

FINAL ESSAY

A REFLECTION ON MY KU MPA EXPERIENCE

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Introduction

The KU Masters of Public Administration (MPA) program has given me the skills, knowledge, and opportunities to serve my local community. When I began this program in June of 2005, I only had a bird's eye view of what it meant to be a city manager and what it truly meant to work in the field of public administration. I entered the MPA program for several reasons. My grandfather worked in local government for 40 years and my father worked in the local public sector as an attorney. This instilled in me a passion to serve and work with the public to better my local community. My undergraduate major in Political Science and my undergraduate minor, Public Service and Civic Leadership, at Kansas University (KU) built a strong foundation for me to enter the MPA program. My undergraduate studies gave me the impression I was entering a field where I would encourage citizen engagement, social capital, and would make government more efficient. I thought city managers led the way in revitalizing downtown areas and helped to create a sense of "community". Many city managers do just this, but this profession is so much more.

When I began the program, I did not have the capacity to understand what a career in city management really entailed, and how my perspective would change after being a student in the MPA program. I had no idea the concepts I learned in the classroom would be true in the real world, and the theories I studied and wrote seemingly endless papers about would actually ring true in real life. These concepts and this two-year experience have both shaped the way I thought about city management and have helped to mold me into the administrator I hope to be someday. This MPA experience has

changed the way I thought of *public administration* and has given me a new perspective on what it really takes to be a professional administrator in local government.

Public Administration as a Concept

What does public administration mean to me, a student and intern in the KU MPA program? George Frederickson (1997) begins his book, “The Spirit of Public Administration,” by approaching the concept of *public administration* and what it means in daily public management. According to Frederickson, management has to do with immediate and pressing questions of how to do things effectively, efficiently, and equitably. The bigger question of public administration has to do with the beliefs, values, and customs of those who practice it. I have learned public management is not just managing people and projects. It is a practice based on the idea of competing values and how those values shape the daily decisions, managing practices, and the overall profession of a public administrator.

Competing Values

Values and administration cannot be separated. Managers in their day-to-day decision-making act on values just as much as facts, according to Frederickson. The competing values (representation, social equity, individual rights, and efficiency) fundamentally characterize public administration. A professional manager desires to serve the public and to provide efficient and professional management. However, managers often find themselves in the democratic and political arena, which may minimize the underlying nature of their job as a professional manager. Moreover, the first tenet in the ICMA Code of Ethics (2004) states, “Be dedicated to the concepts of effective and democratic local government by responsible elected officials and believe

that professional general management is essential to the achievement of this objective.”

The profession of city management is defined by efficiency, and the distinct commitment to community and democratic values, along with equitable service delivery. The manager must remain responsive to the public through the elected officials, while ultimately working towards efficiency, balancing these values with the rights of citizens and insuring fairness to all groups of people.

Public administrators are continually being asked to balance these four values. This is something Professor John Nalbandian reiterated in his class to his students. To be completely honest, I only partially understood the balance of the four core values, until my full-time internship experience. I assumed administrators could balance each value equally, but now I understand that every situation is nothing more than a balancing act. These values are almost on a teeter totter of some sort, continually moving up and down, playing a game of give and take, as each policy and decision is made.

The idea of competing values has been most evident to me through the many problems with awarding bids in Grand Junction. The City staff and the City Council have had several conflicting issues over the awarding of bids to outside contractors. There have been two memorable instances over the past year. City staff recommended the purchase of BMW police motorcycles from an outside vendor, who was the lowest bidder, instead of purchasing motorcycles from the local Harley dealer. The other instance happened last month. City staff recommended awarding a contract on a \$7 million pipe project to a firm from Golden, CO, who was the low bidder and the least risk to the City, instead of awarding the bid the second lowest bidder, who happened to be a local contractor. Both of these instances have been extremely controversial.

The Council continually emphasizes being politically responsive to the local contractors. This is in contrast to what the manager values. The manager might want to be responsive to the local bidder/citizen, but must speak to efficiency, equity, and individual rights. The manager has the inherent responsibility to decide who will give the City the “most bang for the buck” and award a bidder who presents the least amount of threat. Both equity and individual rights must be emphasized because there cannot be individual bias in a purchasing agreement; each firm has the right to bid in a competitive environment. Each contractor is assured that they are on equal footing with the City until the bids are opened. The city manager tries to be responsive to the local citizen, but has a duty to have a fair bidding process and policies that uphold the rights of the contractors to a fair process. On the other hand, the City Council seems to view this more as being politically responsive. They tend to feel it is more effective to have local contractors when applicable, and they feel a duty to uphold the individual rights of the local bidder. The Council does not seem to be looking at this contracting policy from an equity standpoint. When the four values are examined, it is easy to see why purchasing agreements can be so controversial between the Council and staff.

