Professional Development and Election Administration Advocacy

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Abstract Students in public administration and public policy programs often find it difficult to choose a substantive area in which to pursue a career. These are broad fields, and many different options are available. This case study summarizes the experience of choosing a substantive area for one graduate student who eventually chose election cybersecurity as her main focus. She provides insight into why she chose this policy area and why she has been successful in finding career opportunities within this space. The case study concludes with advice for students of public administration and public policy who are trying to select a specific area on which to focus their studies as well as trying to set themselves up for finding a great job and getting onto a successful career trajectory.

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During the final months of 2016 and early months of 2017, I was trying to narrow in on a specific area of focus for my doctoral studies in public administration and public policy. I chose to pursue the degree because I wanted to be engaged in research geared toward finding practical solutions to current problems in public administration. I was pursuing my doctoral degree through the Department of Political Science at Auburn University, a department with a nationally renowned election administration program. Initially, I did not have any intention of studying election administration, but as I was soul searching for a substantive area of focus, something else was going on. The security and integrity of the 2016 US elections were being called into question by the media, by high-ranking government officials, and consequentially by the American public. The outgoing presidential administration declared election systems part of the “critical infrastructure” of the US in response to intelligence reports that foreign actors attempted to interfere with our election. Meanwhile, the newly elected US president made claims of massive voter fraud. The American people were receiving conflicting information from a variety of sources, and many were left wondering whether the results of the 2016 elections could be trusted. I wanted to study a current problem, and I knew I may have my answer. I registered for an election administration course, and my career trajectory unfolded before me.

Recently, I joined the team at the National Association of Secretaries of State (NASS) as the Cybersecurity Program Manager. My main responsibilities include managing the Association’s relationships and information sharing related to cybersecurity for the offices of secretaries of state and the state government functions they oversee. My perspective is that of someone who has newly reentered the workforce after two years of academic pursuits. At the time of writing, I have only been with NASS for a few months. Over the past two years, I completed my doctoral coursework at Auburn University in the public administration and public policy program while also engaging in applied research related to cybersecurity and disaster preparedness in US election administration alongside my professors.

This case begins with an overview of my academic experience. Then, I discuss my transition to a professional career which directly relates to my areas of study. Next, I review how my academic experiences have prepared me for my new position and what challenges I still face. I conclude with tips for students who find themselves where I was in December of 2016—needing to select a substantive area of focus but nervous about making a decision that could largely determine their career paths moving forward.

MY ACADEMIC EXPERIENCE

Shortly after the 2016 elections, I took my first election administration-specific course. As most graduate courses do, this election administration course allowed flexibility regarding specific topics of study. From day one, I was interested in the election security issues which dominated the headlines of the time. It was exciting to dig into election security issues during this class and then in larger applied research projects because they were unfolding before our eyes. Although election administrators have been focused on security issues throughout their careers, attempts by Russian actors to interfere in the 2016 elections launched this issue to the forefront of election administration as well as US politics and political discourse more broadly. For better or worse, election cybersecurity, as a policy area, was growing and changing at a rapid pace.

As a student, this created challenges and opportunities. Information was changing, almost daily. Media stories, and even some government reports, conflicted each other. The area was fairly new to academics of public administration and public policy. Though voting technology has been a topic of study for scholars of information security for years, election cybersecurity had not been studied from the standpoint of public administration and public policy. As an inexperienced researcher, trying to figure out where to begin when a research foundation does not exist is a daunting task. Even working with professors who are very experienced scholars, we struggled to find a starting point as we embarked on research in this area. Alternatively, as a graduate student who was preparing for an applied professional career, this put me in a unique position. I could stay at the cutting edge of this policy area. I did not have decades or even years of policy briefs, government reports, and academic articles to review on the topic. Rather, I could keep up with information as it was released. Reports and other documents were being released at a rapid pace, but I was fully engaged and was able to keep up with the information quite well.

I learned that there are so many aspects to the issue of election cybersecurity, all of which the federal government, state governments, local governments, non-governmental organizations, and academics were attempting to swiftly address and some of which we were better positioned to tackle than others. Election cybersecurity is a coordination issue. It is a communication issue. It is a training and preparation issue. It is a human resource issue. It is a budgeting issue. And, of course, it is a technical cybersecurity issue. As an election administration community, we face challenges and opportunities in each of these areas.

Through a teaching experience I was able to understand election cybersecurity through one of the most important perspectives—intergovernmental relations. I had previously taken a graduate course in intergovernmental relations and, during my last semester of doctoral coursework, served as the teaching assistant for this course. At this point, my studies were fully focused on election security issues. I began to look at the election cybersecurity issue through its complex and ever-changing intergovernmental perspective. In the US's federal system of government, every single policy and administrative area is intergovernmental in nature. This is particularly true for election administration which is a system that is decentralized across US states and localities and is heavily reliant on private-sector vendors. As the cybersecurity issue progressed during 2017, the federal government took on an increased role, increasing the intergovernmental complexity of the issue space and creating both tension between the federal government and states and localities and an increased need for coordination. This perspective prepared me for my current position which essentially requires me to manage intergovernmental relations in this policy area.

