

REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND THE MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION DEGREE

by

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Table of Contents

List of Tables	5
List of Figures	6
Abstract	7
Chapter One: Overview of the Study	8
Background of the Problem	10
Statement of the Problem	14
Purpose of the Study	15
Significance of the Study	16
Limitations and Delimitations	17
Definition of Terms	19
Organization of the Study	20
Chapter Two: Literature Review	21
Definition & History of Reflective Practice	22
Reflective Practice Theory to Action	24
Reflective Practice Integration in the MPA Curriculum	25
Importance of Reflective Practice in MPA Studies	30
Reflective Practice Framework	31
Chapter Three: Methodology	34
Participant Selection	35
Data Collection	36
Survey	36
Interview	38
Artifacts	40
Data Analysis	41
Chapter Four: Findings	44
Research Methods	44
Findings & Themes	45
Analysis of Research Question 1	46
Professional Mobility	46
Coursework Impact	51
Analysis of Research Question 2	57
Reflection as a Tactic	57
Chapter Five: Discussion	66
Implications	67
Future Research	70
Limitations of Survey	71
Concluding Thoughts	72

References	74
Appendix A: Consent Form	79
Appendix B: Email Request to Graduates	81
Appendix C: Survey Instrument	83
Appendix D: Interview Protocol	89

List of Tables

Table 1: Survey Response Rate	38
Table 2: Selection of responses regarding professional mobility from the online survey	47
Table 3: Selection of responses regarding coursework impact from online survey	51
Table 4: Selection of responses to what course/themes they took away from the program	53
Table 5: Selection of responses regarding the use of reflection post-graduation	58

List of Figures

Figure A: Employment Sectors of Public Affair School Graduates

9

Abstract

This study surveyed five years of graduates from the USC Price School in Sacramento's Master of Public Administration degree and asked how they used reflective practice in their professional lives. The research methods included an electronic survey sent to 82 graduates from 2012 through 2016 and follow-up interviews with five individuals, one from each graduating cohort. The themes that emerged from the survey and interview results centered around upward career mobility and professional development. The research found that reflection played a major role in the graduate's perception on their ability to change their professional careers and how they were able to utilize the coursework outside of the classroom. The USC MPA program was designed for students to pursue the degree while working at the same time. This was found to be regular practice as 29 out of 30 survey respondents were working either part or full-time while simultaneously enrolled in the degree program.

Keywords: reflective practice, Master of Public Administration degree, MPA graduates, graduate degree application.

CHAPTER ONE

OVERVIEW OF THE STUDY

Over the past few decades, the USC Price School of Public Policy (hereafter USC Price) has offered a number of different degree programs at the Sacramento campus, however, the longest running and sole remaining program offered at the time of the study was the Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree. The stated mission of the USC Price MPA degree program was to create the next generation of leaders and public servants who are able to create positive change in the communities in which they serve while working to solve problems and create solutions (University of Southern California, 2015).

The MPA degree was developed in general to prepare students for the administrative challenges of the future (Janousek, 2017; King, Britton & Missik, 1996). Schools of public administration endeavor to equip their graduates with the necessary skills to make a difference and have a positive influence in their careers as public servants (Clearly, 1990; King, Britton & Missik, 1996; Frederickson, 2001); including public service knowledge relating to public policy, organizational management, governmental operation, and budgeting and finance (Janousek, 2017). MPA graduates enter various career fields spanning the public, private and non-profit sectors. The graduates in the private sector tend to work on projects connected to the public or non-profit sectors. Figure A shows at the national level, the different sectors that graduates were employed in six months after graduation. In 2013, 35% were employed by the public sector, which included 12% working for the state, 12% in local, 9% at the federal/central level and 2% employed with foreign governments.

The USC Price Sacramento MPA degree program was created to enable full-time working students to complete the MPA degree within two years. This study sought to assess the

applicability of the USC Price Sacramento MPA degree to the professional setting and evaluate how MPA graduates were using the lessons and skills they learned in the program, specifically reflective practice and its role in their decision-making processes. At the same time, this study also sought to identify if there was loss of information retention, where the alumni no longer used the lessons taught in the program. Through the lens of reflective practice, this study sought to determine how the USC Price Sacramento MPA graduates were working through professional challenges and situations and developing solutions, especially, whether reflective practice played an important role.