These competing values came into play when the City Council decided to have the Grand Junction Fire Department handle all emergency services, as of July 2006, in the Grand Valley area. Four out of seven members believed emergency services are inherently a government responsibility and believed the quality of emergency services would be improved. The City Council was trying to be responsive to citizens. They wanted to heighten effectiveness and efficiency, while respecting the rights of a citizen’s need for quality emergency services, due to the fact that many very rural areas in the

County were not covered by *any* provider. However, the Council had to give up social equity and individual rights in this instance because the two other ambulance providers had to shut down operations after this decision. The two other ambulance providers were no longer permitted to run emergency services within county limits. I learned this balancing act of values can be extremely political.

The politics of public administration is one area I have started to understand more through the MPA program. The City Council of Grand Junction seemingly bickers a lot, perhaps that is because there is confusion as to what their role is in the organization as policymakers. Understanding the political ramifications and personal ramifications of the Council's decisions is something that I still try to understand. I continue to try to evaluate the option from the other person's point of view, and I try to consider how the Council will be criticized for it from the public or the media. However, it is still a learning process to understand how the city manager fits into this political sphere.

The Role of the City Manager

During my full-time internship, I was able to observe the hiring of the new city manager in Grand Junction, which was a tremendous learning experience. One of the top candidates pointed out the four main roles of a city manager: to provide leadership, to advise council with solid recommendations and to communicate with the council to create a single "voice", to manage staff operations, and to manage external relationships. To put it bluntly, (as I always like to do), **managers make things happen**, period. They carry out policy and generate change, while balancing the four main values, something not easily done.

City managers also have the duty to be leaders and relationship builders. Leaders accomplish tasks while building relationships. This MPA experience has revealed to me the importance of relationships in public administration; relationships with staff, the community, the council, other governmental entities, and many more. Public administration is not just about budgets, policies, or human resources, it is about relationships and leading people, which are all influenced by values, behavior, and attitude demonstrated in the work place.

The city manager has many duties and responsibilities that frame his/her job. The manager has an obligation to the citizens to run a smooth, responsive, and efficient city and also has obligations to both elected officials and employees. Priorities and moral judgments that drive decision-making are imperative in public administration. Sticking to a strict code of ethics and taking responsibility for your actions is essential. Local officials must have integrity and feel a duty to uphold what they believe in and do what is right, unless it comes at the expense of the public good. In order to do this, self-awareness plays a key role in public administration.

Self-awareness

Self-awareness is a major subject in several classes and the second year seminars. Becoming more self-aware is a huge step in knowing myself as a future manager. I have come to learn more about myself through my experience and the portfolio project. Using the two tools, the Student Deployment Inventory (SDI) and the Emotional Quotient Inventory (EQI), have helped me to become more self-aware of the type of leader I am and the areas I need to improve upon to become a better leader, such as *empathy*. Denahrtdt (2002) states, “Knowledge of ourselves not only is valuable from a personal

standpoint but also is critical to success and satisfaction in our work lives” (19). Part of becoming more self-aware is to understand traits, feelings, and behaviors.

A lesson I learned in self-awareness came from a letter that was written by the interim Fire Chief of Grand Junction to all the Grand Junction Fire Department members. He was given a letter two weeks prior to that from the unrecognized fire “union” that stated he was bowing down to the pressure of City Administration and should stand up for what is correct. He stated, “I expect to be held accountable for my actions and I expect each of you to be accountable for your actions. Integrity is non-negotiable. Each and every person in this Department must have and demonstrate unquestionable integrity. Without each of us possessing and demonstrating integrity, our Department is doomed to mediocrity or worse. We owe to one another and our community the highest moral and ethical behavior.” This letter proved the interim Fire Chief knows exactly who he is as a person and what he stands for. Anything less than this is not acceptable from a public manager and also demonstrates that a professional public administrator must have a set of core values that continually leads them.

