

Assignments for Studying Frontline Bureaucracy

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ABSTRACT

This article outlines a set of assignments in an undergraduate class on public policy and public administration. The assignments are designed to pique student interest in public administration, consider what it means to implement public policy at the street level, and to teach students to critically assess the purpose of public administration and the meaning of public interest. Students achieve these objectives by completing several papers throughout the course. Most students have never considered careers in public service. In these assignments, students first broadly consider public administration and then focus on a specific public service occupation. Students research a specific job; articulate its duties, compensation, and required qualifications; describe what an average day looks like; and outline the job's challenges. Finally, students address the abstract concept of how the profession they researched contributes to the public interest.

KEYWORDS

Teaching undergraduates, case-study research, curriculum design, frontline bureaucracy

Public administration and public policy courses at the university level are in the unique position of being able to interest students in public service careers. This article outlines assignments taught in an undergraduate course that help students to recognize the importance of public administration and its integral, often neglected, role in the delivery of public services. The assignments stress that the competence of public service professionals meaningfully affects people's quality of life. Public administrators are not vague figures who exist in the abstract. Rather they are well-trained professionals who also happen to be our friends, family, and neighbors. The course and its assignments discussed here encourage students to consider the frontline government worker who is committed to her profession, guided by training, and devoted to implementing the law.

Public administration serves as the important link between citizens and the concept and exercise of democracy. That is, the laws passed by legislatures can be deemed successes or failures depending on how public administrators implement those laws. Political science undergraduates study how the government produces legislation, despite the separation of powers and checks and balances, but do not necessarily understand how laws are transformed into governmental workers' actions, which can ultimately shape the public's behavior. What results from a law ultimately rests on the ability of unelected bureaucrats, who are charged with implementation.

The policy text (Anderson, 2011) for the course described here addresses the policy process and the difficulty of getting bills passed into law.

The politics and drama between governing institutions at the national, state, and local levels make for interesting reading and vibrant class discussions. Students quickly come to realize the serendipitous nature of the passage of any proposal into law (Kingdon, 1984). But often overlooked is the role of regular citizens who are entrusted with implementation of laws and delivering public services. Bringing this reality to light is one goal of the assignments discussed in this article. The study of street-level bureaucracy is important because it represents “the primary interface between citizens and government” (Smith & Larimer, 2013, p. 160). The assignments seek to demystify the careers and tasks of bureaucrats, especially because these actors possess substantial power. Students thus learn that street-level bureaucrats “have broad discretion on how they do their jobs, they have a big impact on the lives of citizens, and there are few watchdogs on hand to catch misdeeds” (Kettl, 2015, p. 427).

Another goal of the assignments is to encourage undergraduate political science majors to consider careers in public service. Recent figures indicate that federal, state, and local governments are facing a “brain drain” crisis owing to upcoming retirements. In 2005, “the percentage of workers older than 45 [was] almost twice as high in the civil service (60%) as in the private sector (31%)” (Barr, 2005). Maciag (2013) reports that government, compared to other industries, consistently has the oldest employees. Some state and local governments have recognized the dire need for young, talented workers and are scrambling to attract millennials in anticipation of the baby boomers’ mass exodus. Bright and Graham (2015, p. 576) write that only 6% of surveyed college students plan to work in government. Likewise, the Center for State and Local Government Excellence (2015) reports that, for a second year in a row, state and local governments are hiring. The same study indicates “a sense of urgency about recruitment, retention, and succession planning” (p. 2) among many state and local governments. The assignments described in

this article aim to familiarize students with government job listings, online databases, the qualifications needed to apply for those positions, and the positions’ salaries.

What follows is a discussion of three assignments that require students to think critically about public administration, the people and professions that deliver public goods and services, and the public good itself. The student experiences described are from an undergraduate course in public administration and public policy offered at a regional university. These assignments comprised the writing component for the course, accounting for 30% of a student’s grade. Other components included the midterm and final exams. This course is the only public administration and public policy class required for all political science majors and it consists of sophomores and juniors. The majority of students come from working-class backgrounds, and many are first-generation college students.

**ASSIGNMENT 1:
WHAT IS PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION?
WHY IS IT IMPORTANT?**

Definitions of public administration have taken up much ink and it seems that every textbook in the field seeks to define it anew. The esteemed collection *Public Administration: Concepts and Cases* (Stillman, 2000) begins with fifteen definitions of public administration. The abundance of definitions, though, leaves each wanting. In some, public administration is a field of study that seeks to understand the distribution of public goods and services. Public administration is also a vocation that includes a wide array of work that involves people who work in the public sector. *Public sector*, for its part, is a very inclusive term that involves governments at many levels, nonprofit organizations, and private companies that contract with governments.

