

A Lesson “In” Government: Connecting Theory and Practice in the Study of Municipal Government

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Introduction

The argument that city governments significantly affect people’s lives on a daily basis seems to be nothing but a tired old aphorism. What’s the big deal anyway? Patch a few potholes here, conduct a few ribbon-cutting ceremonies there, and for the most part, remain invisible to the average citizen. That’s city government for you, particularly the small and mid-sized variety. It’s national and international government and politics that command citizens’ attention, at least for those citizens who pay heed. Who cares or even thinks about inside city hall? Is this assessment too harsh? Probably, but experience has demonstrated to me that undergraduate students in particular have rarely thought much about city government, and consequently have an extremely simplified, or inaccurate, understanding of it. I am also convinced that these knowledge deficiencies cannot be remedied fully in the classroom setting where theory and description are often vacuous substitutes for the real world. An experiential component is required before students can achieve a critical understanding of the complexity and nuance of city government administration and politics. Given this pedagogical predilection, this paper describes a unique city government internship program I developed as a way of providing a richly textured, and rigorously conducted, experiential component to my efforts to teach undergraduates about city government and politics. Its portability lends to its easy duplication, and I believe it serves as a model that could be adopted by other institutions and cities.

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John Dewey, Muscatine, Iowa, and Slater, Missouri: Linking Theory and Practice in the Teaching of Municipal Government

Those of us who continually attempt to bridge the gap between the applied and theoretical worlds of political science tend to maintain a constantly critical view of theory as explanation. Our epistemological perspective usually flows from a kind of unspoken query such as: “That theory sounds interesting, but does it hold true in practice?” Standard methods of empirical research help focus our scholarship toward answers, but how is our teaching affected by this fundamental question? At least for me, teaching must be, and typically is, guided by the philosophy of John Dewey and his profound insight that “we learn best by doing” (Dewey 1916)¹ Translated to the world of undergraduate teaching in public administration, urban politics, and state and local government, this fundamental insight has moved me to develop various experiential components for my courses. Different learning styles of students notwithstanding, I have found that these techniques have the broadest appeal in terms of engaging students’ interests, and so the development of these techniques seems a worthy venture.

A few years ago, I was involved in one of several efforts I make annually to line up internships in local government for interested students. As is fairly typical elsewhere, students at Wittenberg University are encouraged to seek out internships in their fields. In this instance, I was trying to help a student arrange a summer internship with the government of her hometown of Muscatine, Iowa.

In a practice that again is fairly typical, students at Wittenberg can receive academic credit for their internships by linking an academic component such as a paper and/or a reflective journal to the internship. While the paper and/or journal can be closely monitored for academic integrity, the quality of the internship as a learning experience is

always potentially problematic. If great care is not taken to ensure that the student has meaningful work assignments, as opposed to mere clerical types of work, and that there is sufficient supervision in the workplace for the student to feel involved and needed, internships can be disastrous from a pedagogical perspective.

Making sure these things are in place when the internship site is in another city, let alone another state like the internship in Muscatine, Iowa, is a challenge requiring clear and consistent communication with the site supervisor. Ways of doing this are numerous, and detailing them is not the purpose of this paper. However, the challenge of ensuring a quality internship experience for this particular student was what led me to consider more innovative ways to create experiential learning opportunities for students interested in local government administration and politics. Additionally, my own experience as an intern, and then as an Assistant to the City Manager and Acting City Manager in Slater, Missouri during the early to mid 1980s reminded me of two critical notions: 1) from an intern’s perspective, being able to point to a significant project, or projects, completed during the internship is a valuable resume-building, and learning, experience; and 2) from the perspective of a typical city administrator, there are always significant projects sitting on the shelf that require attention, but remain on the shelf for lack of personnel or time. In short, my experience had taught me that a truly positive internship experience would have to satisfy the interests of three significant stakeholders: 1) the professor, or more generally, the university and the academic department, 2) the student intern, and 3) the city. With this in mind, I began to consider how I might design an integrative internship program in city government that would allow students to make continual linkages between the theory and practice of local government. It seemed that an ideal scenario in this regard would be one in which student interns would be integrated into an administrative structure of a city on a relatively full-time basis, but

would also be able to constantly dovetail classroom theory with what they were doing and observing as interns. Additionally, I knew from my own experience that in order for the students to feel like they were making a significant contribution while not getting lost in a massive bureaucratic maze, the size of the city had to be small to moderate—somewhere between 10,000 and 75,000 in population.²