Communication

Denhardt (2002) states, “In public service, we must be concerned not only with leading and motivating others but also with doing so in a manner that is consistent with democratic values and the public interest” (6). Engaging the public and openness were key lessons I took away from many of my professors at KU. A public servant must encourage the public to become more involved to help foster the sense of community. The public needs to feel part of a community. To have a civically engaged community, there must be citizen participation. Citizen's involvement is a cornerstone of local

government and networking amongst the public is important to have social capital in the community. The most important aspect is that people get involved in building their communities. An active public keeps communities strong and keeps our civil society from rapidly diminishing.

The external relations that managers are now involved in are requiring managers to develop new skills that go beyond managing the internal affairs of the public organization, as stated by Denhardt (2002). Communication is critical in motivating participation or making it possible. Public managers are using communication to emphasize civic participation, which is the main element of functioning democratic societies because it guides collective action towards community building, according to Shah et al. (2005). Establishing a positive relationship with the media and keeping communication lines open to insure accurate information is necessary. Communication between local governments and citizens is invaluable for maintaining government transparency that pilots civic engagement. This has become very apparent to me in my current community. Communication is essential, because Grand Junction has two local newspapers and three television stations, therefore the City organization is in the media daily. Educating the media and our relationship with local media outlets are both vital.

Internal communication is also vital to the organization. Denhardt (2002) points out that “Communication sustains organizations” (260). I have been able to learn communication within the organization not only helps with the idea of transparency, but it also needs to be a norm in the organizational culture. The prior city manager of Grand Junction has been said to have changed the openness and communicative culture in the organization over a six year period. It became common to exclude employees and

department heads from conversations and therefore, the organization became extremely top-down. There was not a deep level of involvement and communication to employees was minimal. I have seen the problems that arise when there was a lack of internal communication. Recently, the city manager decided to reorganize the City's organization. There was a real lack in communication and rumors started regularly. Many employees felt "out of the loop," and morale was noticeably lower during this period. Many employees were frustrated with the changes, and the organization had a sense of panic for several weeks. Not only is communication highly sought and valued in organizations, but it is a key element truly valued in the community.

Public Administration- *is it humanly possible?*

After reflecting on what it takes to be a public administrator and all the qualities that one person must possess, I find myself thinking, "*Is it humanly possible?*" How do you balance time with staff, versus time with council, versus time with citizens? As the City of Grand Junction, CO began their search for their next City Manager, the consulting firm held a session and outlined many of the major attributes that employees were seeking from their future City Manager. Staff wanted someone who can manage today, but has the intuition to long-range plan. They are seeking someone who is personable, passionate, and has public speaking skills. Being financially erudite is a key attribute, as well as a leader who can lead a dynamic organization in a rapidly growing community. How can one person do all of these things and have all of these attributes? How can a person live up to their list of expectations? This experience was quite a lesson for me as a future administrator. Not only was it a lesson, but a true wake up call about my future expectations and how the KU MPA program has prepared me for my future career path.

The KU MPA Program, what it means to me

The Edwin O. Stene program is a very special program, mostly because it is based on four principles: formal coursework, the mix of experience and coursework, the portfolio project, and the learning aspect from fellow professionals. This program sets itself apart by giving its students a core curriculum of coursework along with real-life experience. This internship experience has proven to be invaluable and could never be replicated in the classroom. The entire MPA experience has shaped what public administration means to me.

Many people outside of the program do not realize this is not just a program. It is not just another graduate school, but a program that changes lives. I began my full-time internship during a very hard period of my life. I moved 1,000 miles away from what I had known, from my entire life. I feel like this profession and program is one of the best things that could have ever happened to me. What makes this program so unique and special is the full-time internship and of course, my twelve classmates. These are fellow interns I continually turn to for advice and have become very special people in my life, even though we are miles apart.

On a more personal note, I have never felt so excited about my life and my career. I appreciate what KU and this MPA program has done for me. The reason this program has dedicated alumni and so much support, is because this program gives students an immense amount of opportunities. It has opened doors for me and given me opportunities that no amount of tuition money could replace. I am very grateful for this. The opportunity I have had in Grand Junction, CO has been amazing. I continually learn and most of all, the people in the organization are *willing* to give me the opportunities to

learn. I have also found several mentors in the organization, including several department heads and the new deputy city manager. I really enjoy the work I am involved in and the people in the organization are outstanding. I could not have asked for a better internship experience and am looking forward to possibly staying in the organization or moving on in about a year.

As I come upon graduation, I know this is not the end. Graduation is only the beginning of my professional career and is the *commencement* of a life-long learning process. I have faculty, alumni, and classmates that I know will always support me. These people are my solid foundation, which was built by the KU MPA program.

Works Cited

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