and (4) Social Equity- emphasis on “fairness to groups...that would otherwise be disadvantaged by a market economy that accepts the legitimacy of discrimination.”²

This idea of values made sense to me at first, but I had always thought public administration was all about efficiency. I struggled to see at first why efficiency should be sacrificed for something like social equity or individual rights. However, as I have begun my

full-time public service career, I have come to recognize the importance of each of the values- especially as I now see examples of values-conflicts almost everyday,

For example, efficiency and social equity conflict with each other in our procurement process, which requires that you call two Historically Underutilized Businesses when calling for quotes. Further, the open meetings laws that I think sometimes slow staff down in being able to get answers and direction from our Governing Body are there to protect the individual rights of citizens to know what is going on in their government. These are not issues of “right” versus “wrong;” rather, they are values-conflicts.

Another example is the conflict between the efficiency of professional standards and responsiveness. For instance, last summer, we had a very upset neighborhood group pressuring City Council to direct staff to lower the speed-limit on a four lane, divided street after staff explained that speed studies conducted by our Public Works Department did not show lowering the speed limit was warranted. Eventually, the speed limit was lowered, and at first I was annoyed because I thought it was another instance of the City bending rules for an upset vocal minority; I saw professional standards as the “right” answer. After more thought, however, I realized the solution wasn’t wrong, it just gave more deference to representativeness than to efficiency.

Another thing that I hadn’t realized was there can be a conflict over the same value. For instance, the City of Sugar Land’s history of having once been a “company town” owned by the Imperial Sugar Company has left ingrained in our residents that business-like government is best and most efficient. Thus, the prevalence of us contracting out services is both indicative of our Council’s responsiveness to their constituents and of the value they themselves place on efficiency.

Yet, even though residents, Council, and staff all agree that efficiency in day-to-day operations is important and most often achieved through privatization, there is an ongoing

debate that we should begin to bring some services back in house for the sake of efficiency. Part of this argument is supported by the fact that when overhead and contract administration costs are accounted for, there are just some services that we can provide in-house for less money. However, an equally important part of this shift is the realization that efficiency means more than “the cheapest.”

Privatization is only effective so long as private managers have incentives to act in the public interest, and the cheapest services are not always in the public interest³. In the City of Sugar Land, part of acting in the public interest means being amply prepared for emergencies, especially since we are on the Gulf Coast and vulnerable to hurricanes. And after facing the threat of Hurricane Rita in 2005, the City of Sugar Land realized that its tendency to privatize services had huge implications for the efficiency of its emergency preparedness.

A main focus of our emergency preparedness plan is the post-disaster debris clearing, and for this to be efficiently done in our City of more than 76,000 people and over 30 square miles (and with a penchant for streets with tree canopies), the less than 40 employees in our Public Works Department will likely have to rely on our contractors to provide assistance. This, however, impedes efficiency. Even though most of our contractors are contractually obligated to provide services such as solid-waste removal during an emergency, the City has little control over whether or not their front-line laborers choose to stay during the storm or evacuate, whereas the City has deemed all employees as “essential” and requires that they stay. Thus, to improve our efficiency in this area, we need to hire additional personnel and bring some services back in-house- something that flies in the face of the typical idea that increased privatization leads to increased efficiency.

Recognizing that there are so many values conflicts, including the possibility of conflicts over the *same* value, and so few “right” answers, I have learned that successful

managers have to be creative and cannot just blindly apply best practices while ignoring the values of stakeholders. Successful managers have to be committed to creative compromise- no matter how difficult and slow it can be. In Sugar Land's efficiency case, because privatization impacts all of the organizational personnel functions- planning, acquisition, development, and sanctions⁴- it is likely that this debate will be resolved slowly over time.

Slowly resolving values conflicts is definitely different from my original idea of public service as a life of vigorously defending "right" from "wrong," just as Clint Eastwood did in all of his old-western shoot-outs. Slow compromise, however, no longer seems like the cowardly way out to me; it seems like the best way- after all, compromise has "little to do with splitting the difference or sacrificing important values to pragmatic considerations," but it is instead a powerful way "of defending and expressing important values in enduring practical ways."⁵

Self-Awareness and Success

While understanding that values conflicts are more prevalent than "right" answers will likely allow me to be more a more successful public servant, I have realized over the last two years that my success will be limited if I don't understand the importance of self-awareness. While I was always interested in self-awareness and enjoyed taking the Strength Deployment Inventory, I was skeptical at first about how something so "touchy-feely" could really be the cornerstone of success. However, once I began working full-time in Sugar Land and becoming more involved in different working relationships, I began to understand just how crucial it is.

