

# Mastering the Discipline

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On several occasions I have been asked the following question: Why do professors make it a point to critique students on discussion boards (on-line setting) or in the traditional classroom instead of by individual e-mail, and why are course requirements so challenging (read as difficult, hard, in-depth, and esoteric and a few of adjectives that cannot be repeated in this paper)? This is a fair two-part question and, as such, deserves a fair response. In the program's syllabi, you may see a reference to what we call the *real-world* model of teaching MPA courses. Since the faculty cannot replicate every work scenario nor can we create a simulated government agency in which MPA students work in order for us to evaluate their potential as public administrators, the faculty instituted other means for providing these *real-world* experiences. In the discussion that follows, you are presented with a variety of core competencies that we instill in our students, a brief synopsis of how we assess those competencies, and why they are important.

Granted, many MPA students are current practitioners of the craft and have a plethora of experience. However, since the purpose of the MPA Program is to provide students with an education focused on making each student a *master of the craft*, then we have to incorporate assessment methods in order to evaluate that potential. The faculty cannot visit each student at his or her workplace (too time consuming and the travel expenses would never be covered). Therefore, professors in the program incorporate assessment measures into the courses that enable us to provide students with simulated *real world* experience or reinforce the experiences they have already acquired.

The three basic characteristics faculty instill or reinforce in students are (1) attention to detail; (2) a sense of urgency; and (3) a strong appreciation for ethical conduct that is focused on promoting social equity while incorporating the tenets of cultural diversity (more later on ethics, social equity, and cultural diversity). The first two items are covered by the detailed instructions students receive in their course syllabus as well as established deadlines for assignments.

Reading and paying attention to a syllabus is a very respectable start. When you think about it, organizations students may work for have rules and regulations, SOPs, as well as state and federal laws which you must adhere to, and paying attention to the details will aid you in your career. The sense of urgency is instilled or reinforced through the timely submission of assignments and having a penalty for late assignments or not accepting late assignments provides the student with practical experience that reinforces the importance of timely submission of projects. After all, it is better to learn this in the classroom rather than the workplace. Waiting for our students to experience this in the *real world* is not being fair to our students—a deficiency in this area could cost a person his or her job or a promising career.

Correcting students on discussion boards (the on-line environment) or in a traditional classroom setting has a learning purpose to it. As a public administrator, you will be given assignments that require you to work alone, yet many times assignments are done as a team, committee, or taskforce (or other similar title). Working in this type of situation will put your work ethic *out there* for every team member to see, and your team leader (and team members) will critique the team as a whole and will critique the individual performance of team members. This critique can be done in the presence of others as a learning tool not only for those who are critiqued, but also for the team's benefit. Imagine it is like a sports team—the coaches provide guidance to the team in order to improve team performance. In addition the coaches provide feedback to individual players in front of other players in order for it to be a learning experience not only for the player being critiqued, but also for the team.

Please note that everything in your courses has been carefully thought out and is incorporated into these courses in order to provide you the maximum learning experience. This is based on the faculty's vast experience in the public sector. The faculty has taken what and how we were taught and asked the question—how can we improve the learning process to give students not only the knowledge they need to succeed, but also the characteristics needed to thrive in the world of public administration? The faculty arrived at this conclusion: students need basic core competencies in order to have a chance of succeeding in this field of study.

First, you need critical thinking skills—observation, interpretation, analysis, inference, evaluation, explanation, and meta-cognition ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_thinking)). In order to be successful at critical thinking you must have the following abilities.

- Recognize problems, to find workable means for meeting those problems
- Understand the importance of prioritization and order of precedence in problem solving
- Gather and marshal pertinent (relevant) information
- Recognize unstated assumptions and values
- Comprehend and use language with accuracy, clarity, and discernment
- Interpret data, to appraise evidence and evaluate arguments
- Recognize the existence (or non-existence) of logical relationships between propositions
- Draw warranted conclusions and generalizations
- Put to test the conclusions and generalizations at which one arrives
- Reconstruct one's patterns of beliefs on the basis of wider experience
- Render accurate judgments about specific things and qualities in everyday life ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_thinking))

Acquiring these abilities you should be able to accomplish the tasks listed below.

- Raise important questions and problems, formulating them clearly and precisely
- Gather and assesses relevant information, using abstract ideas to interpret it effectively

- Come to well-reasoned conclusions and solutions, testing them against relevant criteria and standards
- Think open-mindedly within alternative systems of thought, recognizing and assessing, as need be, their assumptions, implications, and practical consequences
- Communicating effectively with others in figuring out solutions to complex problems, without being unduly influenced by others' thinking on the topic. ([http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical\\_thinking](http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Critical_thinking))

I digress for a moment to provide this caveat: usually, I am not an *avid* fan of Wikipedia, yet in recent years it has gotten better at validating the information found on its pages, and I admit—its discussion of critical thinking was quite enlightened. If you want to know more about critical thinking, I recommend you visit the Wikipedia site (referenced above) or visit <http://www.criticalthinking.org/>.

The second thing you need in order to have a chance of succeeding in the field of public administration is an expert knowledge of the literature. If you can master the literature, then you can master the discourse of the discipline. This is why it is necessary for you to thoroughly discuss the reading material with your professors and fellow graduate students to such a degree that you know and can present the arguments from all sides of an issue. If you cannot master the literature, then you cannot take part in the discipline's discourse and this will prove your undoing. Finally, students need to acquire the *character* of a public administrator.

The character of the public administrator is multifaceted. The public administrator is one who has a keen interest in being a public administrator—interest is the key because without it, then it becomes just a job instead of a passion. The MPA Program faculty assesses your interest by making the courses challenging to the point that if you have some interest you may succeed, and if you are not interested, then you will probably not make it through the courses.

The character of the public administrator is also defined by his or her sense of urgency, attention to detail, leadership abilities, ethics, and concept of social equity including an appreciation for cultural diversity. A sense of urgency and attention to detail aid the administrator in his or her attempts to take care of the public in an effective and efficient manner, and we assess and instill these characteristics through the aid of assignments and lengthy instructions.

Ethics and leadership are presented in PSC 504 Administrative Leadership and Ethics, and to some degree in all of the courses. A student's sense of ethics is assessed through written assignments—your work is reviewed to determine the originality of the work. In other words, is it your work or the work of another person (SafeAssign™ comes into play here)? In step with ethics, a person's sense for social equity and an appreciation for cultural diversity enable the administrator to pursue his or her career ever mindful of the need for justice and fair treatment for clientele (citizens), while remembering we are from diverse backgrounds and culture; that we are bound by our system of government in which the concepts of democracy, liberty, and equality (Ginsberg, Lowi, Weir, and Spitzer 2011)

are promoted by our attempts to maintain accountability and transparency in government (for a discussion of these topics see the works of Cooper 1998; Frederickson 1997; Gormley and Ball 2008; Radin 2002; Svava 2007; Van Wart 2008). These concepts are discussed throughout the curriculum and are introduced in the core public administration course PSC 500 Foundations of Public Administration.

All the aforementioned core competencies—honed to a high level of expertise—are what will make you a successful public administrator, and the faculty’s goal is to instill each of these core competencies in our students, be it in the traditional classroom setting or through the use of distance education—your assignments and assessment measures are the same. Though, at this point, I must say on behalf of the faculty, we cannot rule out *luck*, *fate*, or the *unknown* as factors that account for success. However, the faculty can teach you about luck, unfortunately we cannot teach you luck to the point you can easily acquire it.

### References

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