

Teaching Empathy in Public Administration

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Session Format: Demonstration Project

This demonstration will focus on the topic of empathy in public service, including 1) a brief presentation of survey results on the perceived importance of empathy training and in public service education programs, 2) a case study of teaching empathy to public servants through the course, Ethics and Empathy for Public Servants and 3) an experiential demonstration of the Public Service Empathy Museum that emerged out of the course. This demonstration will offer participants the experiential opportunity to practice and consider empathy in the context of public service.

1. Empathy and public servants: Exploring the role of empathy in public service education programs

Public administrators, who represent the government and often work on the frontlines of service delivery, are expected to be both technically trained and emotionally equipped to interact with the citizens they serve. Recent stories highlight the places where the public are frustrated with the interactions between individual and public servant; while at the same time, recent studies show that college students have lower levels of empathy than in previous decades yet many of these graduates will become the public servants who will address these issues. In this paper, we explore faculty perceptions on empathy in public service education and the extent to which public service education programs are incorporating empathy training into their curriculum.

2. Course Case Study: Ethics and Empathy for Public Servants

We consider one course designed to explore the role of ethics and empathy in the work of public servants, with a goal of preparing students for careers in public service. Relying on stories, films, television, as well as other stories and experiences, this course provides students case examples of scenarios where ethics and empathy are relevant and/or missing. Through the course, students have the opportunity to explore the challenges, benefits, and opportunities associated with ethical and empathetic service delivery. We will present pre- and post-test evaluations of students' perceptions and abilities around empathy, as well as an analysis of the course based on student reflections, course outcomes, and findings from the pre-/post-test survey.

3. Demonstration: Public Service Empathy Museum

We will also offer a demonstration of the Public Service Empathy Museum, which serves as the finale to the Ethics & Empathy for Public Servants course. This Museum is made up of the artifacts and opportunities that students generated and consists of empathy stories, opportunities to practice empathy, and other experiences that invite others to stretch toward empathy. Each exhibit item is designed as an opportunity for others to experience the imaginative act of stepping into another person's shoes and viewing the world from their perspective, specifically around public service. They may choose to focus on the perspective or experiences of either the public servant or the citizen/noncitizen.