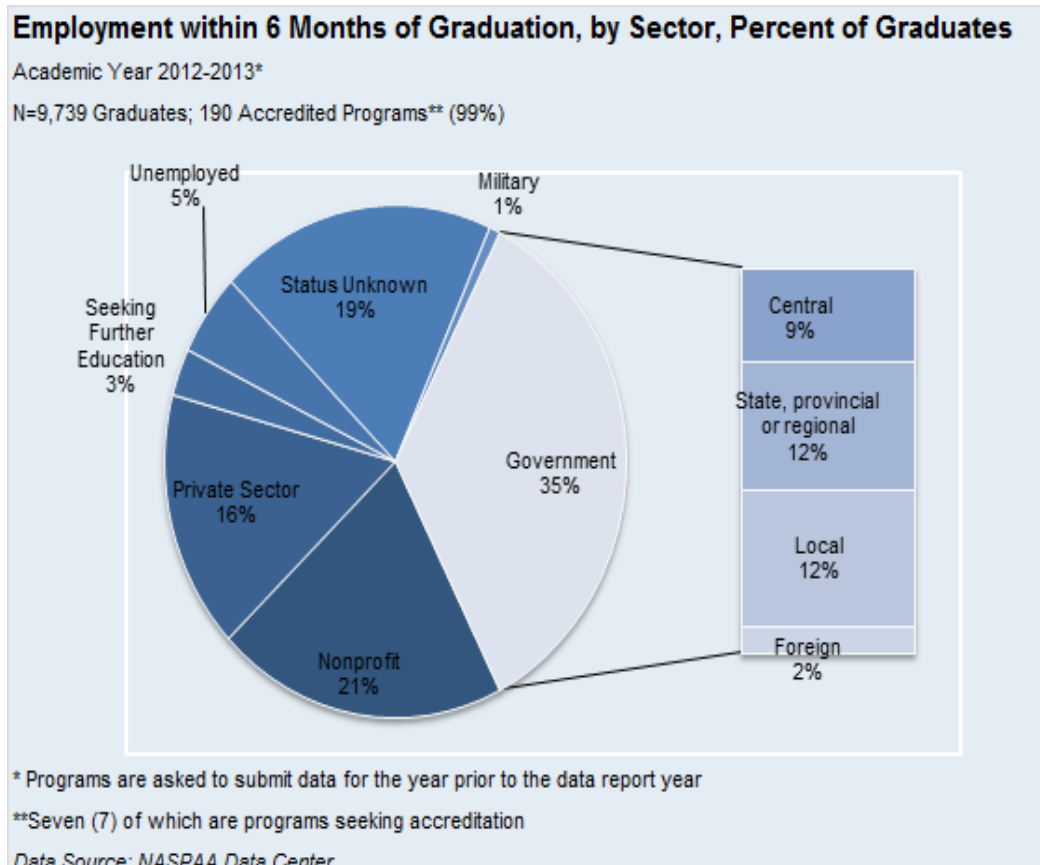


Figure A. Employment sectors of public affair school graduates (NASPAA, 2015)

Background of the Problem

This study addresses the issue of reflective practice and its importance in decision-making for MPA degree graduates from the USC Price Sacramento program. While not explicitly stated, the practice of reflection is taught throughout the curricula of the MPA degree program, as will be demonstrated in Chapter Two. Reflection is argued to be an important component of the MPA degree as it leads to intelligent and analytical thought and action as opposed to routine thinking, and is a necessary process for decision making and problem solving (Callahan, 2008; Larrivee, 2000).

The MPA degree is a professional and accredited graduate degree that was developed to educate managers on how to effectively deal with administrative challenges. The purpose was to produce graduates with “the greatest possible competence, sensitivity to high ethical standards, and enthusiasm for employment in the public service,” and instill the values inherent in defining the roles, processes, methods, and philosophies of administering (King, Britton & Missik, 1996, p. 144). The mission of the MPA degree program at USC Price is to educate professionals to assume leadership positions for public service and to improve the state of governance and management in public and nonprofit organizations (University of Southern California, 2015).

The University of Southern California (hereafter USC) has offered a public administration degree since 1929 and is one of the oldest of its kind in the United States. The MPA degree is housed within the Sol Price School of Public Policy (USC Price), which was ranked fourth among public affairs schools nationwide for the public management/administration specialty (U.S. News & World Report, 2016) at the time of the study. In 1971, USC opened an off-site campus located in Sacramento, California. It was important for USC to have a presence in the capital of California, where the MPA program could recruit and educate students who

were interested in creating and implementing policy while attending school. This program made it possible for full-time working professionals who wanted to improve their skills in creating and implementing public policy to attend a graduate degree program.

Much like reflective practice, the definition of and driving forces underlying the profession of public administration has changed and developed over time. Since its formation in the 1940s, the identity of the field, to a considerable extent, has been inexorably linked to a search for an educational focus in public administration and in public affairs in general (Powell & Saint-Germain, 2016; Raadschelders, 2011). The profession has posited questions in an attempt to define its purpose:

What is public administration? Are we a field, science, discipline or profession?

