Making a Difference as a Public Affairs and Policy Professional

From policy analysis to international affairs to public services management, professional degrees exist for those who want to do well and do good, say two admissions experts

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As graduate admissions directors at two top schools in our field, we encounter significant numbers of college-age individuals who aspire to “make a difference” in their careers, and have already shown commitment to these goals in college activities, volunteerism or community work. While some may be aware that it is possible to fashion a career consistent with their passion, they may feel ill-prepared to affect policy or politics in any meaningful way. Many are unaware of educational opportunities that can help put this commitment into rewarding, professional practice: a graduate degree in public policy, administration and international affairs.

Advising prospective graduate students about this exciting field, we emphasize that a degree in public policy and international affairs can provide the necessary tools to improve people’s lives and effect positive change in the world. Indeed, our graduates are global and community leaders in all spheres of the policy arena. But the reality is that although college students and parents are familiar with traditional professional degrees such as a J.D., M.B.A. and M.D., many have no clue that programs such as ours even exist, much less consider pursuing a degree, whose titles and acronyms are varied: Master of Public Affairs/Administration (M.P.A.), Master of Public Policy (M.P.P.), or master’s degrees in international affairs/relations.

Regardless of the nomenclature, these degrees have more in common than their names would suggest. At base, public affairs-related programs are designed to train individuals for leadership positions and careers in government, the non-profit sector, multilateral organizations such as the United Nations, philanthropy, and even the private sector. Specific positions sought can include foreign service officer, city planner, advisor to government ministries, executive director of a non-profit organization, policy analyst, development director, and even journalist/foreign correspondent. However, the solid skill sets developed for public policy analysis and public management allow graduates to move across sectors and organizations throughout their careers.

Two Traditions

The first graduate programs in public policy analysis and administration were developed 80 years ago. Early programs focused on management skills, necessary at that time for building the infrastructure to support society. Later programs began delving into analysis in an attempt to find the causes of societal ills, so as to be better able to confront them. While the traditions of public management and public policy analysis remain distinct today, some comprehensive
programs impart tools and skills from both traditions to foster well-rounded decision-makers and leaders. Effective management is best when informed by good analysis; and analysis is only productive if the solutions defined are practicable in their implementation and management. Sharpened analytical skills allow leaders to collect data, evaluate reports, and break through the complexity of issues that is the hallmark of public policy; management skills then help them to design, develop, implement and monitor programs to serve the public.

Specific “tools” mastered in such programs include critical thinking, and the ability to conduct quantitative, political, historical, economic, behavioral and cultural analyses. In addition, relevant disciplinary and field research experience through University-supported summer internships or policy workshops provide hands-on training and real-world experience. Students pursuing policy degrees may also specialize in areas that have direct impact on people and the planet, ranging from conflict resolution and human rights to education and poverty alleviation to urbanization and global warming. Having a foundation of both analytical and management skills allows future practitioners to analyze, create, implement and affect domestic and international policy that “makes a difference” in today’s changing world.

**What Drives You?**

Now, if you have an interest in public administration and foreign policy and are considering pursuing a degree in our field, what are the next steps? As with any graduate study, the application process should begin with self-analysis. Ask yourself: What must I do to prepare for this process? What are my strengths and weaknesses? And, significantly: What motivates me?

When we meet with prospective students during recruiting trips around the U.S. or abroad, we ask about their passions – what drives them. In most cases, they share a common, if abstract vision: They want to make the world or their local communities a better place. So far so good. It is then important for considering, selecting and applying for a degree path to formulate a clear vision of your professional aspirations. You should consider and be able to articulate how that vision is connected to your previous course of study, professional or internship experiences, commitment to public service and desire to make the world a better place.

Whether or not your academic record or GRE scores are outstanding, reflecting on your professional achievements and life experiences can help clarify this for yourself. Other good questions include: What are the life experiences that have prompted my commitment to public or community service? Can I identify how that commitment has shaped and is connected to past professional and community endeavors? Have you, for example, demonstrated leadership and/or community action on campus or in your local

**Checklist: The Decision**

* Do I understand the necessary preparation steps for this type of degree (and its application process)?

* Am I strongly motivated by opportunities to lead activities that have direct impact on social problems or political concerns?

* Have I been particularly gratified by past study, extracurricular, career or personal volunteering activities related to public service or policy?

* Did my previous studies give me a good foundation for cultivating advanced management and analytical skills?

* Do I have a strong community orientation or global outlook?
community? Or, has your extensive travel abroad or fluency in one or more foreign languages given you a unique perspective that you would apply to a career in public service?

Whether you have a passion for human rights, immigration issues, health policy, or American politics, you need to have a clear understanding of where you have been and where you aspire to go as a future leader and change agent of public policy.