Self-awareness is defined as the ability to recognize how you are feeling, why you feel that way, and how your behavior impacts others.⁶ Self-awareness, which includes both assertiveness and empathy, allows people to build the "mutually satisfying relationships" that "provide the backbone of strong management."⁷ Self-awareness also allows people to

recognize the changes they need to make to become even better employees, friends, and people.⁸ Over the last ten months, I have really seen how self awareness, especially assertiveness and empathy, impacts success; I now understand that I could have all the technical knowledge in the world, but if I am not self-aware, I will not be successful.

The greatest example of this I have seen is the working relationship between my boss and one of her direct reports. Though my boss has never taken the SDI, she is undoubtedly a “Green” who always emphasizes the importance of thoroughly thinking things through and is rewarded by environments that give her the time to explore options.⁹ However, one of her direct reports is very much a “Red” who tends to compete for authority, tries to exercise persuasion, and is rewarded by fast-moving environments.¹⁰ Neither motivational value system is “right,” but misunderstandings can certainly lead to challenges.

Instead of understanding that our boss is most rewarded when she is able to understand the details before making a decision, the direct report perceives it as a lack of trust and is often offended and hurt. This conflict is sometimes exacerbated by the direct report’s lack of assertiveness in explaining the perceived lack of trust to our boss, which unfortunately leads to a lot of arguments over motivational value systems disguised as arguments about facts.

Not only has this observation demonstrated the importance of self-awareness to my infant career- especially as I tend to struggle with assertiveness myself- it has also caused me to pause and think about the areas of self-awareness that are also important to my future success as a city manager, particularly empathy. Empathy, “the ability to be aware of, to understand and to appreciate the feelings and thoughts of others,” is essentially “being able to ‘emotionally read’ other people,” and without it, relationships can sometimes become tense and antagonistic, creating unhealthy and stressful environments that lead to “dwindling productivity.”¹¹

Thus, I will need to invest in understanding my employees' motivations so that I will recognize when my actions create a perception that I lack trust or appreciation, and empathy will be key. Instead of letting a misunderstanding fester, empathy will allow me to shift "an adversarial relationship to a collaborative relationship."¹² Such an empathetic approach to city management will also be crucial in allowing me to understand and appreciate the viewpoints of councilmembers that I may not personally agree with or even like, which is extremely important, as adversarial relationships with councilmembers do not often lead to success in city management.

Overall, I have come to realize that success is dependent on one's ability to build relationships. Building relationships is not a science requiring technical knowledge; rather, it requires self-awareness- and a commitment to character, namely "patience, kindness, humility, selflessness, respectfulness, forgiveness, honesty, (and) commitment."¹³ This understanding is just as important to my success as my academic knowledge is.

The Role of Local Government: Limited Not Always Best

Though the first two lessons were major realizations for me, what has surprised me the most is that my view of the fundamental role of local government has evolved dramatically. Coming into the KU program, I thought that the best government was a limited one- one that let individual citizens do what they thought was best, so long as it was legal. I, however, no longer feel that way; I now believe that local governments must sometimes intrude upon individual rights in order to protect the interests of its citizens, which, when left to individuals or the market economy, are sometimes disregarded and ignored.

For example, prior to enrolling in the KU MPA program, I was not akin to the idea that local governments could regulate land-uses, where development was to occur, or even what kind of signs you could display. I felt that if a majority of citizens in a community wanted to

live in an aesthetically pleasing and livable community, then that it was their community would be. It took me working in Sugar Land for several months, however, to realize that sometimes local governments have to step in and provide regulations- such as land-use controls- in order to ensure that the community is reflective of citizens' wishes. Further, I now also believe that that strict land-use controls can actually be beneficial for municipalities, as they help prevent uncontrolled development, which often "imposes more in the way of municipal costs than it contributes in the way of municipal revenues,"¹⁴ and help increase citizens' quality of life by protecting natural resources and often lessening the dependence on automobiles.¹⁵

Having worked in Sugar Land for close to a year, I see how great an environment is created by such strict controls. All I have to do is drive to nearby Houston, famous for its lack of zoning and the prevalence of the individual rights mentality, to see what can result without such controls. Instead of advocating that Houston's mentality is best, I argue that Sugar Land has the right- and the responsibility- to establish such controls; I no longer see it as an infringement upon individual rights, but as a way that government can better protect the wishes of the majority of citizens than we as individuals can.