Are we a science or an art? Are we about theory or about practice? Are we a political science or a science of politics, policy, and administration? Are we about policy or administration? (King, Britton & Missik, 1996, p. 147).

In some sense, these questions involve intractable differences in how people see the purpose of public service. Some would suggest that public administration focus solely on the impartial and non-partisan implementation of laws. Others believe that the role of public administration should be to facilitate democracy: “the New Public Service argues that the explicit consideration of democratic values and citizenship by public administrators will have benefits in terms of building communities, engaging citizens, and making government work more effectively” (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015, pg. 664). While these different perspectives may lead to disagreements about the specifics of curriculum in a particular graduate program, the MPA degree is the central element of academic public administration’s efforts to help educate public managers (Cleary, 1990).

The mission of USC Price “is to improve the quality of life for people and their communities, here and abroad. [The mission is achieved] through education and research that promote innovative solutions to the most critical issues facing society” (University of Southern California, 2015). USC Price states that students in its degree programs will receive an education that:

- Combines social sciences, professional expertise, and the resources of a great research university to offer students breadth, depth, and variety as they pursue their interests and design their programs.
- Centers on and values the relationships that develop between students and teachers.
- Offers both academic and relevant real-world experiences, and draws widely on the expertise of networks of engaged counselors, advisors, alumni, and prominent professionals.
- Encourages innovation, entrepreneurship, experimentation, and collaboration.
- Fosters a multidisciplinary and problem-solving ethic.
- Focuses broadly and inclusively on the issues, constituencies, structures, and institutions engaged in public life – in both governance and the built environment.
- Utilizes the City of Los Angeles and the greater Southern California region as a living laboratory in which to learn and put into practice the lessons of the classroom (University of Southern California, 2015).

As the mission states, the MPA degree program’s purpose is to “foster a multi-disciplinary and problem solving ethic” (University of Southern California, 2015). The MPA degree in Sacramento is unique from many programs at USC Price in that it was developed for professionals who work full-time and want to pursue their degrees simultaneously. Applicants

are suggested to have three to five years of work experience when applying to the program.

There is also an option for students to apply straight out of undergraduate school or without work experience. Those students are required to enroll in a one-unit pre-service internship course, which has the students participate in a semester long internship. Therefore, all students and all graduates of the program have some form of work experience by the time they graduate.

As will be discussed more thoroughly in Chapter Two, the current requirements for the MPA degree highlight the importance of reflective practice in the curriculum. The assignments and activities facilitate the students reflecting on their own personal experience to apply the theories and case studies being taught in the program. This practical experience and application of knowledge are how students learn and retain concepts (Knowles, Holton, & Swanson, 2011). While this is a major component of both reflective practice and the MPA degree program curriculum, there have been no studies to my knowledge that follow up with the graduates of the MPA degree program and assess whether this is actually occurring or not. If we view the MPA degree curriculum as an intervention, we should observe influence of the curriculum in the ways that graduates make decisions post-graduation. To improve the potential outcomes of this MPA degree curriculum, this study will evaluate the response of alumni to better inform the program delivery for current and future students.

At the time that this study was conducted, there had been no post graduate surveys conducted with the graduates of the USC Price Sacramento MPA program. The results of this study should therefore give insight to the faculty and USC Price administration about how the curricula and teaching of reflective practice directly impacts and benefits the graduates, and how the curricula and teaching could be honed and improved.

Statement of the Problem

There are two reasons that this study is timely and relevant: (1) USC Price in Sacramento is facing a changing labor market and (2) there is increased competition in the region with more MPA degrees offered by local and non-local universities. First, to adjust to changing demands of the labor market, USC Price needs to stay current with what employers are looking for in new hires. There are the standard skills, as described in the background of the problem, along with new practices and technologies that will make MPA graduates attractive candidates for employment. Second, USC Price needs to maintain relevancy because within the Sacramento metropolitan area, there were three other institutes of higher education and one new university that opened in the fall of 2016 – all of which offer the Master of Public Administration or Master of Public Policy degrees.

Enrollment at the USC Price Sacramento campus has been growing over the years. The entering class of 2015 was the largest cohort at 30 students, triple the number of students that started in 2010. At that time, the USC Price Sacramento campus also offered the Master of Health Administration (MHA) degree, however, due to low enrollment numbers, the MHA degree program was discontinued in Sacramento. This study will only include the graduates of the MPA degree.

