

Beyond the Usual Complaints: The Front-Line Challenges and Opportunities of Small MPA Programs

Michelle Pautz

University of Dayton

Grant Neeley

University of Dayton

ABSTRACT

This article uses narratives to consider our experiences administering a small, regionally focused Master of Public Administration (MPA) program accredited by the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration. Small programs are the majority of public administration programs in the United States, and they have unexpected challenges and opportunities. As directors and department chair, we have identified the following particular challenges: (1) explaining the MPA program and its merit to internal constituencies within the university, (2) valuing a graduate program in an institution that emphasizes undergraduate education, (3) being the program's only advocate, (4) contending with perverse incentives regarding the best and brightest prospective students, (5) capitalizing on the undergraduate emphasis and including graduate students, (6) existing in the world of both undergraduate and graduate education, and (7) grappling with the changing public sector landscape in the region the program serves. This article explores these challenges through personal stories, drawing lessons and offering suggestions.

KEYWORDS

MPA program administration, program challenges, narratives

Directors of Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs face an array of challenges that both hinder and enhance their programs. And it is often easy to focus on the negative aspects of those challenges. In keeping with that tendency, we explore some of the challenges we have faced running a small, regional MPA program at a midsized university in Ohio, but

we offer two less common perspectives on these challenges. First, we endeavor to move beyond the usual complaints of staffing challenges and a desire for more financial resources. We posit that those challenges are ubiquitous for programs large and small and much beyond our control. Second, we consider the challenges we have encountered and offer ways to cope

with them (or at least share our methods of muddling through). We are not so bold as to claim that some of these challenges will ever be overcome, but recognizing their steadfastness enables us to think productively about how to respond and possibly bring about incremental changes. Accordingly, our reflections here should be of interest to other program directors, as we all encounter similar complaints as we strive to educate the next generations of public servant leaders.

We could employ various methodologies to examine our administrative experiences; we opt to heed the scholarship of teaching and learning (SOTL) research that reminds us of the importance of our own stories. As Weimer (2013) notes, narratives are an exceedingly useful means of analyzing experiences and drawing lessons for the future. Further, Shadiow (2013), Mulnix (2016), and Cohan (2009) represent an increasing focus in the SOTL literature on narrative as an instructive means to reflect on and improve our efforts as faculty members. Therefore, our discussion of challenges unfolds as follows. First, we explore this stream of SOTL literature and consider how reflection can be instructive. Second, for context, we give an overview of our program and backgrounds. Third, we discuss how we inventoried our challenges, and we describe seven challenges we have encountered that are beyond the more typical complaints from program directors. We detail each challenge and articulate how we have learned to deal with it, in some cases having even made some progress in mitigating that difficulty. Fourth and finally, we pull our discussion together in the hopes of offering fellow directors and faculty members an opportunity to reflect on their own experiences and see potential pathways through some of the challenges we all encounter.

THE IMPORTANCE AND VALUE OF NARRATIVES

Many of us have anecdotal experience in sharing our stories, sharing our trials and tribulations with others. Often, in those

moments we find some relief or catharsis. Sometimes knowing that other individuals in similar contexts are dealing with the same issue is helpful on its own. And in some instances, we ponder the situation from a new perspective or come up with a solution to a present challenge. It is no surprise, then, that the SOTL literature speaks to the importance of sharing our experiences and reflecting on our own teaching and interactions with students and colleagues. Palmer's (2007) widely read *The Courage to Teach* emphasizes the importance of reflecting on our experiences as educators, as the good days and the bad days provide valuable insights and opportunities for reflection. Just as we encourage our students to be reflective, we must be as well. There are numerous examples of faculty who have transformed their teaching and mentoring of students through intentional reflection. Cohan's (2009) story is particularly noteworthy, as he came to the realization that he might very well have been one of "those bad apples" (p. 32).

Shadiow's (2013) *What Our Stories Teach Us: A Guide to Critical Reflection for College Faculty* helps us understand the power of stories and narratives to learn and relearn. Our stories, according to Shadiow, enable us to note, tell, and reflect on our stories, which permits insights into our journeys as educators and to more fully explore that role. Indeed, as teachers, we tell stories to our students to facilitate learning. In the other facets of our work, our stories can be equally as powerful.