Specifically, I conceived of a program consisting of an internship component combined with a seminar that could be portable, i.e., conducted in any city around the country. Students would be placed as interns in one of the city departments and given one or more projects to complete by the end of the program. My role in this regard would be one of being accessible at city hall each day for students to consult on their projects, to troubleshoot any issues that might arise in terms of supervision, and to help facilitate the independent work that would be required for the students to complete their assignments. Students would also take a seminar from me two nights a week in city hall, and be required to attend regular city council meetings and as many staff and other meetings as appropriate. For this to be mutually beneficial to the students and the city, the program should be operated at a minimum level of about eight students. The internships would be unpaid. Therefore, since students would be paying tuition and fees to register for the program, and most likely giving up a significant portion of their summer jobs, the only way it could be financially feasible would be for the city to pay for housing and basic utilities. With these essential components in mind, I called a friend of mine who at the time was the City Administrator of Grand Island, Nebraska and proposed the idea. He was ecstatic and immediately jumped at the proposal and we began planning for an initial piloting of the program with 13 students during the summer of 1994 in Grand Island. I have since conducted it two other times—Fernandina Beach, Florida in 1997 with 15 students, and again in Grand Island, Nebraska in 2000 with 9 students. As it has now evolved, the program consists of the following components:

- It is a nine-week intensive program wherein students are placed as interns in city departments and given projects to complete by the end of the nine weeks. The number of students varies, but the maximum is around 15 from a logistical point of view.

- Students work Monday-Thursday 8 to 5; and Fridays 8 to 12 as unpaid interns.

- A professor is on-site (in City Hall or another facility where interns are placed) full-time to help with trouble-shooting and to assist students as they work on their projects. For the first two iterations of the program, I did this myself. Then, for the third go-round, I recruited one of my colleagues in the Wittenberg Urban Studies program—Dr. Jeff Ankrom, Professor of Economics—to split the duties with me.

- Students take a course—Introduction to City Administration—from the professor(s) two nights a week in one of the City Hall conference rooms.

- Students are required to attend regular city council meetings and other staff meetings as their supervising department heads require.

- Students receive eight hours of college credits for successful completion of the program, and each pays full tuition for the eight hours of summer session.

- The host city is responsible for providing housing for the students and professor(s) during the period including basic utilities except for long-distance telephone. In the previous three iterations, this expense to the cities has averaged about \$5,000.

- As part of their experience, students are taken on two extended weekend excursions during which they are absent from work on Friday and Monday of those weekends. These are spaced roughly equally apart during the nine-week period. In the Grand Island program, these excursions include trips to the Black Hills/Mt. Rushmore, and Breckenridge, Colorado. The Fernandina Beach program includes trips to Key West and Atlanta.

- The city is responsible for hosting a full-day orientation program for the students on the first Monday of the program during which the city manager/administrator, mayor, interested members of the council, and department heads meet with the students, provide information, and answer questions. Also included is a tour of the city and a reception at the end of the day for some socializing.

Selected Examples of Student Projects

The kinds of projects that students have completed have been challenging and quite varied over the course of the three programs thus far. Below is a sample of the kinds of things students have done. Their commonality is that they have all been discrete, off-the-shelf projects that have greatly benefited the cities. This is a key aspect of the program for the cities. The ability to have

Grand Island, 1994

Legal Department: Updating of Fee Ordinances and Researching Delinquent Tax Assessments.

City Clerk: Survey of Citizen Attitudes on City Services and Developing a Guide to City Services.

Personnel Department: ADA Compliance and Essential Job Function Analysis.

