Master of Public Administration Capstone Paper

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Professional Goals and Public Service Value

I have always been intrigued by public service and leadership; however, I did not know what this career path entailed nor how I could contribute with my values and ideas. The Master of Public Administration (MPA) program has introduced me to the idea of applying my efforts to a field of work that is crucial for the progression of the rural communities across the counties. My interest in public service has always been so vast, including housing, education, health care, employment, voting, transportation, and access to technology. These interests emerged during my adolescence as I have encountered some form of adversity in each of these sectors. These experiences have shown me how these systems truly impact the livelihood of individuals of various rankings, ages, career paths, and a community's sustainability. I have chosen to pursue a generalist path within my MPA career, as the Higher Education Administration, Local Government Administration, and Nonprofit Administration concentrations catch my interest. They provided relevant information about what I am looking to pursue as my way of contributing to society.

The MPA program at the University of Georgia has provided a solid academic experience with a practical education that applies to real-world circumstances and coincides with my public service values. I have strengthened my technical and quantitative skills through coursework in public financial administration, research methods, data application, and my ability to analyze data through the foundations of public policy courses. From the start of the program, I wanted to gain skills, knowledge, and credibility to become the National President of the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP), as this is an organization that takes a special direction toward reversing the generational impact of slavery and the Jim Crow era. However, the path I would take to achieve this goal has somewhat changed. While I initially wanted to pursue this goal by continuously working with various NAACP organizations across the country, I have decided to

spread my efforts to organizations outside of this conglomerate to use my innovative ideas through organizations that are more concentrated in those concerns areas.

The MPA program has shown me how to apply my creative thinking and innovative ideas for various duties and projects while honing my leadership skills and increasing my ability to analyze data for relevant causes and concerns. I have greatly refined my writing skills and have learned how to think about various issues on a community-wide scale Through my work with the city of Valdosta, Georgia, in my Local Government Practicum (PADP 7580) course. I have also developed my public speaking skills to openly express my ideas and concerns while also developing solutions that can avoid conflict and discrepancies. With these skills and experiences, I am looking forward to my next steps in pursuing a career in the nonprofit sector while building relationships with community leaders that are in a position to make a change in areas where the circumstances are unfavorable.

In addition to the MPA program helping me refine my skills, UGA has also helped refine my professional goals. I do not know exactly where my career path will take me in the long term, whether as the president of the NAACP, the president of a different nonprofit organization, or a policymaker. Still, ultimately, I know that no matter what direction I choose, I am well equipped with the tools provided to me by the MPA program.

Career/Internship Reflection

In keeping with my initial goal of being the national president of the NAACP, I pursued an internship supervised by former Georgia NAACP President Reverend James Woodall during the spring of my first year in the MPA program. Despite challenges posed by the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic, I completed the internship through hybrid interaction: via remote teller work and in person at the state capitol and NAACP office. Although some aspects of the training were more challenging

than others, I could still learn a lot from experience I could apply throughout the MPA program and future employment.

My primary role in the internship was as a policy assistant to Reverend Woodall for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP). The overall mission of the NAACP is to secure political, educational, social, and economic equality of rights to eliminate race-based discrimination and ensure the health and wellbeing of all persons. I was tasked with writing brief sheets for the NAACP President and accompanying him to the state capital for hearings and meetings through this internship. Given the fast-paced nature of the legislative environment, it was necessary to keep all written materials concise without sacrificing details. This approach extended to press releases memorandums that gave us a synopsis of the provided information. While adhering to page limits was a challenge during my first semester in the MPA program, much practice provided this skill set, an important aspect of public administration.

This internship has also reflected the skills that I have gained in data synthesis and communication. Almost all the research tasks that I have completed have required me to gather information for use in memos or reports that will serve as a reference for other actors in the NAACP and Legislation. These tasks have been relatively straightforward in some cases – for example, compiling a list of representatives for and against HB 740.

My experience with the NAACP has allowed me to learn about parts of the organization I was not previously familiar with. While my career goals will almost certainly keep me within the orbit of Metro Atlanta, it has been fascinating having discussions with district representatives from other regions of the state. I have been able to gain insight into the different issues facing communities in middle, south, and north Georgia and the advantages that may come with working in a smaller community. My experience has also given me familiarity with a variety of random topics, from

major contemporary issues such as the Multi-tiered System of Supports (MTSS) and the Hate Crimes Bill, following the death of Ahmaud Arbery, to relatively small issues like city contracts with county tax commissioners for property tax billing. It has certainly added plenty of color and context to my understanding of how local government operates on a day-to-day basis in this state and provides me with connections and resources inside this organization that I will almost certainly use.