While I studied this issue in an academic environment, I got the opportunity to attend several conferences and events, both practitioner-focused and academic-focused. I attended the *Inclusion and Integrity Election Symposium* hosted in 2017 by Auburn University and the Election Center during which I heard presentations on election security from the perspectives of state and local election administrators, association leaders, and election technology vendors. I attended another Election Center conference where I saw election cybersecurity presentations, related to many different aspects of the issue from how to communicate with voters to what technical safeguards are necessary, from the Center for Internet Security, the Department of Homeland Security, and an election technology vendor. I presented my own research on the topic at the NASS summer conference while also attending other presentations. I also presented my research and learned about relevant research from other academics at the *Building Better Elections* workshop, a pre-conference workshop to the American Political Science Association's annual conference, and at the Southeastern Conference for Public Administration. Through each of these opportunities, I not only learned new information about election cybersecurity, I also got to learn about the relevant organizations and even individuals working in this space. Further, I was able to make personal connections with many of these individuals.

TRANSITION TO THE PROFESSIONAL ENVIRONMENT

As I have begun my own career in the election cybersecurity arena, I have come to fully realize the value of these experiences. Instead of the flurry of new information and new faces that one usually faces when beginning a new position, I was already familiar with much of the relevant information; I had previous knowledge of the roles of almost every individual I have met through my new job; and I have the benefit of having a personal connection with many of my new colleagues. Furthermore, it was the connections of my academic advisors and connections I made through the experiences described above that allowed me the opportunity to be considered for my current position. These experiences also allowed me to find a position that is an ideal fit for me.

As with any new job, I have still faced challenges related to transitioning into a new position in this space, and I am bound to face more. Election cybersecurity remains a rapidly progressing and changing policy area. There are many differing and even conflicting opinions about the right steps for safeguarding elections. There have been many bridges built across various actors and organizations in the past two years, but, at the same time, walls have gone up. No matter how well one understands and is prepared to work within complicated intergovernmental politics, it will always be a learning experience in a new position and a constant challenge in your day-to-day work. One must intimately get to know all of the relevant actors and understand their positions and interests. One must earn trust and build relationships in their new work environment. This comes down to the simple things—be a hard worker; remain eager to learn; and always look for ways to build bridges, not walls.

TIPS FOR STUDENTS

Be Open-Minded

It is okay to go into your public or election administration education with ideas about what topics you want to study or even one area you are especially passionate about, but remain open-minded and open to new opportunities. These fields are dynamic. Something new can rise to the forefront any day. I came into my public administration program not thinking I wanted to study election administration, but because I was open, I came across an area of fundamental importance to this country that needed

capable and hardworking young talent. Being open-minded allowed me to get involved in an exciting, important, ever-changing policy space, and it opened doors for multiple career opportunities.

But, Be Willing to Commit

On the flip side, be willing to commit once you find the area that's the right fit for you. Find your thing, and then be all in. For me, this was initially difficult. There are so many important problems to tackle! But I eventually committed fully to one substantive area, and this is what has allowed me to gain so much knowledge in such a short period of time. I spend several hours on the average day studying election security issues and keeping up with the latest developments. This is also what has allowed me to make so many connections. My professors know the "right" people to introduce me to because I have committed to an area of focus, and they are willing to make those connections because I have become knowledgeable enough to have intelligent and productive conversations with anyone in the space. I am not suggesting you can never change your mind or follow a new opportunity. But if you can find a topic that you are excited enough about to plan your career around, at least for the foreseeable future, this will lead to connections and opportunities. Just don't expect to find that perfect topic on your first day of classes, or sometimes even during your first year.

Choose Something Current

So, you are trying to find a topic about which you are passionate enough to commit. Where do you start? Watch the news. Look at the issues dominating the headlines. Look particularly for issues that are "new," are receiving renewed attention, or are being viewed from a new perspective. If you find an issue that is currently unfolding or currently transforming, you can position yourself at its cutting edge which will undoubtedly lead to career opportunities!

Build Strong Relationships with Your Professors

Building strong relationships with your professors begins with being successful in their classes. This, of course, means making good grades. But it also means turning in work that will stand out and being highly engaged

in class discussions. If you are in graduate school, remember that everyone is an above average student. You need to find ways to set yourself apart. Also, talk to your professors about their areas of interest. It can help you find something you may be interested in. Choosing a topic that aligns with a professor's interests can provide you with a natural mentor and someone who can help you make the right kinds of connections. Just be sure you have done everything you can to earn that professor's respect before you begin asking them to collaborate or to help you.

Take Advantage of Opportunities

Getting a degree, which usually occurs alongside many other work, family, and community responsibilities, makes for a busy life. But you must find ways to take advantage of opportunities you are given. Traveling to conferences has not always fit perfectly into my schedule, but I always try to make time for them. This has paid off in so many ways. Attending conferences has allowed me to become more knowledgeable and has allowed me to meet so many people and make important connections. This led to the opportunity to be considered for my current position, has made my transition into the position smoother, and will undoubtedly make me more effective in my new role. Once you earn the respect of your professors, they will present you with opportunities. If they tell you something is important, trust them. It just might lead you to your dream job!

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