Mulnix (2016) reflects that

college educators need to tell more stories about their own learning experiences, not just to their students but also to other faculty. Personal stories that describe learning are rare...yet...they have real potential to help faculty intellectually grab hold of the new realities. (p. 8)

Even though reflective thinking is not new—John Dewey detailed it in his writings—it is

nevertheless surprisingly uncommon (Sparks-Langer & Colton, 1991). Alterio and McDrury (2002) present an engaging discussion of the use of narratives and storytelling in the college classroom, and Jalongo, Isenberg, and Gerbracht (1995) describe how teachers' stories can be used to foster professional development. However, there is little extension of that approach to the work of administration.

To remedy that gap, we advocate that program administrators share our experiences, both for catharsis and for seeking new ways to approach a challenge and move forward. We posit that the value of using narratives as a component of reflective teaching can and should be extended to administering academic programs, even though a review of the literature does not extend this approach to the administrative context. The benefits of using narratives so that educators can reflect on and improve their teaching are analogous to program administration.

OUR APPROACH

We focus on our context as current and former directors of an MPA program. We maintain that sharing our stories about running a small MPA program will be helpful in the following ways. First, half of MPA programs are small programs that have less than 100 students (NASPAA, 2016), yet we generally hear most about the large, highly ranked programs. This is understandable, but the actions and practices of such larger programs may or may not be instructive for small programs. We do not mean to suggest that professional organizations, such as the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), do not endeavor to target and provide assistance to small programs; rather, we simply want to remember that small programs outnumber large ones.

Second, as we have both experienced firsthand, many of the challenges we encounter are not unique to our circumstances, meaning that much synergy is possible when we reflect and

talk about our roles and experiences. We have found through conversation at professional gatherings and among members of our own professional networks that many of these challenges are not new; but solutions—or at least coping mechanisms—seem to be reinvented continuously. Therefore, we hope to spur some dialogue through this work and the conversations it might precipitate.

Third, we seek to create a repository of experiences that can endure and serve as a baseline to measure future progress of any given MPA program. Documenting these challenges and the relative merits of our attempts to address them can augment our ability to improve the educational experience we provide students at our institutions. We know we are not alone in the belief that some of the challenges we routinely face can adversely affect the quality of the education our students receive, and this is unacceptable. Instead of the complacency that understandably results from these challenges, we see them as an opportunity to foster continual improvement. And we suspect that many of our counterparts would agree.

To identify the challenges we discuss here, we engaged in a multistep process. First, we each spent time contemplating the frustrations and obstacles associated with our time administering the MPA program. Then, after individual assessments, we met and discussed our lists at length. We were surprised to see many common themes in both of our lists, even if we used different language to articulate them. After this initial discussion, we went back to our own lists and revised them, mindful of our discussion. We also began to categorize the different challenges identified. We met again and began consolidating our lists into the form that unfolds below. Additional conversation took place about how we each have dealt with some of these challenges and other possible efforts that could be taken.

We hope that our own reflections here will help others, as we confront many of the same

complaints in directing MPA programs. We have found the process of crafting this narrative helpful for ourselves, and we now look at some of these challenges from a new perspective. Before we delve into our specific stories, we first provide some context of our specific MPA program and our organizational environment. From there, we offer seven challenges and discuss our efforts to wrestle with these situations. We detail our coping mechanisms and suggest additional insights for others in similar environments.

THE CONTEXT OF OUR MPA PROGRAM

Our MPA program celebrates its 50th anniversary in 2017 as one of the founding members of NASPAA. Similar to a quarter of MPA programs (NASPAA 2016), ours is located within a political science department (itself within a college) and at an institution primarily focused on undergraduate programs, although it offers several STEM doctoral programs. In 2017, we have about 30 students in the MPA program, some part-time and some full-time. About half are in-service, working professionals and the other half are pre-service students, including many who have just completed their undergraduate degrees. The core faculty in the MPA program hold appointments in the Political Science Department that have a 3/3 teaching load,¹ which requires balancing the demands of both undergraduate and MPA curriculum requirements. This results in MPA faculty typically splitting their time and contributing to two programs, teaching one graduate class and two undergraduate classes each term, while the MPA director typically teaches one undergraduate class and one graduate class.

Our institution is a religiously affiliated private university whose undergraduates comprise approximately 70% of the student population; 95% of those students live on campus. The university's focus on undergraduates in a residential environment has some positive spillovers for our small graduate program. There is strong support for undergraduates in terms of co-curricular and extracurricular opportunities,

which the MPA program is able to leverage for our graduate students; such opportunities would not have been otherwise possible given the limited resources dedicated to graduate programs.