Fire Department: 100-city Comparative Study of Staffing Patterns, ISO Fire Protection Rating Research, and a Study of Incident Documentation and Reporting.

City Administrator: Transportation Study and Economic Impact Analysis of Proposed New Civic Center.

Public Works: Comparative Sewer Surcharge Study, and Attitude Survey on Solid Waste Recycling.

Utilities Department: Development of Underground Electric Line Policy.

Parks and Recreation: 10-Year Playground Equipment Replacement Plan, Water Park Usage Survey and Analysis.

Planning Department: Development of Landscape Ordinance, and Updating of Land-Use Maps.

several projects completed at once creates a dramatic impact, and is the essential reason the cities have wanted to host the program.

Connecting Theory and Practice

The course students take twice a week, titled “Introduction to City Administration,” provides students the opportunity to think critically about what they have observed as they have gone about their duties as interns. The principal goal is to provide essential theoretical and illustrative material to help the students put their internships into a theoretical framework for understanding more generally how cities are administered. The course outline is purposefully flexible to allow for guest speakers to be included at short notice. I also allow generous time for extemporaneous classroom discussion of the political issues and controversies that come up while we are in the city. I have found that these discussions are some of the more enlightening for students as they eagerly anticipate being able to process orally their confusion and questions about the events and processes they have become intimately involved in as members of the city staff. The foundation for the

Fernandina Beach, 1997

Police Department: Research and Compilation of Documents for National Accreditation.

Fire Department: Community Survey on Fire/Rescue Services, and Emergency Medical Service Grant Funding Research.

Marina Department: Development of Maritime Museum Proposal, and Development of Computerized Customer Data Base.

Public Works: Evaluation of Efficiency of Sanitation Collection Route System.

City Manager's Office: Research and development of Marketing Plan for TV/Film Production Opportunities, and Development of a City Economic Profile.

City Clerk: Development of New Bid List Procedure, Election Date Survey and Analysis.

Legal Department: Development of Synopsis of the Annexation Procedures for Florida cities to be given to citizens, and Research (including FOIA request) for gaining ferry access to Cumberland Island, GA.

Grand Island, 2000

Planning Department: Conversion of paper land-use maps to GIS, and Updating of landscaping ordinance.

Legal Department: Comparison of 1st-class City Occupancy taxes, Study of handicapped parking compliance, development of Inter-local agreement for Law Enforcement Records Management Program.

Parks and Recreation: Revision of policy regarding licensing of vendors in the parks, and Creation of Public Property Permit Process/Procedure.

Building Department: Incorporated license agreements into appropriate Building Department files, and Analysis of Building Department's permitting procedures.

Community Development: Community Needs Survey (CDBG Program).

Emergency Management Department: Updated the Emergency Operating Guide, and Coordinated all agencies and departments in terms of emergency responsibilities.

Public Works: Sewer Rate Study, Study of Pavement Assessment Policies in Nebraska cities, and Solid Waste Telephone Survey.

course comes primarily from the public administration literature. However, for the third time around—Grand Island, 2000—I was able to recruit a colleague of mine in the Wittenberg Urban Studies program who teaches Economics, specializing in local public finance. His expertise, particularly some economic modeling concepts and methods, has been added to the course, significantly enriching the theoretical material for the students.³

Assessments: Students and Cities

A key academic aspect of the internship component is the requirement that students keep reflective journals documenting what they are observing and providing an opportunity for them to assess what they think they are learning, as well as convey their reactions—both positive and negative—to the program as it develops. At the outset, I provide the students with a syllabus for the internship component outlining the kinds of expectations I have for their successful completion of the internship. Two essential goals are pursued: 1) trying to keep students cognizant of the fact that their “job” is to be students first, and employees second, and 2) emphasizing the need for students to be continually reflective as they write their journal entries. My guide for this assignment has been a nice little article by Brooks (1993) that deals with these issues succinctly. Regarding goal number 1 above, his admonition that students should try not to “go native” (Brooks 1993, 12) is something I continually harp on throughout the course of the program. Although I check their journals periodically during the summer, reading them at the end of the program has consistently led me to believe that the two goals, for the most part, have been universally achieved among the students. The following excerpts from these journals serve to illustrate several themes that have emerged in terms of student assessments of the program and what they believe they have learned. In fact, the themes have developed so clearly that it is possible to categorize student journal entries. I therefore have organized the excerpts around these consistent themes.