This study will fill a gap in the lack of knowledge regarding what happens to MPA graduates after they leave the degree program. USC Price in Sacramento does not track where the MPA graduates work, if they changed jobs, or were promoted. There has been no formal system put in place to collect this information from currently enrolled MPA students or alumni. Consequently, the MPA program at USC Price School in Sacramento has not conducted a study of the graduates after the program to understand what the applicable skills are from the program

or how they are using reflective practice. Therefore, there are no data with which to compare the results of this study.

Purpose of the Study

As previously stated, the purpose of this study is to investigate how the MPA degree program at USC Price in Sacramento has prepared its graduates to be effective leaders and decision-makers, with a specific focus on reflective practice. This study asked alumni if and how they were using reflective practice at their workplace using data collected through surveys and interviews. By using retrospective data collection (asking the graduates to look back on their time in graduate school and relate it to their career), the study sought to evaluate where the USC Price Sacramento MPA degree program was performing well and where the degree program can improve.

The accrediting body for MPA degree program, the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), has included reflective practice as an integral part of the learning outcomes for students in accredited MPA programs. Reflective practice promotes deeper learning on the part of the students through critical thinking and application of new knowledge. Reflective practice is incorporated into the curriculum at the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program to enable the students to practice and develop the skills of self-reflection. A focus on reflective practice is a useful measure to address the effectiveness of the MPA degree because the concepts are scattered throughout most of the core required courses in USC Price Sacramento's MPA degree program. MPA graduates from USC Price in Sacramento should have an understanding of reflective practice upon graduation, and this understanding should be evidenced in their decision-making process in their work post-graduation. This topic will be explored further in the literature review in Chapter Two.

The study was designed to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program specifically in relation to reflective practice. On average, there were about 20 students enrolled annually in each cohort in Sacramento. Alumni who graduated in the last five years from the time of the study, from 2012 through 2016, were targeted for this evaluation. Two data collection strategies were used to collect data: an online survey and interviews conducted in person. The questions on the survey addressed the larger themes of the MPA degree curriculum, and follow-up interviews of five individuals, one from each graduating cohort were conducted to supplement and validate the survey data. The interviews were intended to help gain more insight into the changes that the graduates saw in their professional skills due to the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program.

The research questions for this study were: (1) What are the perceptions of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program alumni regarding the extent to which the MPA degree program prepared them for their career? And (2) in what ways do USC Price in Sacramento MPA alumni describe their implementation of reflective practice and their decision-making practices in the workplace?

Significance of the Study

This study sought to uncover how the knowledge, theories, and skills are being implemented in the professional setting for graduates of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree, and to what extent they were developed as a result of the MPA program. To date, there has been no research that I am aware of conducted on this population. Through surveys and interviews, this research study sought to clarify what public administration means to the students, what specific practices and theories have stayed with them post-graduation, and how reflective practice is impacting their professional work.

There are varied stakeholders involved with USC Price in Sacramento, including the main University office in Los Angeles, the faculty, staff and advisory board in Sacramento, and the students (past, present and future) of both sites. This study sought to demonstrate what is working for the students from the perspective of the alumni of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program. In general, the results indicate that the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program is fulfilling its student learning outcomes and the graduates have become better leaders and more effective practitioners compared to before they matriculated.

The data collected in this study were designed to assist the faculty at USC Price in Sacramento to understand how alumni are using skills and lessons learned in the MPA degree program in the workplace. There will be different circumstances under which the graduates may or may not be using what they learned in the MPA degree program in their workplace and the study sought to clarify why such variations occur and the causes of such variations.

There has not been a study done on the graduates of USC Price in Sacramento's MPA program to assess their attitudes on the curriculum, what they think should be changed and if they are using any of the lessons in particular on reflective practice. Since no research has been conducted on this population, this study design provides insights on what knowledge the students are finding the most beneficial after they complete the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree.

Limitations and Delimitations

Since USC Price in Sacramento first opened in 1971, there have been many students who have studied in various degree programs either full or part-time. The exact number is unknown as there were no comprehensive records, at the time of this study, of the different degree programs that have been offered in Sacramento, least of all a record of the students who were enrolled. Electronic records have been kept for the past few years with the USC Price in

Sacramento MPA degree showing that, from the fall cohort in 2012 to 2016, 106 students have enrolled in the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program, with 82 graduating in the same time span. There are a few factors that contribute to the difference in student numbers from enrollment to graduation from 2012-2016. First, the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program is a two-year program so the graduating class started two years prior; second, not all students complete the program; third, some students do not follow the two-year curriculum varying in completion time to finish the degree.