In the face of such definitional drift, students are encouraged to craft their own definition. The instructions for the first assignment are as follows: What is public administration? Write a paper that defines public administration and why it is important. The learning objective is to

understand the complexity and necessity of public administration. In addition, several assigned readings inform students in developing their arguments (Bertelli & Lynn, 2006; Rosenbloom, 1983; Yang, 2012).

All students were able to articulate the difficulty of defining public administration. Furthermore, many discussed the important role that public administrators play in delivering services that define quality of life (e.g., public safety, potable water, clean air, education). One student wrote,

No matter how it is defined, public administration provides the public with services. The lives of everyday Americans are significantly affected by public policy-making and public administration [such] that it would be almost unfathomable to surmise how we as a society would manage without the various services provided. Without public administration, society as we have come to know it could not exist.

As a general political science course offering, I integrated the U.S. Constitution into this portion of the class and relied heavily on Rosenbloom (1983) for that purpose. Many used Rosenbloom's (1983) framework to help them define public administration and did so in a way that made the concepts of political science relevant to the practical issues they see in their everyday lives. The students in my class concluded that administrators in the United States have to "get things done." What many of them took from this assignment was that all of the constitutional functions, i.e., separation of powers, have been collapsed in the executive branch. Public administrators make rules (legislation), implement these rules (executive), and adjudicate questions concerning their application (a judicial function). One student succinctly put it, "Public administration is the avenue in which public policies are transformed into results." Indeed, the ambiguity of public administration (Rosenbloom, 1983) means that at many points in the discharge of their authority, street-level bureaucrats are making public policy (Lipsky, 1971).

ASSIGNMENT 2:

CASE STUDY OF PUBLIC SERVICE

This second assignment requires students to research a specific profession in public service. They are to report what a person in that job does, what sort of training and qualifications are needed to attain a position in that field, and what that job pays. The assignment prompt is as follows:

Case Study of Public Service

Pick a public service position, including but not limited to social worker, police officer (or law enforcement any level), city manager, urban planner, human resource manager, nonprofit fundraiser, utilities manager, etc., and *research what that profession entails.*

What sort of training is required? What kind of degree is needed? How much does it pay? Consider using the databases and reports issued by the Bureau of Labor Statistics (bls.gov) to find pay rates. FedJobs.gov also has federal job announcements that list qualifications and pay rates for vacant jobs in the federal government.

What does a typical day in the life of that professional look like? The last part will be the most challenging part of your paper. If possible, consider interviewing a public servant. You will find that public servants are all around us and may include your friends, neighbors, and family. The research on "frontline bureaucracy" is particularly helpful. [In this part of the assignment, students are directed toward the literature on street-level or front-line bureaucracy.]

The learning objectives of this assignment are to identify careers in public service, become familiar with the necessary qualifications, and get a realistic look at compensation for front-line bureaucrats. In preparation for this assignment, students could draw from several provided sources (Loyens & Maesschalck, 2010;

Maynard-Moody, Musheno, & Palumbo 1990; Vinzant & Crothers, 1996). The assignment also instructs students to search government jobs databases (whether federal, state, or local) and to use the Bureau of Labor Statistics website in their research.

In their reports, several students reflected on the “role of unelected public employees in a democratic system” (Vinzant & Crothers 1996, p. 458) and said that researchers more or less ignore frontline bureaucrats. Many students found this troubling, considering that, as one student put it, such government workers are “important to the process of implementing public policy.” Others cited Vinzant and Crothers’s (1996) prescient statement about “anti-government sentiment” (p. 459) and ill will toward bureaucrats, pointing out the persistence of such sentiment even 20 years after the work’s publication. Class sessions stressed that public administrators teach classes, patrol streets, issue licenses, process disability claims, deliver mail, pick up the trash, and serve in the military. Discussion centered on the fact that frontline bureaucrats deserve study because of their ubiquity and, ultimately, necessity in delivering public services.

In my class, students researched a variety of positions. Eight students chose to write about law enforcement officers at different governmental levels; seven wrote about social workers; two wrote about school teachers; one student each researched the positions of city manager, firefighter, municipal judge, government attorney, human-resource manager, and water-plant operator. Nine students opted to interview either family members or friends who were public servants. Other students relied on literature provided by professional organizations. Many also reported on professional expectations and the professions’ codes of ethics.

In terms of qualifications, students found that local police departments required applicants to have at least a high school diploma or equivalent, to pass a physical fitness test, and to pass a criminal background check to apply. One student

researched agents of the Bureau of Alcohol, Tobacco, and Firearms (ATF) and found that positions did not require, but favored, college degrees; students also found that successful applicants had attended the ATF’s Criminal Investigator Training Program. All students who researched careers in law enforcement found that applicants had to pass physical fitness exams and drug screenings. The other field that numerous students researched was social work. Students noted that most positions required college degrees in social work or related fields and that social workers needed to be licensed or certified by the state. Students found that both law enforcement and social work required some vocation-specific training or certification beyond an undergraduate degree.

