

The Rhode Island Ethics Project: A Model for Integrating Ethics into a Master of Public Administration Program

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This chapter describes and analyzes an unusual effort to integrate the teaching of ethics throughout a Master of Public Administration (M.P.A.) Program. The Rhode Island Ethics Project, supported by the U.S. Department of Education's Fund for the Improvement of Post-Secondary Education (FIPSE), provides a model not only for other M.P.A. programs in teaching ethics but also for instigating change in the culture to support proud, reflective, and ethical public servants.

A surprise finding of the project was how few obstacles there are to bringing state agency leaders and faculty together to talk about ethics. Indeed, the role of the practitioners enlarged significantly as these encounters continued and as they produced some remarkable results. The experiences of the administrators not only enlightened and encouraged the faculty in teaching ethics in all of the M.P.A. core courses, but these experiences also provided fascinating case studies which the group has published in a new book. These workshops proved so successful that a philanthropist has endowed a new ethics center at the University of Rhode Island to institutionalize and assure the continuance of these encounters. The pages that follow detail the genesis, strategies, successes, and occasional pitfalls of this project, which produced enormous returns in professional and personal insights and relationships.

BACKGROUND

The model which emerged from the Rhode Island Ethics Project is the result of a rare collaboration between Rhode Island academicians and public administrators. The group initially came together in the fall of 1993, in the aftermath of the collapse of many of the state's banks and credit unions and the virtual collapse of the public's confidence in the ethics of public officials. The chief justice of the State Supreme Court had just become the second consecutive official in that position to resign under the threat of almost certain impeachment for ethics violations. The demoralization of the public was increased by revelations of widespread misuse of the state employees' pension fund and a succession of state regulatory failures. An ethics task force appointed by the governor had recently detailed in its first report nothing less than a moral hemorrhaging in the state:

Nowhere have the results of a betrayal of trust, and the unethical conduct it manifests, been more devastating than here in Rhode Island. In recent months, the very civility that in the past ensured reasonable public discourse has been lost as the intensity of the anger and despair some Rhode Islanders feel grows over their government's failure to perform its duties and keep faith with the people.

An atmosphere of greed and an environment of indulgence among the corrupt and connected that accept, excuse, and participate in unethical behavior as part of "the price of doing business" in Rhode Island have diminished the people's bond of trust. (Report, 1991; 2)

The participants in the project gathered in an effort to dispel one small part of the ethical gloom that had descended on Rhode Island. Two of the authors of this chapter, University of Rhode Island Professors Michael Vocino and Alfred Killilea, had proposed a plan for brightening the future of the state government service by initiating the teaching of ethics throughout the M.P.A. program which is jointly offered by the University of Rhode Island, Providence College, and

Rhode Island College. Funded by a grant of \$180,000 from FIPSE, this proposal emphasized the importance of teaching faculty members about ethics as a way of reinforcing a concern for ethics in the core courses of the M.P.A. Program. In addition to initiating a seminar on "Ethics in Public Administration," we hoped to keep ethics from being viewed as an isolated side dish to the meatier and more essential offerings on such matters as budgets and personnel.

Integrated curricula that stress decision making and the formulation of values and moral choice are nothing new in postsecondary education. Indeed, the efforts of others to integrate ethics throughout the curriculum have been well documented (Pascarella and Terenzini, 1991). However, comprehensive attempts have not been undertaken to integrate ethics across a Master of Public Administration program, although teaching and even requiring a public ethics course in such programs has become more commonplace (Cleary, 1990 and Hejka-Ekins, 1988).

The Rhode Island M.P.A. program was ideally situated for making the point that public administrators need training in ethics. After all, it was Rhode Island that was featured in the *Wall Street Journal* and on a national news program as "Rogue's Island," a state with a history of corrupt government. And outsiders were not the only ones pointing fingers. Many government officials, educators, and academics within the state stressed the need for ethics education (Moakley and Cornwall 1996; Report 1991). The success of this project was due in part to its being perceived as essential for Rhode Island, and this, in turn, accounts for much of its success in attracting moral and financial support.