Sporadic support of graduate programs led to an erratic enrollment pattern over the MPA program's history; peak enrollment occurred in 1981, followed by a substantial decline. Since the mid-2000s, local governments have drastically cut personnel budgets—affecting the number of both potential students and post-graduation placements. Over the last decade, the program has increased outreach efforts to the nonprofit sector and state and federal governments to compensate for the decrease in local opportunities, in terms of both tuition assistance and placements. This approach has resulted in a close working relationship with a campus-based center for community leadership and in the incorporation of MPA curriculum-based projects that engage students with local community organizations. Also during the past decade, the program has been central in the institution's public-service orientation, culminating in recognition as a Carnegie Community Engaged University.

Further, in a purposeful effort to improve the quality of the small program's student body, the faculty has moved away from a "formulaic" admissions policy that all but guaranteed admission with minimum GPA and GRE scores. The faculty now more holistically assess a potential student's interest in public service, indicators of such interest within the applicant's file, and that person's writing and communication skills. This choice was in direct contrast to some in the university administration who wanted clearer criteria for admission, which at one point even involved a proposal to "automate" graduate admission by removing faculty review of applications and simply basing admission on combined GRE and GPA scores.

Finally, a brief word about our own backgrounds. Both of us hold MPA degrees; one of us earned a doctorate in political science, the other in pub-

lic administration. Both of our research agendas and publication records fit within the broad landscape of public administration. Additionally, we both have public sector experience. We mention our backgrounds to help our colleagues understand where we are coming from and how our experiences inform our storytelling here.

FRONT-LINE CHALLENGES AND OPPORTUNITIES IN ADMINISTERING A SMALL MPA PROGRAM

Undoubtedly, MPA directors of programs of all shapes and sizes encounter frustrations caused by internal and external forces. Often, those issues are rooted in typical complaints about resource constraints and other frequently lamented challenges in higher education. Here, we take these usual complaints as givens and look beyond them to focus on a different type of problem we face on the front lines of running an MPA program. More specifically, we discuss challenges that we might be able to exert control over to either effect solutions or at least offer coping mechanisms for. We identify seven challenges organized around the following themes: a university environment that focuses principally on undergraduate education and does not understand public administration, program-specific issues and opportunities stemming from the program's location in a political science department, and the changing nature of the population the program serves. Within each theme, we illustrate and discuss specific challenges we encounter. Then we consider the different ways in which we strive to turn those challenges into opportunities or at least to cope with them.

The University Environment and Valuing Public Administration

Many of the challenges we have both faced in running the MPA program stem from the broader university environment and the dynamics of our particular institution. While these issues are somewhat context-specific, we are surely not the only directors who have encountered them, as many programs exist in environments similar to ours.

The first challenge we identify is one that invariably plagues public administration broadly: explaining public administration and its merits to internal constituencies within the university. As those practitioners and scholars of public administration know all too well, outside the field little is known or understood about public administration (cf. Goodsell, 2014). We spend a great deal of time explaining the MPA program and its worth to various internal constituencies, ranging from our political science colleagues, to our dean's office, to the upper administration tasked with overseeing graduate education. Even though our university's mission is heavily intertwined with service and the pursuit of social justice, and we see the obvious connections with the field of public administration, others do not. Time and again, we find ourselves explaining the very nature of public administration to colleagues who at the same time seem to grasp the nature of other fields, such as business administration. This is particularly frustrating when the apparent lack of understanding of public administration and the reasons for the existence of our MPA program seem to exclude the program from discussions of initiatives on campus. For instance, when curriculum innovations are discussed and it is obvious that the MPA program would be a natural fit, we are not included in those conversations. Or if co-curricular events are being planned that endeavor to help students learn about different public sector careers, the MPA program has been overlooked for consultation.

While those of us in the field might wish for a day when everyone would understand the nature of public service, the way everyone seemingly comprehends the nature of business administration, that is unlikely. Therefore, while it may be defeatist, we accept the need to explain (and often re-explain to the same individuals) the nature of public administration and its integral connection to the work and mission of our institution. This can be frustrating, but we endeavor to use each opportunity as a way to remind individuals of the work of

our MPA students and faculty and to highlight the connections.