Program Competency Reflection

Competency One: To Lead and Manage in Public Governance

In this section, I will use my experiences in Public Financial Administration (PADP 6930), Public Management (PADP 6960), Research Methods in Public Administration (PADP 7110), and Local Government Management (PADP 7500) to illustrate what I have learned regarding leadership and management within the public and nonprofit sectors. I will discuss working within these sectors and the dynamics of working with other sectors as a public sector representative.

As managers of an agency or organizations that provide essential services to entire communities and regions, it is important for public administrators to understand the importance and dynamics of working in groups and teams to make collaborative decisions, incorporate diverse viewpoints, and create a cohesive and professional product. While public administrators serve in various positions, they are held to a strict code of ethics regarding their accountability to their community. They are generally united by the goal to "advance the public good" (Ott & Dicke, 2015).

In my Local Government Management class, the public service motivation (PSM) theory was discussed to explain why some individuals pursue careers in these sectors. Generally, public, and nonprofit leaders are motivated by an intrinsic desire to improve societal wellbeing. Studies comparing the impact of wages and PSM on public sector employees' performance showed PSM to

be a more significant motivator than wages (Taylor & Taylor, 2011). Managers need to understand why their subordinates are invested in their work to motivate them and support their development. For local managers is to find ways to develop the ability to tackle service needs and challenges while demonstrating that their community is viable. Similarly, we discussed the theme of Public Service Innovation and how it can be applied in the public and private sectors. Although public service innovation is used mainly in the private sector perspective, employing shared values and collaborative nature. Any public administrator needs to know how to include stakeholders in the innovation process, as they are motivated by similar values, such as professionalism, integrity, and innovation.

This competency also identifies leadership and management demands across public and nonprofit sectors. Working in teams has shown me that leadership can take many forms, and often the most effective leaders are not the loudest speakers but the best listeners. In my Leadership in Public Service class, we discussed the benefits of participative leadership and empowerment. Employees input their ideas and perspectives in participative leadership models, and, as a result, changes are more readily accepted because employees are represented during the decision-making process (Yukl, 2013). A trade-off of participative leadership is that it takes much longer to make decisions when more people are invited to the process. When working in teams for MPA assignments, we balanced representing every member's idea with working on a tight deadline. However, while each team member contributed equally to assignments, sometimes one individual would have to take the de facto leadership position and assemble the contributions of the others into a cohesive, finished product.

Leadership is not just about the people in your immediate team. Leaders must be acutely aware of both internal and external conditions to use appropriate leadership techniques given the

context of the issue at hand. My portfolio includes my Yukl Chapter 13 presentation for Dr. Rainey's Leadership course. This presentation discusses the differences and similarities between ethical, servant, spiritual, and authentic leadership theories. Further, I discussed different conceptions of ethical leadership and the difficulties in defining and assessing ethical leadership. My presentation was also used to help my colleagues understand ways to promote ethical behavior and oppose unethical practices.

Other competency exhibits that demonstrate Competency 1 include my synopsis of the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD) and The Cottage, which is a nonprofit organization based in Athens, Georgia that serves the victims of sexual assault in children of abuse in surrounding communities as well. In the synopsis for the GDEcD, my team and I discussed the department's place within the state structure through their organizational chart. The legislative purpose of this department is to attract new business investments to encourage the expansion of existing industries in small businesses in Georgia. The department must follow the Official Code of Georgia Annotated (OCGA), which authorizes the department to make agreements and contracts in accordance with applicable state laws. When discussing The Cottage organization, my team members and I gave a brief history of the organization and its mission, vision, and values. An overview of the organization and its resources was given to show how it continuously grows as the community's needs grow. A SWOT analysis was provided to determine the strengths and weaknesses of their current organization structure and options and recommendations to alleviate current and potential future issues. These exhibits demonstrate an understanding of the intricacy that departments and organizations must have to provide the necessary services for their target community.

Competency Two: Understanding the Public Policy Process

In this section, I will utilize my experiences from my time as an intern for the National Association for the Advancement of Colored People (NAACP) Georgia chapter. My goal is to describe what I have found to be the most important elements of the public policy process: identifying a problem, developing the appropriate research questions, conducting research, and simplifying and communicating research findings and solutions to the public. Throughout the public policy process, communication is the key. Stakeholders should be active participants in developing solutions to the most pressing issues of the day. As public administrators, it is important to consult affected members of the public before implementing widespread changes. The public policy process is constantly happening to address the never-ending list of needs and demands from constituents and community members.