The survey was restricted to the last five years of graduates in order to maintain consistency with similarity to program leadership and curriculum trends. The number of students in each cohort has averaged around 20 people, and the total number of qualified subjects eligible for the survey was 82. This study could be replicated with any degree program at any school. However, because of the particular circumstances in Sacramento, the results of the study may not be generalizable to the MPA program at USC Price's Los Angeles campus, nor other degree programs at USC Price. As a current employee of the University of Southern California, access to the student records had been approved by the Director of the Price School in Sacramento, however, no identifiable information is reported in this study. For full disclosure, the researcher of this study is also a graduate from 2012 of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program.

An anticipated difficulty with this study was finding common terminology to refer to the various examples of reflective practice in the survey questions. There are different ways that instructors taught reflective practice, and it was not always explicitly stated. Reflective practice was often embedded in activities and lessons, for example, there were reflective journals that students completed over the course of one class. In another class, students discussed what they

learned, what surprised them, and what they unlearned from the previous lesson (Callahan, 2013). The students in this class were also regularly asked to apply what they learned in the classroom to their work experience and vice versa.

As a retrospective study design, this study relied on the participants to remember and be able to articulate the changes in practice and other developmental differences they experienced before entering the MPA degree program and after completion. As with other retrospective study designs, there may be temporal bias. Without a baseline study from before the participants entered the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program, there is no way to examine how the students have changed other than retrospective accounts.

Definition of Terms

- Cohort: a group of people banded together and treated as a group (Cohort, n.d.). In the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program the students are grouped together for the first year, where they take all classes in the same order.
- Critical reflection: a purposeful activity for making considered changes and improvements to practice, knowledge and meanings made from learning and an awareness of assumptions (Hickson, 2011; Larrivee, 2000; Mezirow, 1998).
- Organizational behavior: the study of the way people interact with others in their organization and with the public, how they view their work, and how they serve those communities (Denhardt, Denhardt, & Aristigueta, 2013).
- Public administration: the implementation of government policy; an academic discipline that studies policy implementation and prepares civil servants for working in public service (Janousek, 2017; Newland, 2012).

- **Public policy:** a system of courses of action, regulatory measures, laws, and funding priorities concerning a given topic promulgated by a governmental entity or its representatives. Analyzing, evaluation and solving all aspects of policy, using quantitative and qualitative data to develop assess and evaluate alternative approaches to current and emerging issues (NASPAA, 2014).
- **Reflective practice:** a way of studying one's own past experiences to improve the way one works (Rodgers, 2002), a meaning-making process that relates those experiences to create new knowledge (Dewey, 1938).
- **Strategic planning:** an organization's process of defining its strategy, direction and making decisions on allocation of resources to pursue a goal.
- **Wicked problem:** a problem that is not easily defined or resolved as they are complex and interwoven between different disciplines, organizations, and stakeholders (Head & Alford, 2015; Kettl, 2006).

Organization of the Study

This study is organized into five chapters. This chapter, Chapter One, was an overview of the study, including background of the problem and the purpose of the study. Chapter Two is the literature review where a synthesis of existing literature explains the history of reflective practice and the MPA degree. The literature review also summarizes established theories, especially of reflective practice. Chapter Three reviews the study methodology, explaining the population, data collection and analysis. Chapter Four reports the results of the survey and interviews. Chapter Five summarizes and expands on the findings, explores implications of the results for new research questions, and how the study informs the practice for professionals in the field.

CHAPTER TWO

LITERATURE REVIEW

In this chapter, the importance of reflective practice in the professional setting was reviewed through the context of the research of Donald Schön (1983, 1987), John Dewey (1938), and John Mezirow (1998). Specifically, I focus on how reflection-in-action and reflection-on-action relate to the development of management and leadership traits through decision-making processes that the Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree aims to teach its students. This review of the literature will explore how reflective practice has been integrated into the curricula of the University of Southern California Price School of Public Policy (USC Price) Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree at the Sacramento satellite campus and more broadly on reflection in schools of public affairs from the perspective of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), the accrediting non-profit organization, through which the USC Price MPA degree program has been accredited (NASPAA, 2014).

The USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program was designed and structured for public administration practitioners. Students are expected to be working part or full-time, while simultaneously pursuing their degree (USC Price School, 2016). The purpose of this study was to look at how reflective practice either is or is not being implemented by graduates after completing the degree program and to assess the applicability of the lessons taught in the MPA program to the professional work environment. To this point in time, the USC Price in Sacramento MPA graduates have not been evaluated in this way, that is, to observe the relevancy of the MPA degree in the professional workplace.

As will be discussed later in this chapter, the curricula for the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program has built assignments into the syllabi that utilize reflective practice. This study examines how the students are translating the theory and classroom activities after graduation into the workplace.

The literature demonstrates that reflective practice is a valuable resource for professionals and their development as leaders (Dewey, 1938; Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1998) and MPA programs across the US tout their ability to create effective leaders. NASPAA includes reflective practice as a requirement for schools of public affairs to teach students and USC Price in Sacramento incorporates it into the MPA program through written assignments, journals, and in-class discussions.