The project began with a series of six day-long workshops conducted by national experts on public ethics with the eleven faculty members connected with the M.P.A. program, plus a like number of state agency leaders who held positions at either the director or assistant-director levels. The latter group consisted of the directors of the departments of Corrections; Transportation; Elderly Affairs; and Mental Health, Rehabilitation, and Hospitals; plus assistant directors from Human Services; Children, Youth and their Families; Environmental Management; Corrections; Education; and Administration. The selection of administrators involved a mixture of invitation and self-selection; we

invited about twenty-five leaders, but with short notice. The fifteen practitioners who participated made considerable sacrifices by increasing their workloads to attend the all-day Friday sessions. There was no perceptible difference in contribution or commitment between the politically appointed directors and the career civil servants. All seemed eager to participate, and all indicated a desire to affect the education on ethics of their future colleagues currently in the M.P.A. program.

The initial motive for including the practitioners in the workshops was for them to provide "reality testing" for ideas on ethics that faculty members might pursue in their courses. However, as bonds of trust and mutual respect developed among participants, an interesting shift occurred in the focus of the workshops. The experiences of the administrators came to be seen as valuable teaching tools, and the workshops increasingly concentrated on grappling with the ethical issues raised by these experiences. Faculty members provided "theory testing" whether and how one could generalize from these concrete issues for pedagogical purposes. Of the six workshops, the first two were overnight and focused on the philosophical foundation of ethics, the third and fourth dealt with ethics and personnel and budgetary issues, and the last two were devoted to changing the ethical culture in public agencies.

A book, *Ethical Dilemmas in Public Administration* (Pasquerella, Killilea, and Vocino 1996), emerged naturally from the process of discussing the experiences of practitioners facing ethical dilemmas. Two-person teams, composed of an administrator and an academic, described a particularly trying ethical dilemma that the administrator had confronted and analyzed that experience. The two members of these writing teams seemed to complement each other perfectly. The administrators had abundant experiences of ethical successes and failures but almost no time to react to these experiences or probe their wider implications. The faculty members often regretted how far they were from the firing line, but were skilled in exploring the insights in practitioners' combat experiences. Both groups wanted to extend the learning that occurred in the workshops to a wider audience who might take advantage of these experiences.

It seemed especially important to provide students and young professionals with practice in reacting to ethical conflicts. All of the cases in the resulting book invite the reader to weigh the alternatives faced by the public administrators and to critique the decisions made in those cases. The fact that the cases are based on actual experiences heightens their interest and credibility. The fact that almost all of the participating administrators and faculty commentators are from Rhode Island made this collaboration feasible and friendly but should not limit the relevance of these cases to other geographical locations.

Even as we describe in some of these cases discouraging and longstanding impediments to pursuing the public interest, we believe that this project itself is part of a new seriousness about public ethics in Rhode Island. Moreover, the satisfaction and mutual support we have found in collaborating in the workshops and in the writing of the book suggest that it may be easier than commonly supposed for public officials and citizens to take concrete steps to reassert a concern for ethics in public life. We are encouraged by the recent endowment of the John Hazen White, Sr., Center for Ethics and Public Service at the University of Rhode Island, which will make our experimental workshops on ethics for public administrators more numerous and more permanent. The Center has sponsored the first-ever seminars on ethics for both houses of the state legislature. The first executive order of the new governor was that all state agency directors will attend ethics workshops run by the Center.

The book and the workshops have had little to say about ethics violations stemming from simple greed and seeking to enrich the office holder at the expense of the public. These offenses are serious and common but rather easily identified as legal and ethical violations. The state's Ethics Commission is making a strong effort to educate public officials at all levels concerning their legal duties and liabilities. We are more interested here in ethical dilemmas in which the law provides little guidance and where the administrator must first have the sensitivity to perceive the conflict and then the judgment to make the hard choice among various imperfect solutions. We believe these are the more trying and more important ethical challenges confronting public officials. We offer no dogmas in settling these issues, but rather

encouragement, practice, and examples from people who have known the pressure and discomfort of these dilemmas.