One example surrounds our marketing materials for prospective students. Our institution centralizes marketing and admissions, and we find it difficult to convey effectively the value of the MPA degree to these offices, which are under-resourced and emphasize undergraduate outreach. As a result, we draft the content of our own marketing materials, both in print and online, and convey the messages we want to disseminate. Furthermore, to maximize our external reach and minimize our cost, we have focused on connecting with prospective students (as well as current students and alumni) via social media and networks of public-service entities whenever possible. This does mean more work for us, but we would rather be the ones crafting (and controlling) our message and explaining the MPA program as opposed to delegating that task to another entity on campus. Some of the frustrations we face in explaining the program are connected to other issues we identify and develop below. Overall, we make a concerted effort to be visible and engaged in broader university conversations in order to increase awareness about the program, particularly to internal constituencies. We may be small, but we do our best to be vocal.

Our advice to other directors in similar situations: Embrace the opportunity to explain your MPA program and its value, even if you have to repeat yourself to the same stakeholders, and take charge of crafting your own messaging where possible. In an era in which branding is increasingly important to universities, this presents an opportunity to maintain alignment with your own program's values.

A second challenge we encounter is that too often we are the program's only advocates. Not only is there not widespread understanding of the MPA program, despite our best efforts, but there are usually few opportunities for the program to advance or engage. The institution does support the program overall but the pro-

gram has no champions beyond its own faculty and students. This leaves us as the lone advocates, which can affect the program adversely. For example, within the region there is a major U.S. Air Force base, which means there is an extensive array of firms in the area engaged in the defense industry. It should be unsurprising that we would desire to connect to this community at an institutional level, not just a programmatic one. However, the lack of understanding of the MPA program (the first challenge) and the related lack of institutional advocacy (the second challenge), we are left to pursue building relationships on our own with this community. Our institution does support us in these efforts, but these are initiatives that we as a department and program have to pursue ourselves, even when the positionality may seem to be misaligned. This can prove exasperating. However, we have learned that there is tremendous opportunity here.

Since it falls to us, its lone advocates, to explain the MPA program and its merits, we can use that circumstance to pursue opportunities and relationships that we deem appropriate without some of the barriers that might otherwise be present. Indeed, we have discovered that we can be far more nimble when we do not have to wait for the rest of the institution. Returning to the example of the air force base, we have been anxious to build relationships with the large contingent of federal civil servants and related defense-industry personnel. While we are frustrated with the lack of broader institutional initiatives in this area (and senior leaders on campus are likely tired of hearing us talk about this), we have been able to strike out on our own and start building these relationships. We do stay within the boundaries set by our institution, and we do follow protocol, but we pursue our aims largely as we see fit.

For instance, in our efforts to serve the federal defense workforce, we recently entered into a partnership with the local Defense Acquisitions University campus to enable its students, who do not earn degrees, to transfer some of their

accredited coursework into our MPA program to count as electives. This relationship started when we brainstormed with our program's advisory board about possible access points. Put differently, while it is difficult at times to seemingly be the only champion of the program, we strive to use the resources we do have and channel them as we think appropriate. While our relationship with the federal defense community is far from where we would like it to be, we are making progress.

Our advice to other directors in similar circumstances: By being the only advocate, you can pursue opportunities you think appropriate for your program without having to wait for other actors to come to the same realization. This nimbleness can enable you to act efficiently and be responsive to the ever-changing environment MPA programs find themselves in.

Some of these issues stem from a third challenge we encounter: our university has long emphasized undergraduate education. Even though we are categorized as a doctoral university with high research activity, our institution's primary focus has been undergraduate programs, despite having a handful of very well-regarded graduate programs, including in theology, engineering, and the natural sciences. In this sort of environment, it is difficult to get the campus community to devote time, attention, and resources to graduate programs, including the MPA program. Structurally we lack a graduate school or empowered administration officials to oversee and champion graduate programs of all kinds. As a result, there is not an administrative apparatus that supports programs like ours beyond the department or unit where the program resides. Unevenness among programs and their support and resources is a direct result of this lack of coordinated and centralized administrative structure. And it can be maddening for small graduate programs.

