Combating Teaching Failure: An Interdisciplinary Approach to Educating the Next Generation and Producing Market–Ready Graduates

Cassandra R. Henson

Towson University

ABSTRACT

Preparing future professionals in any industry requires specific education and detailed training early on in the academic process ideally, prior to the influences of the work environment. Many schools and programs offer standard industry courses but much more needs to be accomplished, as the scope and management of private industry and public service continues to expand. In some cases, the current standard pedagogical practices have failed to prepare students for the workplace, an environment that is ever-changing due to advancing technologies, political agendas and societal pressures. By teaching in a silo and being focused on one content area, much of the educational system is providing a disservice to students by not removing the blinders. Sector lines have become increasingly blurred, so the education of future professionals must now take an interdisciplinary approach to successfully navigate this new environment. Market-ready graduates must have the ability to successfully navigate the private, public and nonprofit sectors. This research will suggest several possible avenues to an interdisciplinary pedagogy model, by examining the core competencies of three 'flagship' sector degrees. By combining traditional academic pedagogy with cross-sector topics, we may reduce instances of failed academic preparation and may in fact encourage the next generation of leaders to be even more dynamic than those who've come before, successfully converting theory to practice.

Keywords: Ethics Education, Good Governance, Core Competencies, Interdisciplinary Education

The next generation of leaders must have the foundation and ability to react quickly, identifying issues within the public service that directly impact us as citizens, as well as collaborate to resolve issues within our cross-sector partnerships. The real-world is slightly different now, and future

professionals must be educated and properly prepared for these new challenges. The question then becomes, are prospective leaders being taught and equipped with this critical foundation or have there in fact been teaching failures along the way? Unfortunately, there are a whole host of underlying causes for teaching and systematic failures (funding, resource availability and inadequate policies) as well as factors that create and promote educational inequity (demographics, income, parent involvement, etc.). As educators, we must meet the students where they are but we cannot leave them there because we have no control over what may have been taught or overlooked previously. We have to provide the education and tools forgotten or ignored by prior teaching failures, and ultimately help to level the playing field to make graduatte market-ready.

Versatility and adaptability are critical skill sets for cultivating a successful career, no matter the field of study or discipline. Every stage of the learning process should include elements that reinforce students' ability to think strategically and accommodate change. As professionals, we have become quite adept in transforming theory into practice, but not without the real-world events that have molded our experiences. Teaching these skill sets involve an interdisciplinary approach, empowering the up and coming leaders with core competencies from all sectors. The 'look' of this new interdisciplinary approach would encompass traditional leadership and management pedagogical topics as well as additional private and nonprofit sector focused concepts for increased 'hands-on' effectiveness and productivity. These important capabilities can be captured by examining the core competencies of the various sectors and incorporating these into a standard interdisciplinary pedagogy. This article suggests several options for reaching the intersection of multiple sectors, as well as the existing issues which may prevent or delay getting there. First, we examine the critical points of ethical leadership and the role it plays in preparing future leaders. Secondly, we discuss the masters-level flagship degrees of the public, private and nonprofit sectors to frame the current state of interdisciplinary education and identify the commonalities. Finally, we suggest a pedagogical approach to interdisciplinary education with the intention of leveling the playing field and compensating for previous instances of teaching failure.

Foundational Elements of Ethical Leadership

Ethical leadership is key for being market-ready, and means a lot more than having good intentions. No matter the profession, ethical practice requires adhering to an identified set of rules, regulations, or expectations, accepted as the standard or at the very least acknowledged by those in a given field committed to doing the right thing. Various 'codes of ethics' have been implemented by agencies nationwide, often introduced upon hire and subsequent annual follow-up. These codes often include important competencies necessary for ethical leadership and sound business practice.

Accountability and Transparency. Experienced and newly-minted professionals must be accountable for his or her own actions and decisions in the workplace. Ideally, accountability is present at all levels of an organization, but it should be present with certainty in leadership roles. This could include the implementation of processes, selection of contractors, successful completion of tasks and assignments, as well as the short-comings of getting the job done. Internal controls include agency policies, procedures and

other governing documents. External controls include items such as audits and legislation, external items which lend themselves to public value. Varying levels of internal and external controls such as those mentioned are necessary and more importantly verifiable when addressing concerns of accountability.