Initial Trepidation and Fear

One common reaction initially expressed by some of the students, particularly when they are given their project assignments, is trepidation about being

able to complete the projects. I remember one student in particular in the Grand Island, 1994 program who came to me the first night after receiving his project assignment. He was extremely agitated and concerned that he did not know anything at all about the topic he was assigned to work on. After I reassured him, he concentrated on learning as much about the subject, and in the end was able to do a very fine job for the city. For me, the most gratifying result was his greatly expanded self-confidence. Most students have experienced this type of significant growth process as illustrated by the following quote: “The greatest thing that has happened is that I’ve gained more confidence in myself. I can do the task at hand, whatever it may be, without constantly second-guessing myself” (Grand Island, 2000).

I Now Know What I Don't Want to Do

This program is not designed to train future city administrators and politicians. While some of the former students who have participated in the program have gone on to careers in local government, several have concluded after their experiences that city government is not for them. Part of the intensity of this conclusion is linked to the degree of political turmoil going on in the city during the program. The most tumultuous programs were Grand Island, 1994, and Fernandina Beach, 1997. In fact, during our session in 1997, the city manager was actually publicly fired. This was a tremendous eye-opening experience for the students to see city politics at its fiercest. A few quotes are illustrative of the students' realizations that they don't want to work in local government:

Well, we went to our 3rd city council meeting last night and because of it I have come to many conclusions. I feel like I do not have the right personality to be involved in city government. All of the topics covered last night seemed so petty to me. I couldn't believe people were actually fighting about whether to have fireworks or not (Grand Island, 1994)!

After attending the first city council meeting . . . I can say that I won't go into local government, at least not one where there is a TV broadcasting the [meeting] throughout the area. I think if they removed the cameras, things would be less intense and would move along faster (Fernandina Beach, 1997).

Being turned off of government is a good thing because at least I've realized it now as opposed to having my first 'real' job being this way. It's been frustrating, but still great (Grand Island, 2000)!

If I Hadn't Seen It, I Wouldn't Have Believed Politics Could Be Like This

One of the most satisfying insights that nearly all students gain from this program is a much more nuanced perspective on the nature and intensity of local politics. Naïve and benign perspectives give way to more sophisticated understandings of political reality. This is one of the principal overall goals I had when I designed the program. This intense experiential understanding can only come from the kind of immersion experience the students get from being a part of the administrative staff full-time. Some of the more humorous quotes from student journals have sounded this theme as can be seen by the samples below:

The longer I am here, the more I realize just exactly how incompetent the city council is. I don't understand how some of these bozos have been elected. Today the [local newspaper] has an article about another councilman's legal problems. Apparently, [he] plead guilty to disturbing the peace. The newspaper reported he had been making harassing phone calls to a neighbor. Just another example of the widespread unprofessionalism of the council (Grand Island, 1994).

[Something] that is very noticeable within this organization is the tension among the supporters and nonsupporters of the mayor. Obviously, some people will not like the mayor, but I am very surprised about the tension among these groups. This seems very petty to me, almost high schoolish, but this is the real world outside of [college] and we are definitely getting a taste of it (Grand Island, 1994).

I have learned many things I had no idea to expect. The foremost of these is how intense local politics can be. The suburb I come from has had the same mayor for 40 years, so local politics back home are basically written in stone. [Here], on the other hand, things are in a constant state of flux (Fernandina Beach, 1997).

We attended our second city commission meeting two nights ago. This was much better than the first, but that isn't saying a whole lot. It was two hours

shorter for one thing, and there was no attempt to lynch anyone (Fernandina Beach, 1997).