A lengthy organizational history and culture explains our particular circumstances, but that only serves to contextualize the current predi-

calement. For example, the databases employed by the university to track progress toward degree completion are adept at handling undergraduate students and their needs but far less successful in managing degree requirements for graduate students. Indeed, such systems are frequently implemented with only undergraduate information tested and loaded—graduate program utilization is not considered unless program directors broach the topic and follow up. The software can thus be being frustrating and inadequate for graduate faculty and students alike. But, because of our ongoing vocalization about the need to focus on graduate programs, we were the first graduate program to be included in the degree requirement system. Granted, this inclusion came only after the director insisted that the MPA program be included and worked with the software team—a task that no undergraduate degree had to undertake. Once the MPA program had piloted the application, other graduate programs were subsequently added.

Additionally, much of the university's brand and image focus on appealing to traditional-aged undergraduate students. Though we leave marketing to the experts hired for that purpose, it can be difficult to use those images in a manner that attracts graduate students, particularly those who are midcareer. It took quite a while to convince university marketing staff that photographs of traditional-aged undergraduates in casual dress are not appropriate for the MPA program's marketing materials.

At our institution, there is indication that graduate programs are important and that they will play a greater role in the future of the university. Accordingly, we can easily find support for efforts we want to undertake on our own and actions we want to pursue. For instance, a law school is part of the university and we had always been puzzled as to why there was no joint MPA-law degree program, given that such degree programs are very common. There were no official structures in place to facilitate the construction of a joint degree

program, but if we were willing and the law school was willing, we could create such a program—and we did just that. Clearly such efforts are contingent upon the individuals in various roles, but we were encouraged to find that if there is something we want to do, especially if that something is not resource intensive, it can generally be done. Of course there are aggravating aspects to this situation, but we have nevertheless been able to pursue various avenues to advance the MPA program.

Our advice to program directors in institutions that emphasize undergraduate programs and students: Position your program at the forefront of the graduate programs that are on your campus. Get involved in everything from new software tool development to building partnerships with other programs that you deem advantageous. Responding in these ways will help with some of the other challenges identified in this section, including educating stakeholders about the MPA program and its value. These are some of the institutional-level challenges we encounter, and there are program-level ones to consider as well.

Program-Level Challenges

Beyond the university environment, we routinely experience challenges within our program and department, and the next few challenges are situated in that context. A fourth challenge is the tension we experience with recruiting and retaining our best and brightest students. A few years ago, we created a bachelor's plus master's program that provides well-qualified undergraduates the opportunity to start working on their MPA degree during the final year of their undergraduate education. Our BA2MPA program allows especially talented undergraduates in their third year who are interested in the public sector to apply for conditional admittance to the MPA program and begin graduate coursework in their fourth year. This enables those students, typically, to finish their MPA in one additional year after earning their bachelor's degree.

Many institutions have these sorts of bachelor's degree plus master's, or five-year programs. But we were unprepared for a challenge we encountered with our BA2MPA program: what do we advise our best and brightest students to do? Many of our top undergraduate students are highly competitive for admittance to the nation's best MPA programs. In recent years, our students have gone on to earn MPA degrees at Indiana University, Syracuse University, and George Washington University, to name just a few top programs. Many of these students began their studies in public administration in the BA2MPA program. This leaves us in a pickle. Do we encourage them to stay and finish their MPA with us, or do we encourage them to leave our MPA program and go on to get their degrees elsewhere? If students pursue degrees elsewhere, does this hurt our standing in the eyes of the university, based on our number of students? Or does it enhance our reputation because our students go on to top ranked programs?

There is no simple answer to these perverse incentives, as we all want the very best for our students, and we are unable to offer a universal method of dealing with this conundrum. We counsel each student individually about her options and how one choice or another for an MPA degree will factor into her professional future. In the end, we are proud of our students whether they complete their MPA with us or elsewhere, and we strive to stay connected to this network of young professionals as they embark upon careers of public service.

For this challenge, we are unsure of advice to offer; rather, we simply note that this is a challenge you may confront in this situation. Perhaps the best we can counsel is to consider each student on a case-by-case basis and make sure that any pushback the institution exerts on the MPA program is an opportunity to point out that students end up, one hopes, attending various highly ranked programs, which reflects well on the university.

The fifth challenge we identify is how to work within the undergraduate focus of the institution. Numerous examples could demonstrate the related challenges we encounter. But opportunities have also presented themselves. As previously mentioned, the MPA program has been able to leverage opportunities for our students to participate in co-curricular and extracurricular activities originally designed for the undergraduate population.

