



## How an Election Administration Student Evolved into an Election Professional

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**Abstract** Election administration is an opportunity to serve citizens by ensuring they are equipped with the tools needed to express their voices through voting. The field of election administration is rapidly evolving to require specialty skills from a variety of professionals. An educational background in election administration can contribute greatly to the success of election administration professionals. This case examines the details of a county-level election administrator's education, and discusses how election-oriented college experiences can influence early career professionals.

**Keywords** Election administration • Education • Professionalizing  
• County-level • Practitioner • Academic

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## INTRODUCTION

The election administration field is quickly professionalizing. More people are entering the field who are specialists in data analysis, information technology (especially cybersecurity), Geographic Information Systems (GIS), and personnel management. I am excited to be part of a new wave of students who view election administration as not just a job, but a career choice where we can make a difference by preserving one of our nation's most vital democratic practices. This case study will first examine how I selected the election administration field as my career choice. Second, it will detail how I entered the field after college and the evolution of my role in the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections office (the first county-level office I worked in). Third, I will discuss my college election education, and I will highlight three takeaways that have been significant to my career. I believe it is important for me to discuss how my professional role has evolved before reflecting on my academic career because you cannot truly identify the educational benefits until you understand my role as an administrator in a county-level elections office. Finally, I will conclude with a discussion about applying my election administration education as a practitioner, and I will also make recommendations to academics and students who are interested in the field.

### HOW I FOUND THE FIELD OF ELECTION ADMINISTRATION

Since working in election administration, I have talked to many professionals who have indicated they did not start their careers intending to work in elections, but instead they stumbled into their profession. That is not how I found the field. I deliberately chose election administration as my career path in college because I viewed it as a natural progression for me based on past experiences, and I also viewed it as a way I could do valuable and fulfilling work. Through reflection, I can tell that my route to working in elections was rooted in public service and community engagement values. The remainder of this section will discuss how my experiences as a teenager and college student directed my path toward election administration.

I grew up in a small town in central Alabama that my family resided in for many generations. We had a strong connection to the citizens living there, and my parents always encouraged community engagement. As a teenager, I took part in many service projects around my hometown and

beyond. Those experiences developed my values because I realized that I could make a difference in the lives of others through service.

As a freshman at Auburn University in the fall of 2010, I continued to search for ways to get involved in my community. One opportunity that was particularly influential was the Living Democracy Initiative, which was a living-learning experience that allowed me to live for ten weeks in a rural west Alabama town to experience how that community functioned. I worked closely with the mayor and others in City Hall on multiple projects, and I attended civic group meetings that gave me an informed perspective on how community leaders and citizens approach public problems.

Living Democracy was the first time I had worked in something similar to a public service environment. After graduating Auburn in the spring of 2013 with a BA in Communication and a Minor in Community and Civic Engagement, I continued my education by entering Auburn's Master of Public Administration program. It was during that time that I could select one of three course tracks for my masters the supplement the general public administration curriculum: (1) Election Administration; (2) Economic Development; or (3) Nonprofit Organizations and Community Governance.

My experiences as a teenager and as a student had instilled in me values of democracy, community engagement, and public service. Only one track made sense for me and the person I had become: Election Administration. I viewed the field of elections as a way I could work in a public service environment to equip citizens with the tools they need to begin solving public problems through voting.

## ENTERING THE FIELD OF ELECTION ADMINISTRATION AFTER COLLEGE

In August 2015, I began my professional career in election administration by joining the Escambia County Supervisor of Elections Office in Pensacola, Florida. I quickly learned the way elections are managed in Florida. Each county has one supervisor of elections, and most supervisors are elected. Additionally, Florida is a closed primary state, and there are three ways for citizens to vote: (1) In-person on Election Day; (2) In-person Early Voting; and (3) No-excuse Vote-by-Mail.

As of early 2019, Escambia County had about 215,000 registered voters, 73 polling locations, and 79 precincts and the office consisted of about 12 full-time staff. During election years, we added 15–25 temporary staff members to assist with answering phones, warehouse work, troubleshooting equipment, processing registrations, and responding to voter requests.

During my first year with the office, my duties included polling location management, election worker training, poll watcher management, data analysis, and voter registration data entry. When I began work in August 2015, the office was preparing for the upcoming 2016 election cycle, which consisted of three elections: (1) Presidential Preference Primary in March; (2) State and Local Primary in August; (3) Presidential General in November.

My first few months on the job were dedicated mostly to data entry to update voter registration records and polling location management. A significant responsibility for me was to ensure locations were committed to being polling places, and to ensure they were accessible for all voters by conducting site surveys. As the 2016 election cycle approached, my duties expanded to include election worker training and poll watcher management.

Before the Primary Election in August, our office had discussions with members of the University of West Florida's (UWF) Haas Center about partnering to execute a voter satisfaction survey. I helped develop the survey by researching similar projects conducted by other jurisdictions to determine the types of survey questions that would be most beneficial to our office. Additionally, I spoke with academics who study elections, Dr. Robert Montjoy of Auburn University and the University of New Orleans, and Dr. Charles Stewart, III, of the Massachusetts Institute of Technology. Through our partnership with UWF, we conducted the project during the Primary and General Elections. We released the results from the survey in early 2017, and we touted the project as a successful partnership between a county government office and a local university. Our office used the data from the survey to measure and improve many of our processes, such as our election worker training procedures.