Definition and History of Reflective Practice

Reflective practice has been defined in many ways. John Dewey, renowned educator and philosopher, wrote in his text *Education and Experience* (1938) that learning is a continuous process that requires the individual to be an active participant in her or his own learning. What started as a theory for teaching spread throughout other disciplines such as nursing, social work, education, and public affairs, led to the multitude of interpretations on the concept of reflective practice (Hickson, 2011; Black & Plowright, 2010). According to Cranton (1992), reflection follows a logical progression from awareness and examination of assumptions through examination of sources and consequences of assumptions themselves. Reflective practice ranges from analyzing a single aspect of a lesson to considering the ethical, social, and political implications of teaching practice, and is rooted in the day-to-day operations of an organization (Hammer & Stanton, 1997; Larrivee, 2008).

Dewey (1938) considers that one of the purposes of reflection is to be conscious of the history and past events that influence the mind's current state. Once reflection transforms those critical assumptions, the observations of the present can "turn into means of enriching thought and action" (Miettinen, 2000, p. 63). Two criticisms of John Dewey's ideas on reflection are that (1) it assumes the challenge or problem must be solved and that reflection will help get to the conclusion, and (2) he has a "rigid justificatory model" (Miettinen, 2000, p. 64). Dewey argues that reflective thoughts are separate from action. For example, a reflective practitioner grappling with a situation must first step away from the issue to start the reflective process before returning with the appropriate knowledge (Hébert, 2015). Later in this chapter, Schön's (1983, 1987) concept of reflection, and its expansion of Dewey's theory, will be discussed to qualify experiential knowledge and differentiate types of reflections. However it is defined, reflective practice is identified as being critical to the effective functioning of supporting professionals (Magnuson & Norem, 2002; Strong, 2003).

In Dewey's (1938) theory of inquiry, there are five steps that explain the process through which a practitioner is faced with a problem and works through it to a solution. Step one, the professional is confronted by a disturbance/uncertainty and previous solutions are not applicable. When confronted with the problem, the professional moves to step two: intellectualizing and defining the issue. Step three, the professional studies the conditions of the situation and forms a hypothesis; step four, reasoning; step five, testing of the hypothesis in action, which leads to either new ideas and concepts or a solution to the problem. The definition of reflective practice that guides this study is based on the work of Dewey's (1938) description of reflective inquiry as the active, persistent, and careful consideration of any belief or knowledge – a necessary practice if practitioners want to create change and move away from routine.

Reflective Practice Theory to Action

After Dewey (1938), the next major contributor to the development of the theory on reflective practice is Donald Schön. In *The Reflective Practitioner* (1983), Schön built upon Dewey's work on reflective practice and expressed it as the ability to reflect on an action so as to engage in a process of continuous learning. Schön (1983) explained that reflective practice asks practitioners to trust their tacit knowledge as they reflect on their experiences. He separated the process into two stages: reflection-in-action, which occurs while an event is in process, and reflection-on-action, which occurs after an event is consciously undertaken.

Reflection-on-action is described as thinking through or analyzing a situation, subsequent to the activity. There is time to process the practitioners' thoughts and discuss with others as the event has already occurred (Danielson, 2008). A reflective journal or debrief with colleagues would be an example of reflection-on-action. Mezirow (1998) differentiates reflection from thinking, as it requires awareness of assumptions and deliberation about values, beliefs, and feelings. Reflection-in-action can be thought of as thinking on one's feet. It involves looking ahead, analyzing a situation, and coming up with a critical response (Schön, 1983).

The theories of reflective practice are important for this study in that they provide the foundation for the current state of reflection in higher education institutions such as USC Price in Sacramento. The definition of reflection is broad and varied, but it is widely agreed that reflection is a tool for professionals to analyze events and convert thoughts and theories into action. Schön (1987) explains that professionals have come to see that "the problems of the real-world practice do not present themselves to practitioners as well-formed structures" (p. 4). By focusing on knowledge and experience, those practitioners can work through challenges, which relates to John Dewey's model of reflective thought. Dewey (1938) approached reflection from

the framework of individuals and their role in community. By using evidence and reasoning, people can develop into better problem solvers through rational thought. Reflective practice is a process of critically assessing the content or premise of our efforts to interpret and give meaning to an experience (Mezirow, 1998). Mezirow (1998) goes on to explain that the process is also a simple awareness of an object, event or state, including awareness of a perception, thought, feeling, disposition, intention, action, or of one's habits of doing things. Reflective practice can also mean letting one's thoughts wander over something, taking something into consideration, or imagining alternatives (p. 185).