Institutional Analysis

Once you have completed this self-analysis, it is time to research which programs or schools best suit your goals and interests. As you evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of specific degree programs, thoroughly investigate not only the academic resources, curriculum, and admissions requirements, but also such aspects as community, financial aid, and student services. Look, for example, at a school’s admissions requirements. Some policy schools prefer students who have been exposed to quantitative analysis and economics, while others may emphasize professional work and/or internship experiences within the public sector. Does the school train generalists in a given subject, such as public policy analysis, or specialists, for example, in global trade? Is the curriculum balanced along policy and management dimensions? Do they offer training in area or regional studies and/or provide extended internships domestically or abroad?

For some students, a school’s academic and wider communities are also important in selecting a graduate program. Does the school have a close-knit community? If you are looking at a larger program, how does the school build a sense of community? Does the faculty primarily comprise academics, or practitioners -- people with real policy experience in Congress or the U.N. or in local government -- or a combination of both? Do the students reflect the varied backgrounds and perspectives of the communities they hope to serve? Does the program offer hands-on training through summer internships, workshop projects, and study abroad programs? Are the majority of graduates pursuing public service careers? How active are the alumni, and do they engage with current and prospective students about their future careers?

As the above should convey, the process of applying to graduate school is a two-way street. It is not only about the prospective student, it is also about the prospective school and community under consideration.

Checklist: Program Research

* Obtain and evaluate admissions materials from targeted degree programs as early as possible

* How closely do your preparation and background match the curriculum and those aspects most strongly emphasized in this school’s admissions guidelines?

* Do the program and its extended network of students, faculty and alumni offer opportunities to get practical experience and help in reaching your long-range, real-world goals?

* Do the program, campus and surrounding communities comprise an environment that will help you optimize your studies?
Application Tips

Once you have done your homework clarifying your goals and target schools, you can begin to put together a solid application where all the pieces flow from your personal statement to your letters of recommendation to your GRE scores to your resume. The personal statement in particular is what sets you apart from the rest of the pool. It is your best opportunity to showcase your unique strengths and provide a succinct reflection of your goals and aspirations. But what goes into a successful personal statement?

First, it is important to demonstrate that you have done your homework and researched the school. If the target school prefers candidates with a strong background in math and economics, it is of course helpful if you’ve prepared for the program by taking courses in those areas, and can note that in your statement. If the school prefers students who have significant work experience, note the experiences relevant to your area of interest and provide specific examples of how you have demonstrated your commitment to serving the public good. Most importantly, your personal statement should convey to the readers something that they cannot glean for themselves elsewhere in the application. Simply restating your academic and professional achievements is not enough to set you apart. Take this opportunity to tell the admissions committee something about you that will make your application stand out.

Additionally, letters of recommendation serve to affirm your commitment to public service and your readiness for the program. The recommender should be someone who knows you very well: your background, skills, and personal strengths. Further, the recommender should also be informed of your future academic and career goals. Keep them posted!

And of course, you must rigorously prepare yourself to take the GRE. Becoming familiar with the GREs is not a luxury, it is a necessity. The test prep phase can be a good reality check: Are you academically ready to pursue a course of study in public and international affairs? Have you been significantly exposed to, or are you willing to take, introductory courses in politics and economics and related fields?

Preparing for graduate school is a long and challenging process, but if you are seriously considering a career in government or the non-profit sector, you will learn a lot about yourself from this experience. The field of public and international affairs affects everything we do in our daily lives. The impact public leaders can have is far reaching and important. Programs like ours offer challenging and exciting academic environments for professional growth, and preparation for career paths that allow our graduates to “make a difference.”

Checklist: Your Application

* Thoroughly prepare yourself for the GRE test: Study, take practice tests, invest in a prep course if needed

* Request confidential recommendation letters from recommenders who know you well, update them about your study and career goals, and give them plenty of lead-time

* Formulate a strong personal statement conveying your familiarity with the target program, and your preparation and suitability for it

* Strive to emphasize the unique attributes and experiences that distinguish you from others beyond what can be summarized in a resume

* Don't be afraid to contact admissions staff to ask informed questions as-needed once you have thoroughly reviewed the basic materials
Gaining admission to the school of your choice is just one step toward this goal, and putting all the pieces together can give you a solid understanding of yourself and your future objectives. As admissions directors, our goal is to provide the information that you need to help you make the best choice for you. Our hope is that you, the promising leader of tomorrow who aspires to public service, are prepared and able to find the best opportunity to grow and move forward to realize your goals.

Useful Links for Additional Information

- National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration: [www.naspaa.org](http://www.naspaa.org)
- Association of Public Policy Analysis and Management: [www.appam.org](http://www.appam.org)
- Association of Professional Schools of International Affairs: [www.apsia.org](http://www.apsia.org)
- Public Policy and International Affairs Fellowship Program: [www.ppiaprogram.org](http://www.ppiaprogram.org)
- Public Service Careers: Career and School Information Site [www.PublicServiceCareers.org](http://www.PublicServiceCareers.org)

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