

NASPAA Core Competency: Public Service Perspective

Public Administration Assessment: Interview of a Community College President

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Introduction

██████████ County Community College was established in ██████████ in one of the more populated towns of the ██████████. Now located on two campuses, ██████████, this community college “maintains a mission of building a community of learners through accessible, quality learning opportunities designed to meet educational goals and aspirations” (██████████). Additionally, the college strives to provide affordable lifelong learning for all residents of ██████████ County. The College is led by a ██████████ and President ██████████ has been the president of ██████████ College since ██████████. In his role as President of the College, ██████████ strategically plans for the success of the college. During his tenure, ██████████ has launched several initiatives, including the following: eliminating costly remediation for students, mandating a 60 credit associate degree program, entering into a partnership with ██████████ to save students thousands of dollars, and implementing a robotics drone program. (██████████ County Community College, 2023). I had the opportunity to interview ██████████ on ██████████ ██████████ in his office at the ██████████ Campus of ██████████ County Community College. Although my intention was to focus the interview on Performance Evaluation and Program Evaluation, I allowed the conversation to develop organically, interspersing questions during the lulls or when they were appropriate. The interview highlights the following themes relating to the field of Public Administration: (1) strategic management, evaluation, and planning; (2)

artificial intelligence and technology; (3) teamwork; (4) ethical leadership; and (5) a service-based mission.

Theme 1: Strategic Management, Evaluation, and Planning

When questioned about performance management and program evaluation, [REDACTED] first shared his experience as the administrator of the Arch Diocese of Philadelphia. He learned there that a strategic global plan would not work if even just one employee would not buy into the plan. At [REDACTED] County Community College, he has seen much success with a radically different approach—he expects every single employee, including himself, to write his or her own strategic plan and meet with him to discuss it. [REDACTED] reported how his experience proved it is “easier to win than fail; being successful is a lot less work” ([REDACTED] 2023). [REDACTED] admitted that there have been very few goals that have not been achieved using this method. He shared that there are additional benefits to each employee creating his or her own strategic plan and discussing it with him—he is able to learn about his employees and understand their perspective. By involving employees in their own strategic plan and annual review, he was simultaneously planning for the success of the institution and evaluating the performance of employees. By implementing this positive strategic plan, he approached each employee with his service-based mission. As a result, he forged connections and built trust between himself and his employees.

In addition to helping employees plan their professional strategic goals, he oftentimes learned about great ideas that middle managers would not have put forward. [REDACTED] also stated that “Information here is as good as you want it to be,” meaning that he will communicate with everyone as transparently as possible as often as requested ([REDACTED], 2023). He

emphasized that communication is very important and something that must be always improved upon.

Theme 2: Artificial Intelligence and Technology

According to [REDACTED], artificial intelligence (AI) and technology must be understood by the public administrator of today and the future. In fact, he confided “he would not go into public administration without an understanding of AI” ([REDACTED], 2023). [REDACTED] explained how very soon AI will be writing all our papers, solving our problems, and performing work that people with advanced degrees use to do. According to [REDACTED], we “cannot stop or manage it [AI]” ([REDACTED], 2023). We must learn to “co-exist” with it. He also suggested that unemployment rates are going to skyrocket, and people are not going to know what to do with their time. He advised that along with an understanding of AI and technology, the public administrator of the future must have a sense of wonderment to conceive of a new society where many do not work because AI is doing what they used to do.

Not only will AI be a major issue to contend with, but the public administrator of today and the future must also understand and utilize social media. He stated that “you have to communicate through social media because that is how people communicate today” ([REDACTED], 2023). He also cautioned that you must be very careful who you hire to manage your social media accounts because you may be empowering someone else’s voice other than your own. There was a sense of serene surrender in [REDACTED]’s voice when discussing AI and technology in that he has accepted it and will co-exist with it in a manner that suits a service-oriented mission.