DEVELOPING THE CURRICULUM FOR THE WORKSHOPS

This approach of developing cases as practice for facilitating ethical analysis served as the basis for the curriculum. To provide participants with the conceptual tools necessary to engage in ethical decisionmaking, we used a case-based approach throughout the ethics workshops. These tools include the ability to identify positions, construct and evaluate arguments, expose hidden assumptions, recognize the presuppositions and implications of various positions, and to use reason in drawing conclusions concerning what to believe or do. We chose this method in a conscious effort to promote collaborative learning which would encourage critical and analytical problem solving by having individuals work together in small groups or teams on substantive issues. Those who employ collaborative learning seek to shift the focus of classroom authority from the teacher to the participants. Given the desire we had to dispel the notion that some of the participants were experts and others were only there to learn, applying this technique proved to be central to our mission. In fact, the only leaders in this kind of learning are those chosen by the group members to record and report back to the larger group whatever resolutions they have generated.

Because dissent often serves as a powerful tool for fostering understanding of ethical issues, we wanted to provide a forum that would encourage the free exchange of ideas. By immediately engaging participants in an interactive process, we hoped to allay any fears that dissent means disruption of a process whereby experts disseminate information. Collaborative learning appeared to be well suited to a program whose focus was on ethical decisionmaking in public administration. Ethical dilemmas by their nature involve circumstances under which some ethical principle will be violated no matter what course of action is taken. Since no single response can be determined the correct solution to such problems, collaborative learning provided the means for a comprehensive analysis of the dilemmas that were encountered.

In addition, by forcing group members to seek consensus regarding what constitutes ethical behavior under a certain set of conditions, we hoped to encourage the open-mindedness and willingness to entertain alternative points of view that are necessary to engage in critical thinking. While consensus-seeking may seem to be at odds with the encouragement of dissent, meaningful discourse can take place only when one truly understands the opponent's point of view. Because group members are asked to defend a single position, it is likely that at least some of the participants will be defending a position with which they disagree. The value of this exercise is the encouragement of argumentation skills which include anticipating and responding to objections to one's own views.

We identified two primary obstacles to the success of these workshops. First, from pre-workshop interviews and discussions with participants we knew that several of the public administrators tended to view faculty as operating solely on a theoretical plane and scrutinizing administrators' ethical decisionmaking from their ivory towers. Faculty members, on the other hand, had gleaned their perceptions of the quality of administrative ethical decisionmaking largely from reading newspaper headlines frequently written by "troubleshooters." The first obstacle, then, was the need to overcome stereotypes. Since we wanted participants to learn from one another, we set out to create a learning environment in which these ill-formed judgments would be quickly challenged and eventually dissipated. We were optimistic that collaborative learning would be effective in this regard.

The second obstacle was the fear of repercussions. Workshop participants represented a great number of administrators at a variety of levels. The willingness to share their professional experiences was an essential component of the proposed project. Yet detailing the kinds of ethical dilemmas encountered in daily activities could result in the identification of co-workers both inside and outside state agencies. These confidentiality considerations prompted a realistic concern about the possibility of a "chilling effect" on discussion. The focus on collaborative learning was intended, in part, to address these concerns by fostering an environment of mutual respect and trust. Admittedly, while we were astounded by the willingness of participants to share their

ethical dilemmas in the context of our discussion sessions, many of the most revealing dilemmas in terms of their complexity and transferability across agencies could not be written about by the administrators due to pending administrative action. Nevertheless, participants constructed a broad range of cases highlighting issues of conflict of interest, confidentiality, sexual harassment, truth telling, whistle blowing, and attempts to reform the organizational culture, without finding the need to go to great lengths to disguise agencies or individuals.