Ethical Behavior and Decision

Making. Ethics is the practiced behavior of right and wrong as well as the conscious decisions made concerning which path should be followed (Daft 2010). As with the evolution of any process, there are reasons, causes and effects that have molded the situation we see today. Several scenarios such as more pronounced political division and social justice issues are now hitting the front pages of media, making ethics education a necessity instead of traditional optional course. Moving in the right direction requires future professionals to be 'proactive' instead of 'reactive', in the fight to eliminate corruption and unethical behavior. Leadership often determines the ethical path of the organization, by establishing ethical standards, policies, procedures and enforcement mechanisms which guide the official (and possibly the unofficial) culture. Sound ethics education must adequately prepare students for these important leadership roles.

Ever-Changing Professional

Environment. The rise in public-private partnerships (PPP's) has in some cases blurred organizational boundaries, accountability, and responsibilities (Bovaird 2004, 2014), but is just one example of the changes to the professional environment. Organizations are now partnering with others across sectoral boundaries to produce, distribute and sell a host of goods and services. Factors such as cost, human

capital, capacity, technology and even location constraints contribute to the need to cross these once clear and very distinct lines. The textbook knowledge becomes the easy part. Ethical leadership skills that include the aforementioned elements is critical to sustained success and the practical application of theory. Are we teaching ethical leadership to future professionals or have we failed to prepare them for market readiness?

Sectoral Education – Where Are We Now?

Grass-roots changes to ethical foundations and educational leadership structures will be needed to have 'doing the right thing' become embedded in the fabric of academic systems. What will it take? Competencies. Competency defined is the knowledge, skills, values and behaviors that people need to successfully perform a particular activity or task (Pillay and Morris 2016; Cooper and Menzel 2013). Each sector has identified its own core standards, which guide the academic and professional activities of its industry.

Current State of Public

Administration Education (Public Sector Indicator). Although NASPAA and other accrediting bodies do not mandate specific ethics course content for Maters of Public Administration (MPA) programs, the regulations they set forth do however incorporate ethics and ethical decision making into its mission, focus and processes. At the core of the standards are public service values and accountability, as stated:

> The mission, governance, and curriculum of eligible programs shall demonstrably emphasize public service values. Public service values

are important and enduring beliefs, ideals and principles shared by members of a community about what is good and desirable and what is not. They include pursuing the public interest with accountability and transparency; serving professionally with competence, efficiency, and objectivity; acting ethically so as to uphold the public trust; and demonstrating respect, equity, and fairness in dealings with citizens and fellow public servants. (NASPAA.org).

Now clearly 'acting ethically' leaves much open to interpretation, which is why conduct must be defined early on in the education process, before students become practitioners. The expectations are surely out there, and are easily found, but it is the decisions we make that define acceptable or unacceptable ethical behavior. We know what the rules are, but whether or not we choose to follow them is a completely different issue.

Many agencies have a standard ethics training module or program, administered by the human resources department. Some actually have a separate ethics committee that sits within individual departments, to directly address ethics related issues. The goal here is to have rules and regulations that reflect the best ethical conduct, leaving no lines blurred internally. Public service agencies at least in theory, strive for productivity and efficiency, but does a productive end justify unethical means? Absolutely not! Just because you're reaching for a noble cause, doesn't mean you can get there unjustly. To address this, organizations often define their idea of ethical behavior as well as the path to be followed to achieve it. Are these programs successful? Future studies will surely

determine, but they would undoubtedly be more successful if ethics were the foundation at the academic level.