Theme 3: Teamwork

In a story about how [REDACTED] almost wanted to quit, but instead forged ahead, he discussed the importance of building a strong team around him. He confided that one of the toughest times he has endured as a public administrator was when someone sued him. He stated that “when you are a public official, you can’t sue back and you can’t control what the media says” ([REDACTED], 2023). He had to settle the suit because to keep fighting back would financially endanger the whole institution. [REDACTED] shared “whether it happened or not, it’s real in the perception” and it “was the end of the world” for him, but everyone else stood behind him ([REDACTED], 2023). The team that [REDACTED] had built around him during his tenure did not ask him to leave, did not fire him; they stood behind him and lifted him up in his darkest days.

[REDACTED]’s team, i.e. the college’s Board of Trustees, also helped him at another poignant time in his career. He told the story of how he just found out he had to put his dog to sleep and then immediately had to go into a meeting with a unionized faculty member who “wanted an economic prize.” ([REDACTED], 2023) The meeting took a turn for the worse and [REDACTED] said he was about to resign to the Board right at that moment, but they would not accept his resignation. They convinced him to go on a sabbatical instead; “in that moment the Board was a better leader than I was,” admitted [REDACTED] ([REDACTED], 2023). His point in telling this story was that you need to have a supervisor who supports you in your worst moments. Building a team and working together is what yields real results and success.

Theme 4: Ethical Leadership

Public administration needs leaders “that are ethical as they can possibly be because the trust factor is gone...not only do you have to represent the job; you have to represent the profession” ([REDACTED], 2023). [REDACTED] explained how there is a lot of pressure on

government today to prove itself. This pressure on government is in stark contrast to when he began his career decades ago. Then, he stated, government could be trusted and you could take for granted that you would be trusted ([REDACTED], 2023). Now, everything must be proven and accounted for to an extent that is nearly impossible and often counterintuitive. He added that if you want to be an effective president, you cannot take sides; you must always find the common ground. Additionally, you may inherit some problems in government, but you must learn how to “build blocks around the bad people” ([REDACTED], 2023). [REDACTED]’s strategy of building blocks around what does not work or who does not work is an effective way of proactively managing a less than perfect situation. In government you cannot fire everyone like you can in the private sector. And sometimes because of bureaucratic protections, it will be nearly impossible to fire someone, but an effective leader will find a way around those stumbling blocks.

Theme 5: Service-based Mission

My first interview question to [REDACTED] was “What influenced you to become a public administrator?” His immediate answer surprised me because he started telling me a story about how after he left [REDACTED] University he went to work at the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] and just started firing everyone and closing every school in [REDACTED]. His story concluded, however, with him professing how he liked the missionary work and the community aspect of the [REDACTED] [REDACTED] so that made him consider working at a community college. He added that the most important thing for him to remember each day is that he is there to serve the public, not serve himself. [REDACTED] stated, “everything here belongs to the people, not me” ([REDACTED], 2023). He said it is essential that public leaders remember that nothing belongs to them, and they are there to serve the people. According to [REDACTED], a lot of people become politicians and think

they are here to get elected, but they are not, they have a higher purpose and that is to serve the people.

A service-based mission also resonated when [REDACTED] spoke about the empathetic qualities a public administrator must possess. [REDACTED] declared that you really need to care about people if you are going into this profession. It will also be helpful to have a sense of humor because “it is going to be terrible” ([REDACTED], 2023). In this context, [REDACTED] was referring to the shift in the public when many things become automated due to AI innovations, causing mass unemployment.