Two examples come to mind. First, the university sponsors a distinguished speaker series that affords students a chance to meet in a small group setting with the speaker. By maintaining close connection and communication with the staff member who arranges these speakers, the MPA program has been able to garner invitations for our students to these prestigious events. Second, the college and department fund a summer internship program in the state capital. Although this program was initially designed for undergraduates, the MPA program has successfully lobbied for and secured internship placements for our students, resulting in full-time employment within state government for three of our graduates. Keeping an eye out for a “graduate-friendly” space can be an opportunity for small programs without detracting from or supplanting the undergraduate experience.

Our advice here to other program directors: Think about how to leverage the emphasis and resources given to undergraduate programs and look for ways to include graduate students in those programs. We have often been able to ensure that undergraduate programming also supports our MPA students.

Functioning as an MPA program within a political science department is not a new challenge, but we note this as a sixth challenge to small programs. In particular, this challenge involves the delineation of responsibilities and authorities for running and staffing a graduate program within a department that also supports two undergraduate majors. Given the dual role

of departmental and programmatic faculty, the MPA faculty bear a substantial burden beyond their service on departmental committees; in our case, this means serving collectively as a committee to fulfill graduate-specific functions of program admissions, curriculum, and accreditation requirements. To maintain curriculum offerings and the NASPAA Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) standards for substantial teaching within the program, and having a core MPA faculty of five, the faculty and program director have to engage in constant monitoring and seek support of departmental and upper administration leadership for regular faculty contingencies (i.e., sabbaticals) and unique circumstances (i.e., administrative appointments). Our experience suggests that placing primacy on MPA offerings is of utmost importance, as we have been successful in garnering university administration support for adjunct teaching appointments in the Political Science Department or for offering overloads for additional compensation to political science faculty.

Day-to-day, existing in both undergraduate and graduate worlds can prove taxing, not only for the MPA program director but for faculty as well. Beyond different service requirements, different groups of students have varying needs. This apparent double work can seem like a burden; for example, carrying out the assessment processes that unfold one way for undergraduates and another way for graduate students. However, there are some advantages. Given that the core MPA faculty teach in both graduate and undergraduate realms and to both political science and public administration students, we find wonderful opportunities for crossover.

Two such synergies have emerged. First, a handful of MPA electives are cross-listed as advanced undergraduate electives, creating a fascinating dynamic and appealing energy in the classroom, with a tremendous mix of students. Topics and experiences are addressed from a multitude of perspectives, leading to an engaging learning environment for students

and faculty. At first, one might be skeptical of mixing midcareer public servants with more traditional-aged upper-division undergraduates; but in our experience, the dynamic is rewarding and one appreciated by all. Second, having MPA faculty also teach undergraduate classes allows us to identify promising students for the BA2MPA program, increasing enrollment. This rich learning environment relates to the changing nature of the community and region we serve.

Our advice concerning this apparent double duty: Think creatively about how to ease some of the double-duty tasks MPA faculty have to contend with given both MPA and undergraduate responsibilities. Mixing various types of students in a classroom has proven productive for all involved, semester after semester; and these interactions between undergraduates and MPA students (particularly those already in service) can be a tremendous benefit to recruiting talented undergraduates to the public sector.

Challenges in the Region

Every program contends with challenges beyond its campus, whether in terms of the region and students it strives to serve or the broader economic and political context. For us, a seventh and final challenge is the changing nature of our region's public sector. A traditional mainstay of both students and employment opportunities, local governments in the region have been in a decade-long period of downsizing or holding employment levels steady. Our program thus struggled with both recruitment and placement issues.

While the public sector has atrophied, nonprofit organizations in the region remain fertile ground for both ends of the student pipeline. Recognizing this changing landscape of public-service organizations, we identified a need to develop curricular offerings for our students geared toward the nonprofit sector and employment therein. We piloted courses for two summers and developed a series of MPA

electives that lead to a certificate in nonprofit and community leadership; we also successfully garnered university support for this new certificate, including a new faculty hire with responsibility for teaching in and administering the new certificate program. While the proposal took considerable time and effort to develop, the benefit in adding a new faculty member and new course offerings has generated student interest in the growing nonprofit sector. This effort ameliorated the decrease in student credit hours that MPA courses generate, and the certificate program is touted by the institution's administration as a success.

Our advice for MPA program directors regarding this challenge: Stay abreast of changes in the public sector in your community. Constantly think about how your program can meet the needs of the public sector nearby and how the public sector can be engaged to serve your program.