An effective local government administrator should have ongoing channels for soliciting feedback from representative public samples. They provided services to thousands of individuals in the service area. They must engage in regular communication with their service areas to understand the needs of the diverse populations within the region. While administrators are technical experts in their fields, the public is most familiar with their own lives and needs. A crucial first step of the public policy process is surveying the public to identify what needs they find most pressing.

It is known that early childhood experiences have an enormous impact on a child's academic success. These experiences are significantly enhanced through effective evidence-based practices and interventions. Potential outcomes of effective methods and interventions include decreased expulsion, behavioral referrals, and reduction in student retention. House Bill 740 (HB 740) was created to "amend Subpart 1A of Part 2 of Article 16 of Chapter 2 of Title 20 of the Official Code of Georgia Annotated, relating to improved student learning environment and discipline in elementary

and secondary education." This would require local school systems to conduct certain multi-tiered system of supports and reviews before expelling or assigning a student in preschool through third grade to out-of-school suspension for more than five cumulative days during a school year. This bill also requires schools to provide informed parental consent and provide exceptions.

In my internship, and included in my portfolio, the NAACP and Georgia's MTSS team collaborated with the members of the Georgia Department of Education (GaDOE) Instructional Technology team to develop an online platform housing intervention data and processes for MTSS. The platform is called Georgia's Online MTSS/SST, which generates reports for behavior and interventions. The platform currently has 24 districts online, with approximately 117 Georgia having participated in one or more MTSS training events. Charts and graphs referencing Cohort 1 data in the document demonstrate growth with districts implemented as part of the SPDG grant.

The Multi-tiered system of support (MTSS) is used as a systemic, continuous-improvement framework in which data-based problem solving and decision making are practiced identifying areas where students need better support with the educational system at multiple levels of intervention. Using representative data collection to guide research inquiries led the MTSS and Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) teams to the research questions with the highest potential impact on people's lives. Once the appropriate research questions have been identified, the next step should be to collect and analyze data. Once analyzed, information regarding HB 740 and the subsequent State Board of Education Rule, Student Discipline (160-4-8-.15), was given to districts and schools through multiple professional learning events, such as webinars, training events, coaching sessions, conference presentations, and online learning modules. These sessions demonstrated the efforts to ensure educators and school leaders are aware of the new law and examine practices to ensure interventions are provided as needed before long-term suspension or

expulsion. This document also contains graphs and an appendix with examples of resources used in this report.

Public administrators collaborate with people, so data collection has important ethical and logistical challenges that must be met. First, data must be representative of the population you are serving. Additionally, your data collection method must not jeopardize the privacy and security of respondents. For example, a municipality may wish to evaluate the scope of an opioid epidemic in their downtown area but collecting that data should not put honest respondents at risk of arrest or other retaliation. Identifiable traits should be removed from sensitive data to protect respondents' privacy. In Foundations of Policy Analysis, we analyzed community issues from an economic framework. The class was a fascinating discussion of quantitative analysis based on an understanding of how people think and respond.

Finally, the public policy process requires that research findings and policy proposals be understandably communicated with relevant stakeholders. This is evident in the GaDOE's commitment to establishing an MTSS unit within its department to begin working with all districts and schools. Although Positive Behavioral Interventions and Supports (PBIS) were already in place, an additional need emerged with the law to provide universal support to all districts and schools regarding tiered interventions for behavior, especially the Georgia public schools serving Pre-K through 3rd grades. With two teams, MTSS and PBIS, working collaboratively, the numerous resources for tiered interventions would provide information and support to districts and schools to bring about systemic improvements in school-based discipline to benefit all children.

This exhibit demonstrates an understanding of the intricacy of the public policy process at the federal, state, and local levels, involving formulating, implementing, and evaluating policy. Departments and organizations must provide the necessary services for their target community.

Further, I developed the ability to interpret and communicate information regarding policy alternatives through meetings and presentations. Through this internship, I was also able to analyze policy alternatives to evaluate decisions and explain potential ramifications for diverse constituencies.

Competency Three: Analyzing/Synthesizing to Solve Problems and Make Decisions

This section will use my experiences in Public Financial Administration (PADP 6930) and Research Methods in Public Administration (PADP 7110) to describe the various data analysis tools I have utilized while in the MPA program. Specifically, I will detail my data analysis projects from each class that taught me how to use data to make programmatic recommendations.