Intersection of Themes with Holzer and Schwester

Although I found many intersections of themes in the Holzer and Schwester textbook and [REDACTED]'s interview, I will focus on two chapters regarding human resources and the future of public administration, which resonated as I spoke with [REDACTED]. First, in the Managing Human Resources Chapter, Holzer and Schwester state that “greater numbers of workers are driven by the desire to find a societal niche where their talents are recognized, where they are treated as human beings who have deeply held desires...where they are consulted on those matters that have influence on their work lives” (2020, p. 163). Clearly, [REDACTED] understands this tendency of human nature as he encourages each employee to create his or her own strategic plan and mission statement. With clear lines of communication, [REDACTED] treats his employees with respect and puts them in the driver's seat. In the interview, [REDACTED] also stated that you should never tell employees how to do something; you should let them surprise you with their ingenuity ([REDACTED], 2023). Similarly, Holzer and Schwester echo that sentiment, “Not insisting that the delegating task be done ‘your’ way is important to effective delegation” (2020, p. 163). By allowing his employees to find their own methods to solve problems, [REDACTED]

allows for his employees to own their work in ways that would be impossible if the task were spelled out step-by-step. Additionally, by adopting a planning and performance tools such as self-defined strategic planning, [REDACTED] is ensuring a partnership with his employees and fostering an environment of respect, trust, and accountability.

Secondly, [REDACTED]'s interview intersected the Holzer and Schwester Chapter entitled "The Future of Public Administration." Countering negative stereotypes, e-governance, and artificial intelligence were key themes in my interview of [REDACTED]. As conveyed in Holzer and Schwester, there is "an inaccurate, distorted portrayal of public servants [that] characterized them as inept and inefficient" (2020, p. 401). [REDACTED] alluded to this negative stereotype and added that there is such distrust of public administration and government that reclaiming that trust has become a job in and of itself. Additionally, the future of public administration will become more and more e-governance. Holzer and Schwester define e-governance as "the general term used to describe the government's use of technology in performing its multiple task[s]" (2020, p. 408). [REDACTED]'s emphasis on how public administrators must utilize and communicate via social media fluently as well as his focus on robotics and artificial intelligence echo the growing importance of e-governance in the public sector.

Conclusion: My Future in Public Administration

Although the assignment was to focus my interview on one of eight areas corresponding to chapters Holzer and Schwester's textbook, I was guided in my interview by the personal and professional stories of [REDACTED]. My initial focus was Performance Management and Program Evaluation and I appreciated his emphasis on personal strategic planning and putting the responsibility and respect into the hands of the employee. I feel that this method effectively and astutely allows people to become the best versions of themselves in the workplace. Moreover,

██████'s focus on robotics and artificial intelligence made me want to pursue that topic further, as admittedly, I know little of the subject. As a result, I pivoted my Managing Public Organizations literature review to focus on the topic of artificial intelligence so that I might learn more of what ██████ was speaking of. Thus, I have been learning what research there is on the topic of artificial intelligence in public administration as well as proposing my own research design in the field.

As I embark on my public administration career, I will hold closely the experiences and history of ██████ and other leaders before me. I will do my best to learn from ██████'s success and failures. I especially appreciated his emphasis on how it is easier to succeed than to fail. He stated that he has been successful at ██████ County Community College because he “runs this place like a business and not like a government institution” (██████, 2023). He shared that one of the things that enabled him to do that was implementing individual strategic plans and mission statements for each employee. He professed that this strategic planning and mission statement writing of employees enabled his staff to reach a higher level at work and in life. ██████'s approach is very different than what I have seen in the public sector so far and I plan to utilize his methods when I am in a position to do so.

Finally, I was very impressed by ██████'s public service mission. He had a unique combination of both humility and confidence that emanated throughout his demeanor. I learned that when the times get tough, it is essential to remember that we in public administration are public servants and must conduct ourselves ethically as such. After hearing it expressed so forcefully from ██████, I realized that I, too, believed in the public service mission. When things have gotten stressful or hectic at work recently, I have reminded myself of that mission and almost immediately the stress dissipates and I am able to approach the task at hand. In just

under two hours, a breadth of topics were discussed and [REDACTED] shed light on different aspects of public administration. I very much appreciated [REDACTED] giving his time to my interview and I hope that someday I will earn the opportunity to repay the favor to an upcoming graduate student.

References

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