Following the 2016 election cycle, my responsibilities increased to include supervising daily warehouse operations and managing our office's GIS duties. A significant portion of my time in 2017 was dedicated to improving our voter registration system's streets database. Prior to this, I did not have any GIS experience. However, after receiving training, I coordinated an effort by our office to perform maintenance on and make improvements to our streets database. Our goal was to help voters by ensuring that each one was registered in his or her correct precinct. We also wanted to reduce the risk of data entry errors by ensuring that only valid residence addresses were in the registration system. The project was very challenging but also very rewarding. As a result of the project, our office ensured the accuracy of our voter registration database, and we reduced the risk of manual data entry errors.

## HOW MY ACADEMIC EXPERIENCES HAVE INFLUENCED MY CAREER

There are many dynamics of administering elections that cannot be prepared for in a classroom setting. For example, it is difficult to simulate all of the processes that must occur to train over 500 election workers in a five-week span for a Presidential Election. However, there are numerous characteristics of an election administration education that are important and unique. Through reflection, I have identified three takeaways about my election administration education: (1) My education created a holistic, well-rounded framework through which I viewed the field when I started my career; (2) Many aspects of my education have been helpful and provide knowledge and skills that directly apply in the field; and (3) My education equipped me with skills, both tangible and intangible, that have helped me adapt to my job duties and gain more skills later.

First, I appreciate that I entered the field of elections with a holistic viewpoint of it. Through a class taught by Dr. Montjoy, I learned about the history of elections and the ways that they have been administered over many decades. I also learned about concepts such as single- and multi-member districts, gerrymandering, redistricting, and many others. These concepts, while basic, provided me a database of knowledge with which to begin my career.

My holistic viewpoint of election administration was further formulated through the internship I had with the Election Center, which is the National Association of Election Officials. While interning, I worked on projects where I researched Professional Practice Papers (papers that document best practices from the field), I attended multiple conferences as a presenter, and I assisted in administering Certified Elections Registration Administrator (CERA) classes. Researching diverse best practices and networking with many professionals at conferences and CERA classes provided me a wealth of practical knowledge, and it also taught me about the decentralization of the elections field. What works best for one jurisdiction might not work as well for another because of differences in policy, population, people, location, and many other reasons.

Second, many aspects of my education provided knowledge and skills that directly apply in the field. One of those aspects was the ability to interpret statutes thoroughly and efficiently. Studying election law and court cases provided me with practice that taught me how to interpret statute,

a skill that is necessary for any practitioner. Almost all aspects of everyday duties are framed by statutory guidelines, regulations, and deadlines that must be met.

Also, the ability to understand how public budgeting works and the process through which funding occurs is important. Taking a class on public-sector budgeting provided me with practical skills that have made me a better election practitioner. The class reinforced the importance of fiscal responsibility and respecting citizens when trying to allocate tax dollars. Practitioners must often determine how to best utilize limited financial resources to deliver voter services to citizens, and I rely on knowledge gained in my budgeting class to help me make those types of determinations.

Third, my education equipped me with skills, both tangible and intangible, that have helped me adapt to my job duties and gain more skills as I have encountered different challenges. My college experiences were invaluable in many ways because they trained me how to make progress when faced with difficult problems. While I might not have been taught tangible skills about working with GIS systems, finding a voter in a voter registration database, or even processing a registration application, I was trained to think critically, analyze data, and evaluate processes.

I have never once written a policy memo since I started working in elections; however, classes that dealt with public policy analysis and program/project evaluation were particularly helpful because they taught me how to identify and dissect large problems and find solutions to them. They also taught me to set measurable goals and measure data points to determine progress. These types of skills proved especially beneficial to me during the GIS project that I worked on, as well as the voter satisfaction survey that our office conducted.

## DISCUSSION AND RECOMMENDATIONS

It takes all kinds of people to coordinate an event as large and important as an election. The elections field needs practitioners who specialize in community education and engagement, teaching and training, information technology/cybersecurity, GIS, and many other areas. For that reason, I recommend that academics look far and wide for students who would be good candidates for an election administration education.

Additionally, academics should prepare students for lifelong learning. College teaches many skills that will prove useful, but students need to be prepared to become part of an elections team by adapting and serving

where needed. They need to be team players first and foremost. They also need to know that election administration is not glamorous. It is always about the fine, nitty-gritty details. Further, students should expect a transition period as they go from always having studied the big, decentralized picture of elections to having a role in an elections office.

Finally, students of election administration have a unique skillset that should be utilized appropriately. We care about data analysis and process evaluation, and we want to find ways to improve practices. We have a holistic, well-rounded mentality that gives us a unique perspective as we transition from student to practitioner. I am fortunate to have worked with supervisors and other team members who have been interested in using data and who have always looked for ways to be on the leading edge of election practices.

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