Current State of Business Administration Education (Private Sector Indicator). Preparation for private industry practice is the concentration of Masters of Business Administration (MBA) programs, focusing on organizational management, economic theories and financial analysis. As with other disciplines, masters-level education requires a deeper understanding of core concepts and competencies as well as practical application of this knowledge to real-world scenarios. The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business International (AACSB.edu) is the accrediting body for business schools, which currently oversees the academic activity for approximately 777 business schools and 185 independently certified accounting programs. Guiding principles for the programs include: ethical behavior in both the academic and professional settings, a collegiate environment and the commitment to corporate and social responsibility. Specific curriculum/knowledge areas as noted by the AACSB are:

- Leading in organizational situations
- Managing in a global context
- Thinking creatively
- Sound decisions and good judgment under uncertainty
- Integrating knowledge across fields

In addition, MBA students are instructed to understand the discipline from multiple perspectives, framing problems and developing creative solutions, specialized knowledge in global context, conducting high quality research.

Current State of Social Work

Education (Non-Profit/Human Services Sector Indicator). Council on Social Work Education (CSWE) is the accrediting body for the social work profession, with the Masters of Social Work (MSW) as the flagship degree. This important industry is not only responsible for the social programs and support systems in our communities, but for the identification and dispersion of much needed mental health, abuse, and family resources for underserved or vulnerable populations. The social work discipline follows nine distinct competencies to: "integrate and apply social work knowledge, values, and skills to practice situations in a purposeful, intentional, and professional manner to promote human and community well-being" (CSWE.org).

The Road to Interdisciplinary Pedagogy: Theory to Practice

The public, private and nonprofit sectors are becoming more integrated and interdependent requiring professionals to have skills applicable to multiple environments. A solid understanding of the problems and intersections between sectors should be the foundation for interdisciplinary education, with concentration on items that impact every professional industry.

More Complex Ethics Pedagogy. With no specific ethics course mandates guiding most programs, we must be sure that future offerings on the subject of ethics includes all facets of the topic (where possible), and establishes the solid foundation and system infusion of the ethical processes. We must move from basic ethics education to a model of what Jurkiewicz identifies as 'ethical competence'. To educate ethical future graduates in ethical competence, she suggests the following framework as the basis for course content: (1) an understanding of moral arguments and moral philosophies, (2) the ability to separate true management issues from ethical issues, (3) the ability for logical reasoning, (4) the ability to separate personal ethics from professional ethics and (5) the ability to perform ethically under pressure (Jurkiewicz 2013). These items definitely provide a solid methodological approach to ethics education, going beyond the traditional basic definitions.

Cooper and Menzel suggest several outcomes for ethics coursework, in line with Jurkiewicz's suggestions, that could possibly be incorporated into all programs of study. Their concept suggests five categories of ethics knowledge necessary for a deeper understanding of ethical behavior: (1) the commitment to higher standards behavior, both personal and professional, (2) the knowledge and understanding of ethics laws and codes, (3) the ability for ethical reasoning and decision making, (4) the acknowledgement of public service values and ethics and (5) the ability to promote ethical behavior and ethical practices in public agencies (2013). All disciplines that train public servants would benefit from such an in-depth look at ethical behavior, making it a part of standard operations instead of a topic to review when things go wrong.

Leadership and Decision Making Preparation. Thompson believes that ethics should be instilled in and taught to all officials at all levels of government, which is crucial to their role in American democracy (Thompson 1992). Furthermore, he states that three main paradoxes make this quite the arduous task, hindering the process of ongoing ethics education: (1) the

perceived importance of government ethics, (2) the difference between one's personal ethics and public ethics and (3) the appearance and reality of right and wrong (255-258). As a multi-sectoral industry we must arm future market-ready graduates with the tools of ethics before their professional tenure begins, instilling such values from the beginning and not depending on the on the job training. It must be second nature, alongside the daily business tasks, infused in the decision making process for public, private and nonprofit administrators. The ethical tone for an agency is often set by the leadership, so they must possess the necessary skills.

Technology and software training.

Typically, business schools prepare its' graduates by requiring mandatory software utilization throughout their coursework, and in some cases certification. On the public administration and social work sides, this tends to be limited to a quantitative methods course or a designated concentration such as health information technology. Some of our new graduates cannot do basic office computing, which is now the standard for those entering at leadership levels. The solution here may be the intertwining of routinely used industry software into academic programs. In some cases this may not be feasible, but an effective simulation would help accomplish the necessary training.

