

FROM STUDENT TO CITY MANAGER: REFLECTIONS OF MPA STUDENTS AND ASPIRING CITY MANAGERS

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Members of the city council linger in the council chambers on a Tuesday night, celebrating their decisions and proud of the work they are doing to transform their community. The local news that night, and an editorial the next morning, will congratulate the city council for swift action that enabled the city to maintain service levels while cutting ten percent of the budget. The room has mostly cleared, and the city manager and his staff are gathering their materials, each ready to go home after another long day and late night.

Few residents know about the work of the city manager and his staff – that dedicated and conscientious public administrators are behind nearly every action in their city. Even fewer students aspire to such a job. But for some Master of Public Administration students at Arizona State University, that job is a dream that each of us can hardly wait to attain.

Faced with unique challenges, a workplace designed by previous generations, and access to new technologies, our cohort of public administrators has the opportunity and drive to make dramatic changes to local government. We asked ourselves and several other students and recent graduates of the Master of Public Administration program at Arizona State University about our unique position as aspiring city managers and about the relationship between our generation and the future of local government.

Next Generation in Local Government

One of the primary reasons we plan to work in local governments is that we are attracted to the intangible rewards of the job. Daniel said, “The greatest thing that attracted me to local government is actually being able to see the fruits of one’s labor. If you were to work at the federal level or state level or for the private sector, you may never get to see the impact your actions or decisions may have. At the local level sometimes all you have to do is look out a window and see people playing at a park that you helped develop.”

The opportunity to see real results and feel connected to the community we serve is what drives some of us to pursue a career in local government. It was important to us that local government also allows us to make a lasting impact on the world. That impact is especially important to Sam. “Local government is the place where people come together from diverse backgrounds and collaborate to solve problems, improve the lives of others, and create a better world,” he said. “It is my hope that I can work with others in my field to build that world.”

Our generation of city managers looks forward to serving the public and helping residents not only to have access to resources, but also to feel connected to their community. These future managers are excited to work in a profession where each day presents novel challenges, which are unique opportunities for creativity and transformation.

Career Choices

The choice to work in local government is seen by some to be less ambitious, or less financially smart, than working in business or the private sector. Our generation has heard this from many friends, some who are working for major corporations in the private sector. Some of our friends do not even know what the role of a city manager is, or what local governments even do. For example, Jeff said, “Most of my friends are in the private sector and their opinion runs the gamut. The vast majority of them don’t really know a lot about how local government works or even such basics as what the council-manager form of government is or involves.”

Since many of us believe strongly in the impact that local governments have, and because we are proud of our career choice, we inevitably explain the role of the city manager and of local government in general. Jeff continues, saying that his friends can still be skeptical even after that explanation. “But once I explain to them what local governments do, they tend to offer a lot of respect,” Jeff said.

Physical Design

The next generation of city managers will make many changes in the public workplace, including

changes to processes and organizational culture. But the students we heard from also say they hope to alter the physical aesthetics of the public workplace. Many students said those physical changes would contribute to more transparent interaction. For example, one student would like to see “a lot of interaction and friendliness. I would want the executive staff to have their doors open at most times and be willing to talk to people.”

Many will also continue to embrace sustainability in the workplace. Some said that they hope to have offices with more natural light and less clutter. One future city manager even said, “I imagine hexagon-shaped workspaces, surrounded by glass to allow natural light to flow throughout the office.” Other responses included similar innovations in the physical characteristics of the city organization.

Many of the respondents said that they seek to create open workplaces where all levels of employees have greater interaction. Transparency in government will apply not only to the flow of information, but also to the future workplace, which will be designed with improvements that encourage the preservation of energy and resources.

New Visions of Public Service

Finally, we wanted to know what changes the next generation of public administrators will make to public service in general. The responses show that the emerging generation is both concerned and hopeful about the continued impact of increasingly cooperative technology. While technology will continue to lead to improved effectiveness and efficiency in local government, it will also have an impact on issues of civic engagement and participation. If technology is more participative and collaborative, then local governments will have the opportunity to involve their citizens to a greater degree.

Beyond technology, however, we also have



differences among our basic visions for public service and local government. Some say that local government should focus on basic service delivery and infrastructure, while others advocate a greater role for local government

in the challenges facing the world today. One recent graduate of the program, Nicole, agrees with those who advocate for the larger role. She said, “A greater call for compassion and holistic vision – taking into account global government, economic, social, and environmental conditions – will be paramount for success at all levels of governance.”

Every generation of local government administrators has the opportunity and responsibility to redefine itself. New challenges require leadership that grows beyond the patterns of the past. Just as current city managers embraced greater cooperation and partnership with the private sector, our generation must make similar choices. Only through the innovation of past leaders, however, we can take the next steps.

Each of us, though, has one ultimate goal: that when we leave those city council meetings in our communities across the United States – feeling tired, underappreciated, and overworked – we can hold our heads high, because we will be proud that we did all we could to improve our communities. It is that feeling that drives each of us to serve in local governments. And in that way, we are no different than the local government administrators of today.

The students mentioned in the article above are all students in or recent graduates of the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University, which is one of the top ranked schools for Urban Management. The following students were awarded the Marvin Andrews Fellowship, which provides scholarships and internships in local government to a select group of students who want to become city managers: Nicole Dailey (2007), Seth Blumen (2008), Jeff Riggs (2008), Daniel Ortiz-Hernandez (2009), Cynthia Segovia (2009), and Sam Feldman (2009) all contributed responses.