Whose Problem Is This?  
Our Responsibilities to  
Public Affairs Program Graduates  
Who Return to Oppressive Regimes  

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**Abstract**  
This essay explores questions raised by graduates of public affairs programs who return to politically oppressive regimes. The decision about whether, and to what extent, to assume responsibility for addressing this issue is critical. If we decide to address it in our programs, there are both challenges and opportunities. Whatever our institutional and individual circumstances, this appears to be an area where we can learn from one another.

American public service education programs host students from diverse regimes all over the world. International students comprised about 8.7% of those enrolled in MPA/MPP programs in 2007. In some, the international student population was 55% (Apaza & McFarland, p. 2). Asian countries dominate international enrollments at both the masters and doctoral levels. At the University of Hawai`i at Manoa, about 20% are international students, virtually all from Asia or the Pacific. This group normally includes participants from countries that have oppressive or politically problematic regimes.

The essay examines the reentry concerns associated with these international students, the ways in which these concerns are and are not different from the challenges other students face, what it might mean to try to address them, and the nature and limits of our responsibilities. It does not appear likely that these harsh regimes will disappear any time soon. If anything, the graduates of all our programs may face more, rather than fewer, environments that are hostile to what they’ve learned, heightening the importance of the dialogue this essay encourages (Dator, Pratt, & Yongseok, 2006).
Stories

Auming Ingei was a child when the Khmer Rouge forcibly evacuated the residents of Phnom Penh. She not only suffered through the dislocation with her family, but for a period had to go into hiding to avoid being taken far away from them. Years after her family’s return to the capital, she secured a position in the office of the governor of Phnom Penh.

Auming’s deepest desire was to expose and unseat those responsible, some who still hold powerful elective and administrative positions. She expressed increasing concern about what would happen when she returned and tried to delay that time by undertaking doctoral studies. Her English prevented this pursuit, and we heard little after she returned to Cambodia and then only in response to our messages. One of her notes stated she might be out of contact for some time. There was an ominous sense to it, although she wrote that we should not worry.

Yillal Duang worked for a national news agency in China before coming to pursue a degree that would help her find a position more directly engaged in public service. Very smart and a quick learner with excellent English skills, she was ambitious to make a difference in her next career.

We visited Yillal in a very upscale apartment in Beijing a couple of years after she graduated. Her husband was richly rewarded by his Chinese company for negotiating complex deals with foreign firms and was candid that his work invariably involved payoffs and kickbacks.

Yillal’s efforts to find a job had failed, and she could not even return to her old employer. Friends let her know she was informally being blackballed. No value was given to the education she had sacrificed for; it even was seen in a negative light. Devastated by this unexpected turn of events, she raised their son while waiting for her husband to return from a job that required the very behavior she hoped to help end.

Yie Yanasurit is very smart, well organized, passionate about his country, and direct in his opinions. He intended to work for a nongovernmental organization when he returned to Burma, partly because it would build some small but comforting distance between him and government authorities.

But Yie did not return, despite this passion for his homeland. He was offered a short-term position in a campus office where he’d done an internship. He elected to stay because of the heightened danger to him and his family of any publicly visible position. He will pursue options for remaining in the United States or another country, at least for the time being.

Trung Nguyen was employed by a training institute in northern Vietnam and expected to return to it after graduation. He is motivated, smart, and hopeful about his country’s future. He returned home, but not to public service. He opted for a private sector firm where he can do some of the same work, preferring job insecurity and a lower sense of mission to continuous worry about reprisals for not following the party line.
A Looming Question

We can ask specific questions about each of these cases. For Auming Ingei, it is whether there really was anything to worry about. Perhaps not, but it did raise concerns different from those we might have upon receiving a similar message from someone working in a U.S. mayor’s office. Yillal Duang’s case raises the question of whether, given her enthusiasm to use what she learned, our faculty might have anticipated her difficulties. Yie Yanasurit’s decision not to return asks whether our program ought to be pleased about the position he landed in the United States. And what are any of us to think about Trung Nguyen’s need to join a company that can make much less use of his public service education?

These questions are difficult; but behind them looms one larger for all of us, and it is this: What are our responsibilities here? We, of course, can and should ask about the fates of any of our graduates. Many enter or return to difficult environments. They face intractable bureaucracies, incompetent bosses, and high-stakes politics. They may be the only ones whose approach to complex issues is shaped by a professional-level and/or relevant education.

Our program tries to address the challenges they will face by encouraging graduates to be professional resources to one another and by using our newsletters and speakers forum to keep graduates engaged with issues and with one another. We tell them they can never ignore their obligations, because of the investment society has made in them. In short, we do acknowledge some responsibility for the postgraduation experience of these students. Does this take care of our obligations to international students who return to difficult and dangerous settings?