Practitioners utilize reflection to better understand situations and connect concepts into actionable steps to learn, grow and become a more effective leader (Schön & Rein, 1994). Schön expressed that professionals use reflection to assess their actions, by giving thought to everyday processes, and in so doing, professionals are able to better understand, evaluate and communicate changes and their effectiveness (Turner-Mueke, 1986). It is important for public administrators to be confident that they are able to make decisions with as much information that is available to them and be efficient and effective when implementing those decisions.

Reflective Practice Integration in the MPA Curriculum

There are assignments built into the curriculum of the MPA degree that help facilitate the practice of reflection in and outside of the classroom. The MPA curriculum is structured to help address complex and wicked problems through the interdisciplinary work that occurs between agencies and the many stakeholders and ways of thought that students engage. In his installation remarks, USC Provost Michael Quick (2015) stated his goal for the university was to take on "the most intractable, difficult, multifaceted problems of the day." A wicked problem is a social and cultural problem that is impossible to solve for a variety of different reasons including,

incomplete or contradictory knowledge, the number of people and opinions involved, large economic burden, and the tangle of connections with other problems (Head & Alford, 2015; Kettl, 2006; Rittel & Webber, 1973). For example, problems such as poverty, health care access, and homelessness are considered wicked problems. Students pursuing the MPA degree learn how to define these types of problems, set goals, and deal with the tradeoffs of efficiency and equity.

At USC Price, all students in the MPA program are required to complete 40 units of coursework that is comprised of core courses, management competencies, and electives. Reflective practice is incorporated throughout the courses but most heavily in a few core classes, namely PPD 540 *Public Administration and Society*, PPD 500 *Intersectoral Leadership*, and PPD 545 *Human Behavior in Public Organizations* – all classes taken during a student’s first year in the USC Price MPA degree program.

In the first semester of the USC Price MPA, all students are required to take an introductory course titled *Public Administration and Society* (PPD 540) as a foundation that lays the groundwork for the rest of the MPA degree program. In this course, students are required to discuss case studies and relate the readings to their professional organizations/ workplaces. The discussions center around defining problems and learning how these challenges might be addressed. Practicing public administrators often face unexpected situations and they use reflection to think back on past experiences and create new opportunities (Schön, 1983; Weschler, 1997). Eisenhardt (1989) writes in her research that decision makers that keep pace with change are linked to strong performance (p. 544). By practicing reflection, the graduates from the MPA program learn how to become better decision makers by learning from past case studies and how to look at problems and discover unique solutions.

Intersectoral Leadership also known as *Cross-Sectoral Governance*, refers to the roles and combined strengths of the public, private and non-profit sectors in policy, planning and development (PPD 500 syllabus, 2017). In the *Intersectoral Leadership* course (PPD 500), the students are required to participate in a number of experiential learning experiences. In order to gain the most from these activities, the class takes time after the activity to debrief the sessions. The class instructor leads the discussion to prompt the students to reflect on what they learned the day before to answer three questions: what did they learn, what did they unlearn and what surprised them? Provided with simulation opportunities, “the reflective practices further integrate theory and practice. Without reflection on decisions and processes, students have no idea how to improve in future transactions or why they did or did not succeed” (Wills & Clerkin, 2009, p. 225). The exercise makes students apply what they learned to their own personal experiences. The question of unlearning is a difficult concept that takes practice to develop over time. According to Callahan (2013), the question of unlearning asks adults what skills, knowledge, tools they have relied on in the past that are no longer valuable (p. 31). It may be asking them about skills or practices that could be holding them back from professional advancement (Callahan, 2013).

In the course *Human Behavior in Public Organizations* (PPD 545), the learning objectives are to have the student able to “critically assess classical and contemporary approaches” to organizational management. Students are expected to integrate theory with practice and “increase their capacity for intellectual reflection and critical thinking” (PPD 545 syllabus, 2016). The goals are accomplished with a journal assignment where students are asked to reflect on their past work experiences and describe those situations with the leadership theories that they have been studying throughout the semester. The assignment asks that they

write about previous challenges and apply the theories that they learned throughout the duration of the course to analyze how it may influence their behavior in the future. Reflective writing should “seek out critical examination of relevant concepts: apply higher order thinking skills of analysis, evaluation, and synthesis” (Wills & Clerkin, 2009, p. 221) and help learners connect theory to practices across disciplines.