As nice as it was for the city to let us come here, and to pay for our housing, this place is way too screwed up. They need to end all this corruption and stupid political games. I understand this stuff seems to go on everywhere, but this community is even more out of whack than I ever could have imagined (Grand Island, 2000).

I am very glad I spoke to city council earlier than later, but I think I will have to speak before council again. This time I will commend these gentlemen for doing thankless work that a majority of people take for granted. So many petty decisions are made, denied, remade . . . This type of inefficient planning is what I cannot understand (Grand Island, 2000).

Frustration and Disappointment

Unfortunately, not all students end up having a totally positive experience. This is due to a variety of factors including poor project design, inadequate interaction with their busy supervisors, or inability to keep busy due to insufficient workload. These negative experiences have been minimal, but a few students have expressed some concerns. In most cases, I have been able to intercede and salvage the experience with some corrective action. Nevertheless, students who have been frustrated or disappointed pulled no punches in their journal entries as noted below:

Yesterday was a very frustrating day for me. Once again, I did not do hardly anything productive for the course, or my learning experience. I have to say I was really bitter as I left work yesterday. It is very hard to stay interested in a job when no one really seems to care if you are there or not. Knowing that I'm obligated to be there every day from 8 to 5 is very difficult when people treat me like I don't really need to be there at all. I just don't understand why someone wouldn't take advantage of basically free labor (Fernandina Beach, 1997).

In considering what I have done over the last 6 weeks, I wonder if the work I am doing is really useful or just for my own educational benefit? Do they really need me to do these projects? Are they just creating work for me to do? I had hoped that a project I completed might influence some policy de-

cision put before the city council (Grand Island, 2000).

Idiosyncratic Insights

The final theme that has emerged from student journal entries concerns the surprises, or unintentional insights, students have revealed as they have reflected on their experiences. Often, these observations come in later entries as they have come to know the city and city government more intimately, and they therefore tend to have a more global focus. For me, they are usually the most rewarding entries to read. Here is a sample of observations ranging from the importance of inter-city communications, to potential workplace gender bias, to the realization that city service delivery is so fundamental to city government.

I am still surprised by the amount of fees the residents here have to pay. [The city attorney] said the amount of fees is also increased because of the city's utilities and electric plant. I am surprised half the citizens are not in debt yet (Grand Island, 1994).

I have noticed a very close bond between the women in th[is department] . . . I wonder if gender plays a role in the [supervisor's] attitude? I guess [he] wishes I was a man, because he would definitely treat me differently. The [assistant] is more open to me about her career . . . (Grand Island, 1994).

One thing I learned from this project was the [importance] of communication from city to city. I never really thought of the importance of daily communication from one city hall to another (Fernandina Beach, 1997).

I never really realized that the main function of local government is service delivery. I would have never expected the broad array of things for which city government is responsible. Above this, I never realized how complex delivering these services is. The neat thing is that employees cared about getting these services out to the citizens (Fernandina Beach, 1997).

I am noticing more the dynamics of the workplace here at City Hall. The administrative staff under [the city manager] and the city clerk is [sic] more easygoing than some of the other departments. [One of the] departments is pretty much a madhouse, and the people seem as though they are about ready to go crazy most of the time. I can understand that because of how busy their department is, but they are

busy upstairs [too]. I think it really depends upon who is the department head (Fernandina Beach, 1997).

In summary, the student journal entries clearly have indicated to me over the years that the program has been successful. In spite of the occasional frustrated student, the vast majority of responses and reactions by students have been overwhelmingly positive. They have attempted to take seriously their role as students, and to reflect critically on the things they are observing around them at city hall on a daily basis.

What about the cities? How have they assessed the programs? The evidence I have points to strong positive reactions on the part of the cities. Toward the end of each program, I have surveyed the department heads and supervisors of the interns on their attitudes about the program. The consistent strong positive feedback I have received, and the fact that both cities have invited us back are indicative of the support the cities and their staffs have for the program in general.