Some Important Differences

Many domestic students remain in their professional positions while undertaking graduate studies. This means they gradually integrate new skills and perspectives, and their coworkers have time to adjust to their new views. International students, on the other hand, are completely absent and living in a different world for at least 2 years. They need to reintegrate with their workplace and their colleagues while looking for ways to use what they’ve learned, just as their bosses and coworkers are trying to adjust to them.

It seems safe to say that in our field, most of us are knowledgeable about the environments our domestic graduates are returning to. At a minimum, we are familiar with the institutional rules of the game. This familiarity is much lower in relation to our international students, especially those returning to these challenging regimes. After a module on the importance of critical thinking in public service work, a woman from Kazakhstan explained why a focus on critical thinking was largely meaningless. She described her colleagues, the behavior of her bosses, and the often unpredictable gap between formal rules and the actions of those with power. I listened and then made the case that despite all of these obstacles, there are still good reasons for her to take the idea of critical thinking

Whose Problem Is This?
seriously. Reflecting later, my educator-self thought I was right in persisting, but my realist-self recognized I had a very limited understanding of the professional world she would reencounter.

**Deciding What to Do, or Not Do**

As public affairs educators, we have several options in deciding what to do about our responsibilities to students. One is to let our students figure out their challenges for themselves. The strongest justification for this approach is that helping students deal with such context-specific issues is beyond our responsibilities, or at least our capabilities. This is like concluding that these problems are none of our business, or at least it is a business we cannot expect to really understand. If that is true, as my encounter with the Kazakhstani student suggests, then by taking this option we avoid the risk of creating more, rather than less, trouble for our students.

Another option is to rely on others to help students and graduates deal with these issues. The most likely candidates are the sponsoring agencies, such as the Asian Development Bank, the Ford Foundation, and in our case, the East-West Center. It is not just buck-passing to think that staffs at these agencies may have more direct experience with our graduates’ circumstances and that they might be in a position to do some follow-up in the coming years. If this is our approach, we might consider going a little further to encourage these sponsoring agencies by offering whatever information would be helpful to them. We might even agree to jointly design reentry strategies.

A third option is to deal with the issues more directly. This path can take at least two broad directions. One is to agree to work with current students individually to help them integrate what they’ve learned into the realities of the places they will work. Each adviser can do this, and by and large this is what we have done. Another path is to create a program that addresses these issues, and we are now tentatively experimenting with such a program.

**Challenges**

Any path that leads toward taking more responsibility also presents other issues. The first of these is finding out what we need to know about the students’ experience, and how we learn it. Any of us might design a program that makes sense for these students, assuming a reasonably accurate understanding of their circumstances. That my program has not done much to systematically obtain information about the conditions our graduates face, or our students think they will face, in part reflects that they do not seem anxious to tell us. Several things may be at play. One is the personality of the individual student, and how open or closed she or he is. Another is that student’s relationship to the program and to particular faculty. The third element is the student’s relationship with other students from their country, and their sense of whether what they say or do will
be transmitted to authorities. Given all of this, our primary approach has been to rely on what we know about repressive regimes and punitive bureaucracies and wait for individual encounters between faculty and students.

Opportunities

What would a program look like that incorporates some degree of responsibility for or responsiveness to the challenges these graduates face? One of the design issues to be resolved is whether it should take place throughout their program of study, or only at its end. Placing it at the end is logical since most of their learning is completed, and they are face-to-face with the transition. A more integrated program has some significant virtues because there are so many topics that lend themselves to its inclusion. For example, we could open up a classroom discussion of Rosemary O’Leary’s informative and provocative *The Ethics of Dissent* to include settings in which the motivations of the decision makers are more opaque and the threats to the dissenter more dangerous. There is a reasonable likelihood that international students would be better at interpreting their options in future situations as a result of these discussions.

The strategy of incorporating this topic more fully into the curriculum rather than placing it at the end of a program of study brings another potential gain, seen in this question: What kind of teaching and learning opportunities does this topic present for other students? From one perspective, this is an issue of concern only for international students returning to difficult regimes. From another, the discussion will enrich all students, broadening their frames of reference, sensitizing them to the importance of transparency and due process, underscoring the meaning of *public* in public service, and generating faculty-to-student and student-to-student conversations. Using the same example, a discussion in connection with *The Ethics of Dissent* could help create sensitivity to abuses by authority, build better discernment of when dissent is an important step or a self-serving gesture, and augment the courage to act when it is needed.

Conclusion

Reflecting on the experience of our international students has increased my curiosity about what other programs are doing to facilitate these transitions. How many have a program in place? Are any directed at graduates? Which of these for current students are one-on-one versus group conversations? Do they bring together students from different academic programs? What has been the response of both national and international students? How do we know if an approach is successful?
Whose Problem Is This?

REFERENCES


Footnotes
1 Identifying characteristics for these individuals have been altered, but not their situations.

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