More detailed management functions. Many of our programs concentrate on foundation and theory, which are definitely important. The next generation of professionals must exhibit broader management and critical thinking capabilities: strategic planning, organizational leadership, performance improvement and management to name a

few. This is where market-ready graduates must be knowledgeable in moving theory to practice. Of course experience and the continued honing of this skill only comes with practice, but the mindset and the foundational abilities must have been reinforced during the educational process.

Measureable student outcomes. The key to improving or designing curricula is to ensure the creation of measureable student outcomes. Outcomes, favorable or not, will serve as a guide to further adjustments and improvements. Outcomes may specific to a discipline as often directed by national and international certification bodies or may be more generalized covering all aspects of an entire academic unit (not just accredited ones). Outcomes should tie directly to the identified learning objectives as well as the outlined mission, vision and values of an organization. In the case of interdisciplinary education, the learning objectives and desired student outcomes should be a succinct combination of best practices from each sector with particular attention to those that are common across all sectors. These would be identified as the strongest and most desirable points, potentially increasing the student's marketability and preparedness.

SUMMARY

What's now required is a collaborative effort between all sectors, for efficient and effective operations. As noted previously within this discussion, the area that lies between the public, private and nonprofit services is quite gray as goods production, service delivery methods and customer bases overlap. This fine balance must be accomplished to achieve both the policy agenda as well as the social agenda, which will be no easy feat. Public trust and ethics structure that provides its foundation

(either positively or negatively) must be improved and nurtured by participation and transparency.

All organizations strive to achieve long-term success and sustainability, especially public organizations dependent on perceived effectiveness and value. This begins with the well-laid plans of meaningful activities that support a sound and insightful organizational mission. The key to orchestrating such a scenario is the knowledgeable and well-equipped leadership team. They must demonstrate the necessary personal and professional skill-sets to interpret the organization's needs, create objective plans of action, and effectively communicate the information to others, for effective and successful implementation.

The ultimate goal of organizations is to maintain viability, while ensuring longevity and realizing the office's future vision. They must continue to create significant and lasting public value ~ the society's vision of success (Bryson 2011). Anchored by sound ethics, an established and communicated mission, well-educated and well-trained industry professionals, successful organizations must fully integrate the core concepts of good governance into the everyday operations and internal processes.

REFERENCES

Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB). https://www.aacsb.edu/accreditation

Bovaird, Tony. "Efficiency in Third Sector Partnerships for Delivering Local Government Services". *Public Management Review,* vol. 16, no. 8, 2014, pp. 1067-1090.

Bovaird, Tony. "Public–Private Partnerships: from Contested Concepts to Prevalent Practice". *International Review of Administrative Sciences,* vol. 70, no. 2, 2004, pp. 200-215.

Bryson, John. *Strategic Planning For Public and Non-Profit Organizations*. United States: Jossey-Bass Publishing, 2011.

Cooper, Terry and Menzel, Donald. *Achieving Ethical Competence for Public Service Leadership*. New York, M.E. Sharp, 2013.

Council on Social Work Education (CSWE). https://www.cswe.org/Accreditation

Daft, Richard. *Organization Theory and Design*. United States: South Western Cengage Learning, 2010.

Jurkiewicz, Carole. Advancing Ethical Competence through Pedagogy. *In*: Terry Cooper and Donald Menzel, *Achieving Ethical Competence for Public Service Leadership*. New York, M.E. Sharp, 2013.

Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration (NASPAA). https://accreditation.naspaa.org/resources/

Pillay, Rubin and Morris, Michael. "Changing Healthcare by Changing the Education of Its Leaders: An Innovative Competence Model". *The Journal of Health Administration Education*, vol. 33, no. 3, 2016, pp.393-410.

Thompson, Dennis. "Paradoxes of Government Ethics". *Public Administration Review,* vol. 52, no. 3, 1992, pp.254-259.

About the Author

Cassandra R. Henson, Dr.P.A., is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Health Sciences at Towson University. Research interests include: healthcare

finance, healthcare ethics and public
administration. Email: chenson@towson.edu