As the previous section described, data and research are necessary elements of the public policy process. Making evidence-informed decisions requires careful evaluation of available research. By using research appropriately, public administrators can be reasonably confident in the effectiveness of their public policy proposals. Public administrators are often confronted with policy problems that are massive in scale. Administrators must rely on data analysis to scale the issue down to make effective recommendations regarding these problems.

Along with my colleagues, I analyzed the Georgia Department of Economic Development (GDEcD) annual reports to provide effective reasoning for the department's decision-making. The annual report included information regarding Innovation Centers, Film, the Georgia Council for the Arts, Global Commerce, International Relations and Trade, Tourism, and Rural Georgia Initiatives. In particular, the annual report discusses how the explore Georgia tourism industry portal distributed 33 grants to regional visitor information centers and 14 grants to tourism product development. Further, the Tourism division provided a coordinated response to Hurricane Dorian to help evacuees receive alerts and updates about available lodging, traffic conditions, and other critical information to

help travelers safely find their way. Throughout the COVID-19 pandemic, Governor Kemp strived to keep these states safely open for business while balancing livelihoods and public health concerns. Thus, the GDEcD shifted to remote work, and it has been a vital partner with the state in coordinating response efforts and providing guidance for businesses. The Global Commerce division collaborated closely with the governor's office to convey updates and communicate new business safety regulations. This division also coordinated donations of PPE from local companies to local hospitals to help these companies track down needed resources.

The Global Commerce division of the GDEcD increased project locations compared to the prior year despite the global impacts of COVID-19 during the second half of the fiscal year. During this time, the global commerce division has supported the creation of more than 24,000 new jobs and has generated more than $7.4 billion in total investment. Further, the Global Commerce division created 14,000 jobs, and investments totaled $6 billion outside the Atlanta metro region. These new jobs represented 59% of the total employment generated, with investments being 81% of total investment, with manufacturing, logistics, software development, and tech industries experiencing significant growth in both jobs and investments in particular.

In my Research Methods in Public Administration course, my colleagues and I conducted research regarding the effects of social media use on political polarization in the United States. This research study aimed to understand how social media algorithms, specifically those employed by Facebook and Twitter, affect political polarization in all sectors of American society. Specifically, my colleagues and I were investigating whether or not selective exposure and filter bubbles increased social media's impact on polarization and if they would have such an impact on future presidential elections. Political polarization in recent years has revealed a decline in trust and the erosion of democratic norms in American society. Over the past decade, social media has become inextricably

with global news and political landscapes. Citing the transition from journalists curating content in newspapers to social media algorithms curating content on news feeds, the author of the book, The Filter Bubble: What the Internet Is Hiding from You, Eli Pariser, stated in a 2011 TEDTalk: "What we are seeing is more of a passing of the torch from human gatekeepers to algorithmic ones. And the thing is that the algorithms do not yet have the kind of embedded ethics that the editors did" (Pariser, 2011). this study was used to understand the impact of an individual social media platform of choice and its usage on affective polarization (Bail, et al., 2018).

Our conceptual framework hypothesized that selective exposure and echo chambers are positively associated with political polarization. Further, we hypothesize that there would be a differential positive association between the ranking algorithms of Facebook and Twitter as they relate to political polarization. Regarding research design, we determined that a non-experimental design would be best for understanding the relationship between selective exposure and echo chambers and affective polarization for our first research question. We choose to conduct a longitudinal non-experiment because we are not treating our study group with anything. We are simply observing the group's selective exposure and how they form echo chambers using Facebook and Twitter's algorithms. For our second research question, we determined that a quasi-experimental design would be best for understanding individual platform algorithms and affective polarization. Specifically, we chose to use a difference in differences design with a comparison group quasi-experiment because of the cross-comparison of Twitter and Facebook algorithms with individual increases in political polarization.

Our population of interest was voting-age individuals living in the United States. For our first research question, we sought to identify target populations of 200 individuals who active social media users and one hundred individuals who were did not have active social media accounts. Of the

200 individuals with active social media accounts, we planned to use the subsampling technique from our simple random sample to distinguish the individuals who use Twitter the most and those who use Facebook the most to identify 100 active Twitter users and 100 active Twitter Facebook users. Our data collection methods included gathering data through primary sources, such as the United States census and general social survey data. The data will be collected from the United States Census Bureau website and the National Opinion Research Center at the University of Chicago to randomly select the participants for a pretest and post-test.