Challenges

Organizing and conducting a program such as this is not easy, but an essential logistical template for the program was generated during the first go round, and it has served me well in the later experiences. An initial obstacle is obtaining the approval of a potential host city. This was easy the first time since my colleague was so enthusiastic. However, I have had two other cities—Jacksonville Beach, Florida and Glendale, Arizona—working with me to implement programs only to have them pull out during the planning stages due to snags along the way. Obviously, having had such positive experiences in Grand Island and Fernandina Beach has led to us being invited back, but I am

constantly trying to expand the program to get other cities in the rotation.

One of the biggest hurdles is the issue of housing. While the cost has not been high for the cities (again, about \$5,000), finding this kind of temporary housing at such a low cost has been difficult in every instance. In fact, the

Part of the goal of the program is to achieve a mutually beneficial experience for the students and the city.

initial two experiences—Grand Island, 1994 and Fernandina Beach, 1997—saw some creative, yet controversial, solutions by the cities. In 1994, Grand Island had just completed a new city hall prior to our arrival. Housing was in such short supply that year the city finally decided to turn one floor of the old city hall, across the street from the new one, into a dormitory/loft arrangement. Offices were converted into bedrooms. The employee lounge was turned into a TV/lounge area, and the old employee kitchen was upgraded a bit for the students to use as a kitchen. Of course, there were bathrooms throughout the building, but only one shower existed in the old public works area. So, the city obtained memberships in the YMCA across the street so students could shower. Nine of the students lived there that summer, while the other four shared an apartment. In 1997, Fernandina Beach rented a three-story beach house and placed all 15 students there. In 2000, the housing situation was less of an issue as the city was able to find apartments for us.

Another challenge is recruiting students. Part of the goal of the program is to achieve a mutually beneficial experience for the students and the city. As noted above, the benefit for the city is in having such a large number of projects completed at once. This requires that at least eight students participate, with a more optimal number being 12 to 15. I have found that I have to start recruiting potential students at least a year in advance to get them interested and excited about the program. I then need to keep

them on board so they will follow through and register to participate. This usually requires monthly meetings to give them updates about the planning, and to keep them excited about the program. Traveling to some other destination and having a quality internship project to complete is appealing, but the effort to generate interest is still part of the challenge of overseeing this kind of venture.

One final challenge is that of keeping the students focused during what can sometimes be the doldrums of the program. During the middle of the summer, when projects are underway, and we have fallen into a routine, students have to be reminded sometimes to stay on task. For many of them, this is their first professional work experience, and on those inevitable slow days, they can get frustrated.

A Lesson “In” Government

In spite of the challenges, the chance to develop close bonds with good students, and to see them bridge theory and practice has been a deeply rewarding experience. The program has also received its share of publicity over the years, which has been another source of satisfaction. Several newspaper articles have been written about the program with each iteration, including some blurbs in national publications such as *Nation's Cities Weekly* (“City Ideas That Work,” 1994), and *The Chronicle of Higher Education* (“Ohio Students Help Short-Staffed Nebraska City,” 1994). In 1997, we even had a camera crew from the regional bureau of CNN ready to come to Fernandina Beach to do a story. In the end this did not materialize, but it was exciting to the students to think that they were participating in something so unique that it had the potential of being national news. Of all the articles that have been written, my favorite is one that was published in the Grand Island newspaper about a month after we had arrived in 1994. It was titled “A Lesson In Government” (Hooper 1994). I have come to realize that it could not have captured the essence of the program any better. I think the students would agree.

Notes

1. Actually, this was rather intuitive for me from the beginning. It was only later in my academic career that I had the occasion to read Dewey and discover his ruminations on the importance of experience as part of the educational process and the development of democracy.

2. Ideally, for students to have maximum impact and receive significant recognition for their efforts, the program was conceived as working best in a medium-sized city. Of course, opportunities abound for working out similar arrangement in larger urban settings. The logistics would be a bit more complex,

and acclimating students to a larger city bureaucracy would be more challenging, but with these issues in mind, the program is certainly doable in a larger city.

3. A copy of the course syllabus can be obtained by emailing the author: jbak@wittenberg.edu.

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