While our emphasis has been on the pedagogy involved in conducting the workshops, we were convinced of the need to provide some theoretical background to serve as a framework for discussion. For this reason, the workshops began with an interactive lecture on the tasks of normative ethics in general and applied normative ethics in particular. Because ethical analysis is a philosophical endeavor, we modeled the process of doing philosophy by taking participants through the steps of resolving an ethical dilemma in public administration. This involved engaging discussants in the two broad stages of doing philosophy, consisting of identification and clarification of issues in the first stage and argumentation in the second. The discussion of the second stage included a brief overview of the methods of evaluating arguments supporting and opposing a given position. We then discussed how an application of competing normative ethical principles, exemplifying various deontological and consequentialist perspectives, might lead to contradictory conclusions concerning the correct course of action.

Finally, we considered two primary challenges confronting this approach to ethical decision making. These challenges come in the form of relativism and arguments from strong role differentiation. The latter position seemed particularly important for administrators who may view their professional roles as exempting them from certain common standards of morality in order to preserve an institution which is deemed an overriding social good.

After this brief introduction to normative ethics, participants were asked to work in small groups to resolve a broad range of ethical dilemmas faced by administrators at various levels of different agencies. For instance:

- (a) Suppose you are a middle manager in charge of making a recommendation for an opening in your organization. You have formed a committee and appointed a chair to conduct the search process. Shortly after the process begins, you receive a call from your supervisor telling you that a family friend is one of the candidates. Your superior assures you that the call is in no way an attempt to influence the process but reiterates the closeness of their relationship and comments about the person's excellent qualifications for this position. The search committee recommends a rank order of three persons. As it turns out, your supervisor's friend is ranked number two in what was, by the chair's own account, a close and difficult ranking process. Would you recommend your supervisor's friend under these circumstances? Would it be morally permissible to do so? Why or why not? Suppose you are the supervisor in this case. Have you done anything wrong? Please explain.
- (b) Your agency has been given a state grant. At the end of the fiscal year you face a decision whether to return unspent portions of the grant to a state that is in dire need; to spend the money on nonessentials; or to encourage employees doing valuable work on other projects to list their unfunded work under the budget for this grant, thereby zeroing-out the grant. You know that if the money is not all spent, the next year's grant will be reduced by a substantial amount. What should you do?
- (c) It is brought to your attention as manager that someone in your department took a sick day to attend the funeral of an uncle. The bereavement policy in your agency does not provide paid leave covering this relationship. A co-worker discovers that the person is being paid for an unauthorized personal leave day and comes to you as the supervisor. What action should be taken? Should you use coercion to discourage this type of whistle blowing, or should you praise the behavior? Is this a genuine ethical dilemma? Why or why not?

Reporting back on these dilemmas allowed participants to observe how their colleagues in other agencies, along with those in the academy, would respond to the typical crises they face.

In the afternoon, participants worked in teams, consisting of one faculty member and one administrator, who were responsible for drafting a table of contents to be used for developing a code of ethics for the administrator's own agency. We proceeded to compare the issues outlined by different administrators as central components of a comprehensive guide for an ethics training manual. Samples included statements of expectations by the director, codes of conduct, agency goals, sections on employer/employee relations (identifying common ethical problems such as union issues, harassment, power issues, and whistle blowing), worker/client issues, agency to agency issues, opportunities for continuing discussion of ethics, and enforcement procedures.

During the evening of the first workshop, which was an overnight session, we had a study-circle discussion of issues surrounding sexual harassment. The next day was focused on sources of corruption in the state and strategies for improving the state's ethical climate. The discussions highlighted the different strengths administrators and faculty bring to bear on these complex issues. The openness of the discussions was clearly prized by the administrators. One commented on an evaluation sheet, "I have not had an opportunity before to discuss these issues *freely*—nice job of creating an open environment."