Competency Four: The Public Service Perspective

This section will use what I have learned from Local Government Management (PADP 7500). I will describe how my MPA classes have developed my professional code of ethics and how the public administration theory and history we have studied have shaped my understanding of the field as a whole. There is a substantial amount of responsibility that accompanies the title of a public administrator. I feel confident that the training I have received, which I will recount in the subsequent paragraphs, has equipped me to uphold the high standard of public administrators' accountability.

Collaborative governance requires public administrators to successfully engage with intergovernmental organizations to tackle issues that cross jurisdictional boundaries. Today, engaging citizens in local government has become more critical given the current tensions in American politics and the distrust for the government. Involvement can range from being informed of decisions and actions to actively providing feedback and information in public hearings to advise or influence program implementation (Nelson & Stenberg, 2018). In my PADP 7500 final exam, I discussed ways to develop constructive approaches to engage the public in local governance by allowing more opportunities for direct democracy. These opportunities could bypass representative democracy and enable citizens to place policy proposals on general election valid ballots or vote to

confirm legislative actions. This would allow citizens to participate as coproducers with government agencies within their community, such as adopting highway programs, crime stopper programs, and recycling.

Additionally, facilitating citizen engagement can build the desire for the public to get more involved and identify a sense of community and responsibility. This engagement can also produce better outcomes and responses to the needs of targeted populations and achieve more buy-in from both funding agencies and affected citizens (Nelson & Stenberg, 2018). Recognizing the ability of citizens to influence local government decisions and promoting active involvement can increase the power of the local government to reach out to citizens and instill a solid commitment to their community. The local government must use these engagement efforts concurrently to achieve optimal engagement from those in the community, including stakeholders and advocates. Developing creative content is a great way to engage citizens in the local government and retain their involvement and input. Local government officials with a background in media can propel to be excellent spokespersons for their local government. The collaborative governance necessary for community engagement could involve interacting with other agencies and departments, for instance, the Sustainability Office in partnership with the Office of Public Engagement (Amir, 2021). Ajeenah Amir stated that a heavy emphasis on strong, effective, and clear communication channels is necessary to encourage transparency of the local government to the citizens and community (Amir, 2021).

Competency Five: Communicating with a Diverse Workforce and Citizenry

In this section, I will use my experiences in Public Personnel (PADP 6920), Research Methods (PADP 7110), and my internship with NAACP to describe what I have learned about communicating and representing the wishes of diverse populations in public administration. While

public administration has a history of white men in positions of power leading in the interests of other white men and women, I am grateful that this issue of diversity has seen special attention in recent years. However, more could be done to include the voices of marginalized populations. In Public Personnel Administration, we discussed the steps necessary to actively pursue diversity as part of an organization's hiring strategy (Pynes, 2013). First, an organization needs to meet diverse populations where they are. This means that an organization needs to recruit for positions among communities that represent diverse populations. This could include advertising in languages other than English or publishing job notices in minority-concentrated community centers. Next, human resource administrators need to be careful in selecting tools to narrow down the applicant pool. This was made evident in my presentation on Uniform Guidelines on Employment Selection Procedures, 29 CFR Part 1607 (1978).

Some applicant assessment methods have an adverse impact on minority populations. Suppose an HR team deems an assessment method necessary, despite its adverse impact on minorities. In that case, that adverse impact should be considered when evaluating the assessment results. While they have high validity, cognitive ability tests and job knowledge tests hurt minority candidates. Other assessment methods, like personality tests, integrity tests, and structured interviews, have far less of an adverse impact on minority candidates. It is vital for HR professionals and managers to consider the potential biases that could hurt a minority candidate throughout the hiring process. Public administrators must always consider how their language resonates with diverse individuals in their community.

Conclusion

In the end, I have found that my experience in the Master of Public Administration program at the University of Georgia through my courses, assignments, and peer discussions has fostered the

learning needed to master the five program competencies. My competency exhibits highlight the wide array of work I have done over the past two years since joining the MPA family. I have been given an opportunity to assess my own public service values and test them in true nonprofit and local government settings. The opportunity that this Capstone allowed me to reflect on the knowledge and experiences I have gained through this program will guide me in the years to come. The MPA program has offered a challenging academic setting to hone my skills and rediscover my values. The faculty in the MPA program has also provided mentorship along the way. The experiences and relationships I have gained through this program will also greatly impact how I navigate through the public administration field after I graduate.

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