This second assignment also asked students to report on compensation, using websites of the Department of Labor, Bureau of Labor Statistics, and the like. One student reported “that the median annual wage for social workers was \$44,200 as of May of 2012. The lowest ten percent earned less than \$27,450 and the top ten percent earned more than \$72,980.” Another student found that pay scale for state troopers “varies greatly with the location, as well as the troopers rank: starting pay is high school diploma/GED: \$35,609.60; Associate degree: \$37,356.80; Bachelor degree or higher: \$39,270.40.” Students also found discrepancies between elementary and high school teachers: “the BLS [Bureau of Labor Statistics] reported that the median annual salary for elementary school teachers was \$53,400 and \$50,120 for Kindergarten teachers in May 2012. ... The median annual salary for high school teachers was \$55,050 in May 2012.” To find more-local rates of compensation, students looked to the Alabama League of Municipalities (alalm.org). Students reported that police officers in Decatur earned \$30,550; a new city manager in Phenix City, \$113,948. The various website sources were useful for gathering information about compensation, especially when students interviewed friends and family. As one student pointed out, “This is my neighbor. I just can’t ask him how much he makes.”

Finally, students described a typical day in the profession they chose to research. One student noted that

Officers on the clock spend the majority of their time on patrol looking for citizens who are not properly following the law. ... Extreme danger is the main challenge of being a police officer; the fact that every day your life could potentially be on the line is a huge obstacle for people who are interested in becoming police officers. (See also Bell, Virden, Lewis, & Cassidy, 2015)

Another student quoted a local police officer, who said, "My job can have me doing desk work one day followed by a long night of patrolling the next." A student who interviewed a local judge found that "the most common type of cases a municipal court hears are domestic and physical violence cases, DUIs and possession of marijuana in the second degree and other misdemeanor drug offenses, misdemeanor property crimes, and traffic and ordinance violations." Another found that

an ordinary day for a Department of Human Resources worker would most likely begin with a case assignment. The social worker would meet with a client, investigate the situation, assess his/her needs, and develop a plan to help resolve the situation. Every step taken must be documented with paperwork, be in compliance with the National Association of Social Workers Code of Ethics, and be evidence-based.

This assignment sought to give students an idea of what qualifications these jobs require, what these jobs pay, and what these and similar jobs in public service entail. One of the more fascinating issues that students found was how much some of these jobs pay. The U.S. Census Bureau estimated 2014 median income of public servants to be \$53,657 (DeNavas-Walt & Proctor, 2015). In some student reports, compensation was at or above the national median. Where there was a pay gap, students found that

public service professionals sometimes supplemented their incomes. In one case, one interviewee had a side business of renting bouncy castles for children's birthday parties. And other public servants found part-time or seasonal work during winter and summer vacations.

ASSIGNMENT 3: WHAT IS THE PUBLIC INTEREST?

The final assignment encourages students to think broadly about the challenges faced by public service professionals and about how such jobs serve the public good. The assignment is as follows:

What are the challenges that public service professionals face in the field you have written about?

Using the literature discussed in the course, describe how those in this position (job) serve the public good.

Again, students had a list of sources to draw on in addition to the course text (Benditt, 1973; Frederickson & Hart, 1985; Staats, 1988). Students who wrote about teachers found that educators had to deal with difficult students, incompetent administrators, uncooperative parents, and changing education policies. Many teachers struggled with issues over which they had little control, such as class size, which students would be in their classes, and how home life affected in-class performance.

Among students who covered law enforcement, many pointed out that danger was part of the job. One student concluded that Frederickson and Hart's (1985) opening lines defined the challenge that police officers face every day: "When one sees one's fellows in danger, one's duty is to go to their aid; strong men do much, the weak little, but being weak is no reason for folding one's arms and refusing one's cooperation" (p. 547). Other students discussed the difficulty of managing life with irregular work hours. Curiously, only one student mentioned the challenge of community and race relations. This was rather disappointing, considering how in-class discussion was devoted to race, policing,

and the cases of Michael Brown in Ferguson, Missouri; Tamir Rice in Cleveland; and Freddie Gray in Baltimore.

Students who researched social workers thoughtfully noted that these professionals sought to change to their clients' lives but often did not have the means or authority to meaningfully do so. Finally, another student commented on the emotional toll of working with troubled clientele (e.g., victims of abuse and recovering addicts); this student argued that emotional stress coupled with low pay could be very demoralizing.

