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Regional

Public administration more than just politics

Public administration is a complicated endeavor that is usually misunderstood by the general public. Its practitioners need both managerial and leadership skills. And it's not, according to those who teach it, just about training to become a politician.

"Even today we have many students who come in with a little confusion thinking they want to go into politics," said Drew Dolan, professor and chair of the department of public administration and policy analysis at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. "It is really about taking everything that the politicians create and then finding ways to make them work. And I have always found that more interesting than the political side of it."

A native of Rockford, Ill., Dolan obtained his bachelor's degree in business administration from Rockford College in Illinois and his master's and doctorate in public administration from Northern Illinois University. One of the major differences in working in the public sector, Dolan explained, is that you can only do what is allowed, while in the private sector you can do anything as long as it is not forbidden.

"They really don't realize that coming in," said Dolan of his students. "By the time they are leaving, we really hope that we have impressed that message on them. We begin by telling them that to be a public administrator is actually much, much harder than to be a business administrator. In government you not only have to be efficient and economical but you have to be representative, you have to be effective. So you have all these other goals that you have to meet in order to keep everybody happy." And when it comes to the difference between management and leadership, he said that the difference is not always clear-cut.

"Management is what we do every day as a public administrator," he said. "Leadership is really about the future. One of the ways in which we describe it is management is doing things the right way and leadership is doing the right thing."

Yet, he added that you couldn't be a great manager or a great leader without being a



Dr. Drew Dolan with two of his students.

little bit of the other, as well.

"To be a manager these days with all the rules and all the regulations you really have to find ways to get the most out of your employees and the most out of your organization," he said. "And that is not going to come from just telling them what to do and how to do it. That is going to come from motivating them and that is leadership."

Sometimes public administrators have to deal with unexpected topics. For example,

Dolan has been working on gambling as a public policy instrument. It may sound like odd research, but there is a good explanation for it.

"I have been doing some joint research with somebody in the state of Indiana," Dolan said. "Jim Landers once was a professor here at this university, and now he works there as a budget analyst. He was doing some research on the use of budgeting revenues for local governments at the

same time I was doing research on the impacts of non-profits." They decided to combine their research.

"What we do in the research, and in my portion especially, is try and understand that yes, it is great to get gambling revenues in, but what is the cost of getting those revenues? What is it doing to the social programs? In other words, the people who become addicted become a cost to us as public administrators," explained

Aldemaro Romero Jr. College Talk

Dolan. People not only become addicted, said Dolan, but also the areas that surround casinos tend to suffer. "That is also something that we have to deal with as public administrators," he added. "So I'm kind of looking at the downside of the revenues while he is looking at the upside of the revenues."

Another problem is that many of the people who become addicted to gambling are low-income.

"That is really where the cost of non-profits comes into play because they are the individuals who end up needing the non-profit services," said Dolan. "They don't have the support base to begin with. Oftentimes they are living on small amounts of money or things that are coming in from the government anyway to assist them. Then they take those revenues that they get, and they use them in the hope of the big score, a dream that they are going to be taken out of poverty by winning the lottery."

We all know that the odds of winning the lottery are incredibly low. "If you take this person and you allow them to go into this gambling establishment and spend their money there, then when they are done they are, of course, worse off than when they went in," said Dolan. "So they will need those non-profits even more." What this means is that gambling is not always a winning game for cities.

"While the city may get some revenue to put in new streets and new lights and a new park," said Dolan, "the non-profits are left to clean up what happens to these people that lost the money that the cities are getting."

Aldemaro Romero Jr. is the Dean of the College of Arts and Sciences at Southern Illinois University Edwardsville. His show, "Segue," can be heard every Sunday morning at 9 a.m. on WSIE, 88.7 FM. He can be reached at College_Sciences@siue.edu.

Picture courtesy of Michael Nathe