Administrators left the workshops with renewed confidence in their own abilities to identify and resolve ethical dilemmas within their agencies. Agency leaders revealed that the types of dilemmas with which they are confronted are not substantially different from those faced by other agency directors. For instance, the director of a large social service agency spoke of the difficulties of trying singlehandedly to make a change in the ethical climate. He had an employee who also worked as a fireman; when his shift was changed at the fire station, creating a conflict with his agency job, the employee asked for a leave of absence. Such leave is normally granted only for medical reasons, and so the director refused the request. The employee's close connections to union officials and powerful state legislators led

to explicit threats of vengeance upon the director's job and the agency's budget.

The director stood by his decision and weathered the political storm, but at great cost to his time and energy. He felt these costs were worth paying, because he saw this challenge not as an isolated issue but as an opportunity to maintain a standard of ethics for the entire state service. It was crucial for him to have the support and encouragement of other administrators in the state. The easy solution for him personally would have been to accommodate the employee, avoid a series of grievances, and perpetuate a culture where state employment is seen as an entitlement to employment and shallow commitment.

That culture will be changed by one decision after another by administrators who are able to see the ripple effect of each decision made, with the assurance that colleagues are prepared to make the same commitment to uphold ethics in public service. By sharing such cases, administrators also share the sense that they are not alone in their efforts to undertake ethical reform in an occasionally unresponsive bureaucracy. In fact, administrators across the state have strengthened their ties by exercising their ability to engage in the meaningful discourse that is necessary to create a political culture in which ethics is of paramount importance.

Faculty also forged new relationships with colleagues that continue to generate research and teaching projects. One consequence of the project is that faculty members from different departments and institutions have come together to work on grants, conduct training sessions, write articles, and team-teach courses. In addition, because we established writing teams which paired one faculty member with one administrator, faculty were able to experience administrative decision making from within the institutions. This has proved extremely valuable for those faculty members teaching both public policy and public administration courses.

Finally, both groups were able to take advantage of the case studies generated by workshop participants. Some agency directors used the cases to conduct ethics training workshops for the employees in their organizations, and faculty used the cases in the classroom. By including practical assignments in a case-based approach to ethics

training, we encouraged agency leaders and M.P.A. faculty to address ethical issues frequently and consistently.

MAJOR OUTCOMES TO DATE

The following are the most significant outcomes of the three-year Rhode Island Ethics Project:

A Working Model for Teaching and Studying Ethics

The workshops on ethics for public managers can be replicated in virtually any state by other M.P.A. programs interested in cultivating a concern for ethics in public officials. With a very low budget, faculty can invite practitioners to meet on a regular basis to discuss case studies the participants create from their own experience. They probably would find colleagues with experience in applied ethics very willing to serve as facilitators for these discussions. Once begun, these dialogues will develop a style and purpose of their own, but they are almost certain to be valuable for all involved.

Core Ethics Course Institutionalized in M.P.A. Program

PSC 504—Ethics in Public Administration—was developed as a discrete ethics course following directly from the FIPSE grant. The course was offered for the first time in the fall of 1993 and is taught annually. By means of a case study method, class discussion, films, and readings, this course explores how ethical deliberation in the public sector is an essential commitment and skill for public administrators.

Anthology of Cases and Comments

This book, *Ethical Dilemmas in Public Administration* (Pasquerella, Killilea, and Vocino 1995) comprises original chapters written by participants in our workshops. Eleven working groups, pairing a state agency leader with an academician, were organized midway through our seminars.

Each group produced a chapter dealing with an ethical dilemma experienced by the administrator. The academic worked with the administrator to analyze the decision-making process, their options, and outcomes.

John Hazen White Center for Ethics and Public Service

This center is probably the most dramatic and noteworthy outcome of the project. It demonstrates the university's commitment to institutionalizing a permanent ethics workshop program, not only for public managers but elected public officials and court administrators as well. A proposal for a \$5,000,000 endowment was developed by the university, and a local philanthropist, interested in improving the quality of Rhode Island's public life, provided the endowment. The center will house a permanent ethics education program for public officials, which our project initiated. The center has already conducted a series of three day-long workshops on ethics for the directors of all state departments.