CONCLUDING THOUGHTS

What advice do we have for small MPA programs based on our experiences? First, recognize the environment you operate in—strive to work with, not against it. Seek those opportunities that may exist in other institutional spaces, whether with undergraduate programs, other graduate programs, or community partners. Ascertain the strengths of your institution or region and work to make and maintain connections with those strong points. Second, leverage your “smallness” to be agile and seek to create opportunities within the scope appropriate to your situation. This may mean arguing against being classified together with other graduate programs, such as Master of Art or Master of Science programs, and being more entrepreneurial or professionally focused with external constituencies. Finally, when faced with being the only advocate for your program, maintain internal consistency. Do not waiver in your belief in your program's value, and be ready to fight for and espouse its virtues. Maintain communication with your external

constituents—your graduates and their respective employers and your advisory board of community professionals. Internal constituents can advocate for your program as well. We have been fortunate to count many staff among our alumni, and we encourage them to participate in our programmatic functions and to remind administrators of their affiliation with the program. Taken together, these constituents can be powerful allies in conveying the importance of your program.

We set out to discuss the challenges and opportunities of running a small MPA program, and we situated that discussion within a framework of narrative reflection by heeding the suggestions of existing work on narratives and storytelling in higher education and extending that guidance to our work as program administrators. We are pleased to say that the efforts of pausing for reflection have been of tremendous use to both of us, just as we emphasize to our students the importance of reflection. We are reminded that while we often get caught up in the day-to-day frustrations of gathering MPA program data for another campus office that does not accurately reflect our program or what our students accomplish, we have continually been able to make programmatic improvements that lead to better outcomes for the public servant leaders we strive to educate.

Stated differently, our time reflecting on the opportunities we have seized and challenges we continue to face has been uplifting and encourages us to continue making the changes we believe are in the best interests of our students and our program. We hope our stories help our colleagues, and we invite an ongoing dialogue about being on the front lines of running small MPA programs. Of course, these are just the narratives of two program directors associated with one MPA program, with all the limits of a single case study. However, we make two final points. First, the value and importance of narratives in higher education must extend from our work in the classroom to our work

behind the scenes administering academic programs. There is utility in working with past and present administrators in a sort of exercise similar to that conducted here in assessing challenges and opportunities. We encourage others to do the same. Second, as other MPA program directors engage in this endeavor, we can and should learn from one another as we advance the cause of public service education. Additional work in this area could establish a foundation for more systematic survey methodologies, for example, that might produce results of interest not just to directors but to academic institutions and NASPAA.

NOTE

- 1 A 3/3 teaching load indicates that full-time faculty teach three courses each semester of the academic year.

REFERENCES

- Alterio, M., & McDrury, J. (2002). *Learning through storytelling in higher education: Using reflection and experience to improve learning*. Sterling, VA: Kogan Page.
- Cohan, M. (2009, November–December). Bad apple: The social production and subsequent re-education of a bad teacher. *Change Magazine*, 32–36.
- Goodsell, C. T. (2014). *The new case for bureaucracy*. Washington, DC: Sage/CQ Press.
- Jalongo, M. R., Isenberg, J. P., & Gerbracht, G. (1995). *Teachers' stories: From personal narrative to professional insight*. San Francisco, CA: Jossey-Bass.
- Mulnix, A. (2016). What my cadaver dog taught me about teaching and learning. *Journal on Excellence in College Teaching*, 27(1), 5–1.

Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA). (2016). NASPAA Data Center. Retrieved from <http://www.naspaa.org/DataCenter/NASPAADisaggregatereports.asp>.

Palmer, P. (2007). *The courage to teach: Exploring the inner landscape of a teacher's life* (10th anniversary ed.). New York, NY: Jossey-Bass.

Shadiow, L. K. (2013). *What our stories teach us: A guide to critical reflection for college faculty*. New York, NY: Jossey-Bass.

Sparks-Langer, G. M., & Colton, A. B. (1991). Synthesis of Research on Teachers' Reflective Thinking. *Educational Leadership*, 48(6), 37-44.

Weimer, M. (2013). *Learner-centered teaching: Five key changes to practice* (2nd ed.). New York, NY: Jossey-Bass.

ABOUT THE AUTHORS

Michelle Pautz is the director of the MPA program and an associate professor of political science at the University of Dayton.

Grant Neeley is a chair and an associate professor in the Political Science Department at the University of Dayton.