While my changed beliefs on land-use controls was a major evolution, the biggest change in my beliefs is that I now believe that governments have a right to regulate other aspects of citizens' lives as well, such as whether or not individuals may smoke in restaurants. I can remember being vehemently opposed to the City of Fayetteville, Arkansas' proposed smoking ordinance my sophomore year of college and even arguing with some of my KU classmates about such ordinances; to me, the thought of the government telling a private business owner what he or she could allow inside his or her own business was ludicrous. I now, however, understand that local governments cannot always rely on the market economy

to be representative of citizens' desires for social changes, such as the institution of a comprehensive smoking ban.

It was not until the City of Sugar Land began debating making its smoking ordinance more restrictive that I realized that even if all of our residents wanted a smoke-free environment, it likely would not happen until the City regulated such an environment. One Councilmember even mentioned that a restaurant owner told him it would *help* if the City passed such an ordinance prohibiting smoking at all restaurants in the City limits, as this would alleviate his fear of losing business to nearby restaurants that will not enact bans without being directed to do so by the City. It was this debate that really illustrated to me that a 100 percent deferral to individual rights and the market economy is not always a panacea; instead, sometimes local governments must step in and provide regulations in order to protect the wishes of its citizens, which are sometimes discriminated against by the market economy. (However, I still understand that a 100 percent deferral to responsiveness could lead to chaos as well, especially if the majority of citizens wanted their government to enact discriminatory laws or illegal regulations.)

Four years ago- or even just one year ago- I would have never thought that I would come to have so much respect for local governments that step in and enact regulations to protect the wishes of those sometimes discriminated against by a market economy. I never thought that there would be instances in which I would place more of a value on social equity than I would individual rights- or that I would come to see government as something that shouldn't always be limited. But, that is exactly what has happened.

Conclusion

Writing this essay- and reflecting on how much my thoughts about public service and local government have changed since writing my entrance essay to the KU MPA program- has

reinforced how much I have learned over the last two years. In those two years, I have not only graduated from the University of Arkansas, completed my graduate school coursework at the University of Kansas, completed a part-time internship in Merriam, Kansas, and begun my full-time public service as a Management Assistant in Sugar Land, Texas, I have also come to a deeper understanding of what it means to be a public servant- and what it does not mean.

Instead of being vigorously defending “right” from “wrong,” I know that a public servant is committed to creative compromise and is always seeking to become more self-aware. Public service is not championing individual rights or limited government at the expense of social equity or any other value; rather, it is balancing the values while being empathetic enough to understand and appreciate the feelings of others.

And though, in only a matter of weeks, I will graduate with an MPA from the top City Management Public Administration program in the United States, writing this essay has also shown me how much I still have to learn. I know now that graduation is not the end of learning, it is only the beginning- and I am confident that I have become part of an amazing family of KUCIMATs- friends, classmates, alumni, and faculty- that will help me through any challenges I may face in the future. I am so grateful to be a part of this KUCIMAT family and for the experiences I had in the KU program, but I am also grateful- as I wrote in my entrance essay- that I live in a country with a wonderful system of democracy and have been given not only a voice as a citizen, but also the right to serve within it.

End Notes

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- ¹ May, Jennifer. *KU Entrance Essay*. Dec 2004.
 - ² Klinger, Donald E. and John Nalbandian. (2003). *Public Personnel Management: Context and Strategies*.
 - ³ Goodman, John B. and Gary W. Loveman. (1991). "Does Privatization Serve the Public Interest?" *Harvard Business Review*. 69 (Nov-Dec), 26-40.
 - ⁴ Klinger, Donald E. and John Nalbandian. (2003). *Public Personnel Management: Context and Strategies*.
 - ⁵ Frederickson, H. George. "Public Administration and Quiet Leadership." Summer 2005.
 - ⁶ Stein, Steven J. and Howard E. Book. (2006). *The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*.
 - ⁷ Stein, Steven J. and Howard E. Book. (2006). *The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*, p. 31.
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 - ⁹ Porter, Elias H. (1973). *Strength Deployment Inventory*.
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 - ¹¹ Stein, Steven J. and Howard E. Book. (2006). *The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*, pp. 61, 125.
 - ¹² Stein, Steven J. and Howard E. Book. (2006). *The EQ Edge: Emotional Intelligence and Your Success*, p. 125.
 - ¹³ Hunter, James C. (1998). *The Servant*, p. 167.
 - ¹⁴ Freilich, Robert H. (1999). *From Sprawl to Smart Growth: Successful Legal, Planning, and Environmental Systems*. Chicago: American Bar Association.
 - ¹⁵ Benfield, F. Kaid, Jutka Terris, and Nancy Vorsanger. "Solving Sprawl with Smart Growth." Selection (pp. 1-6) from *Solving Sprawl: Models of Smart Growth Across America*. New York: Natural Resources Defense Council, 2001.