This final assignment also required students to argue for how the profession they chose to study served the public interest. One student made an important link between public servants and Staats's (1988) view that "government effectiveness translates into prosperity and security" (p. 601). For example, for a city to be habitable, trash must be collected and a city manager may need to coordinate the routes; for businesses to thrive, they must be secure from being robbed; and for the vitality of the local economy, school performance is critical. Following an extended class discussion of Frederickson and Hart (1985), a significant number of students argued about the "character" of public servants and the need to staff government with "good people," because "in the end, they hold lots of power," making staffing all the more "important because in some cases, there is not a lot of supervision going on." This perspective suggests that having the right personnel in place will achieve the public interest. And in order to serve the public good, it is thus incumbent on government to hire professionals who view their jobs in terms patriotism and benevolence (see Frederickson & Hart, 1988).

Students also gathered evidence that the teachers interviewed were devoted to teaching their students, that social workers did as much as they could within the limits of their authority, and that other professionals had rigid codes of ethics that steered them in the right direction. Students found that public servants self-select into the positions they hold because street-level bureaucrats are guided by "what is right" and

have "a profound commitment to the democratic values of their nation" (see also Frederickson & Hart 1985, 549).

CONCLUSION

This set of assignments can be improved upon. In future courses, I plan to solicit more-critical analyses in two areas. The first concerns a more nuanced and complete discussion about pay and compensation. Initially, I was most concerned about students learning how to navigate various databases and websites to obtain credible information about salaries. In the future, I plan to focus on the factors that determine *how* governments decide to compensate their employees. Are some states more generous than others? Does the federal government pay more than the states? Why? This discussion could also be directed in a more practical direction. For instance, what does it mean to be a social worker who earns \$44,000 a year, or a state trooper who is paid less than \$40,000, or a city manager who is compensated \$113,000? That is, if these jobs pay this amount, what kind of homes do these workers buy, if they can even afford to buy a home? What kind of cars do they drive? What kind of vacations do they take? These are all important aspects of choosing careers that are, for better or ill, often ignored in higher education.

The second area that needs more-critical analysis involves the challenges faced in various careers. For instance, most students cited the danger and low pay of police work as the main challenges for law enforcement; and while these are relevant challenges, they are also superficial. By the end of the semester, students understood that public service occupations are not lucrative positions. A more meaningful analysis would have addressed the fact that attempts to professionalize the police force—for example, by requiring that applicants have college degrees and other training—have nevertheless not translated into higher salaries. Similar was true for social workers. Many students reported that this work was emotionally draining and that the job did not pay well. In several cases, students noted that adhering to the profession's code of conduct was a challenge. But analysis did not go further.

Some students, however, did offer original and thoughtful insights. For instance, one saw race relations, claims of police brutality, and police militarization as challenges for law enforcement. Another pointed out that the danger and pay for firefighters made it difficult to recruit personnel. And, one student argued that social workers are bound by the limits of their agency's mission to initiate change and administer the help that can make a difference in someone's life. To that end, the student concluded, social workers must use their discretion wisely.

Another recommendation for using these or similar assignments is to set aside a class session to discuss students' perceptions of the challenges faced by the positions under study. This could be done using short presentations, where students briefly discuss the professions they have chosen and their challenges. As a class, students could discuss the credibility of the suggested challenges. Then, instructors could guide students toward additional readings that students might incorporate into their written work before submitting a final draft.

Finally, I want to stress that public administrators are representative citizens who faithfully carry out the laws of the state (Frederickson, 1997). Compared to elected governing bodies (Mansbridge, 1999), public servants better represent the population in terms of race, socio-economics, and gender (Bradbury & Kellough, 2011). This form of representative government allows for public servants to best serve the public, because they understand the needs and hardships of those they serve. Ultimately, the interviewed teachers were trying to teach children; the police officers were trying to protect the public; the social workers were making their rounds at the local rehabilitation center or dealing with abuse cases; and the water-plant operator ran tests on water quality, fixed pumps, and inventoried chemicals. The public good is an abstract concept that is often invoked but difficult to define. As one student pointed out, we "struggle to formulate an indisputable definition of what public interest is."

In sum, this set of assignments had several goals: to familiarize students with the concept of public administration and frontline bureaucracy; to pique student interest in public service; and to teach students to navigate various online databases that they might someday use as job applicants. The assignments also helped establish realistic expectations of workload, pay, and qualifications needed to apply for these positions. The big picture was to convey to students that the public depends on regular citizens to carry out laws. These regular citizens are students' family members, friends, and neighbors. Many of these people do their jobs with their best intentions, to the best of their training, and because they are called to the work itself. At the same time, each individual interviewed seemed to disconnect their position in public service from the broader idea of democratic governance. Recognizing the ubiquitous services delivered by frontline bureaucrats allowed students who had not considered public service as a vocation to think about the issues they care about in terms of actual jobs they could see themselves doing.

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