Programs dealing with professional ethics and public service are being developed for graduate students as well as undergraduates. Seventy University of Rhode Island faculty members have expressed written interest in attending next year's Professional Ethics for Academics workshops. The center has also provided the impetus for further grant-writing and as a focal point for those interested in exploring ethics education in a variety of settings.

Community Awareness

Publicity about the project has resulted in invitations to develop ethics presentations in a variety of forums. A panel on public ethics sponsored by the URI Alumni Association was held in November 1994 at the Warwick City Hall as part of a community outreach program. An audience of at least two hundred citizens attended. Participants in our workshops have described the benefits of the project at an ASPA regional conference in Vermont, and in conferences in Washington, D.C., and Florida.

The Development of Professional Relationships Around the Issue of Ethics

Working together in the project's seminars has facilitated bonding among faculty participants and state administrative leaders. Many of the faculty and administrators, in turn, have led and will continue to lead workshops sponsored by the new Center for Ethics. The project has identified a critical mass of motivated professionals who will work together to try to change the ethical culture of state service.

EVALUATION OF THE PROJECT

Review of an undertaking such as the Rhode Island Ethics Project requires mention of evaluation methods. Measuring the success of the project's intervention has been an ongoing process. The evaluation process has had some preliminary results, mostly qualitative, which are very encouraging. The pre- and post-testing of workshop participants has been particularly encouraging. Most of the previous three years have been spent collecting quantitative data for analysis at the end of the project. Professor Jon Wergin of Virginia Commonwealth University and Glenn Erickson and Bette L. Erickson of the Instructional Development Program have served as external and internal reviewers. FIPSE requires a full evaluation of each project it funds and that the final results be published. It is expected that the effects of the Rhode Island Ethics Project will be long-term, and therefore the benefits of ethics education modeled by this project will be best measured by longitudinal studies. Structural and cultural change will not be immediately apparent. The project is viewed as an investment in facilitating the moral development of public managers in Rhode Island.

CONCLUSION

It is not lost on the authors that the unique success of the Rhode Island Ethics Project has a great deal to do with the fact that the project took place in Rhode Island. Many of our ethical problems stem from the reality that, in a cozy city-state of one million people with perhaps only two degrees of separation from each other, everyone is "connected." At the same time, in a state of this scale change is possible.

It is believed that this uniqueness does not mean that larger states cannot learn from our experience, but rather that the project provides a microcosm for trying out ideas and for changing attitudes from which other states can extrapolate. This modest experiment did not so much change people as identify them and invite them to come together for collective thought and action. Once together, they provided their own agenda and momentum. We would never have guessed how generous colleagues in the M.P.A. program would be in allowing philosophers to share their turf and curriculum, or how receptive overworked agency leaders would be to collaborate with faculty on problems of public ethics.

There is serendipity in every discovery, and the fact that not all the outcomes of this project were planned does not mean others cannot profit mightily from the lessons stumbled upon. Perhaps the key lesson has to do with the strong undercurrent that exists among state administrators, university faculty, philanthropists, and the general public who are determined to do something about preserving the integrity of our public life, if only they can find an effective vehicle. We believe we have found such a vehicle for various groups in our state. Our specific strategies may be directly relevant in other locations, but the vehicle is not as important as the fact that many professionals in public administration (which, after all, does not tend to attract tycoons or narcissists) are primed to take extraordinary steps to create a culture where refining ethical judgment is a central professional and governmental concern.

The major discovery of our project is that there are many professionals and public servants who need only to be asked in order to make a substantial commitment to learn from each other about ethics and to take action together. They want to create a culture that is not only intolerant of sleaze, but also is sensitive to the more subtle ethical dilemmas every well intentioned public servant encounters as an inherent part of the job. We believe that facilitating an exchange among faculty and practitioners that sharpens their capacity to resolve dilemmas by examining how others have maneuvered through various ethical thickets is ethics education that will gain the enthusiastic support of citizens and administrators in many states.

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