Strategic Planning in the Public Sector (PPD 673), is an elective course offered at the USC Price Los Angeles main campus. The students who enroll in this class are required to travel to Los Angeles for the in-person meetings. The purpose of the course is to focus on the areas of strategic planning including formulation, implementation and evaluation (PPD 673 syllabus, 2016). In addition to learning the process of how to develop, implement and monitor strategic plans, students are also taught how to evaluate them; what are the strengths, weaknesses, what works, what does not work and why. The course requires students to work in teams to collaborate on assignments and presentations. One of the projects is on reflection and feedback in strategic planning.

The final course of the USC Price MPA program, *Capstone in Public Administration* (PPD 546) taken in the second year of the degree program engages the students in the integration and application of skills learned in the program through (1) a real-time, real-life organizational consultation project, (2) the development of a written framework for public administration, (3) creating a personal Management Advancement Plan, and (4) practicing contemporary skills in collaborative leadership, creative leadership, and personal leadership. The focus overall is on sharpening skills in the professional practice of public administration by putting into action the competencies developed in the core USC Price MPA courses.

The capstone project requires students to work in groups and act as a consultant to actual client organizations who can use assistance on semester long projects. The students have to bring together all of the skills that they learned in the MPA program and present solutions and recommendations to their client organizations. This is an application of reflection-on-action as well as reflection-in-action since the students have to work from previous experiences in the MPA degree program to apply problem solving techniques to their current situation. It is a prime example of how the degree should work for the students after they complete the program. As Bore and Wright (2009) state, by the end of the program, students should be able to “deal with complex issues both systematically and creatively, make sound judgments in the absence of complete data, and communicate their conclusions clearly” to their audiences (p. 254).

The USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program is focused on creating a better manager and leader in whatever organization the student works in currently or may work in upon graduation. The program recruits students who are working professionals. The admissions officer for the USC Price School in Sacramento claims that “anywhere from 90 to 95% of the students at the Sacramento campus are employed while they attend the MPA program full-time (A. Stayton, personal communication, March 2017). Courses are taught by both faculty researchers and practitioners with years of professional experience. The MPA program at USC Price in Sacramento was specifically created for working professionals so they could use their experiences to apply theory, make changes and adapt their habits in the workplace. Darling-Hammond (2000, p. 10) agrees with Schön that:

most people learn more powerfully when new ideas are connected to what they already know and have experienced; when they use real-world problems to test their knowledge; when they are given clear, high goals with practice in reaching them; when they can build

on what they have previously learned; and when their own interests and strengths are a springboard for learning.

It is the conversation in the classroom that helps students connect their experiences with the larger conversation (Callahan, 2013). When applying to the program, the applicants are required to have three to five years of professional work experience, or they can participate in an internship class prior to beginning first year core courses. This is to ensure that the student has real world experiences to draw from when working through the MPA degree program. Many of the assignments require the student to reflect on situations at their workplace to expand on theories taught in class, such as the journal assignment where theoretical concepts from the classroom are applied to the student's real-life work environment.

Schön (1987) writes that engaging in reflective practice enables professionals to communicate and process what needs to occur, how to make it happen, describe the purpose for the action, and understand its impact on decision-making. The assignments and activities in the USC Price MPA program reinforce this type of connection between new theories and ideas to personal knowledge and experiences to create a dynamic learning environment with reflective practice.

Importance of Reflective Practice in MPA Studies

The USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree was developed with the intent to establish a field of study for public servants and strengthen their ability to solve challenges that have not presented themselves before. The skills acquired by completing the coursework were designed to improve managerial qualities and help impart an ability to understand systems and organizational structures. The public administrator needs to have the ability to acquire knowledge, communicate, and the desire to be a life-long learner. Reflective practice is one of

the tools that have been integrated into the MPA curriculum to help develop the mindful practitioner who can work with diverse populations and among different sectors to create innovative solutions to wicked problems.

One of the main goals of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree is to prepare students for future administrative challenges and to acquire further knowledge in the pursuit of public service. Developing this ability and capacity requires that the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program result in multiple outcomes: general skills and knowledge; critical and communication skills; and overall personal, intellectual, and moral development (King, Britton, & Missik, 1996). Reflective practice assists in the growth of purposeful thinking and ensures that thoughts and ideas do not become routine.

The USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program develops leadership as a skill and has incorporated reflective practice in the curriculum to help facilitate those leadership enhancing experiences. Through written assignments, discussions in class and activities/exercises, students learn how to use reflection to develop leadership skills during the MPA program. A large proportion, 35 percent, of students who complete degrees from public affairs schools work in government at the local, state and federal levels (NASPAA, 2015). Effective public administrators are the result of the “cognitive development which guides the acquisition of necessary skills for professional practice” (King, Britton, & Missik, 1996, p. 155). Leadership involves becoming critically reflective of assumptions and participating in discourse to validate beliefs, intentions, values and feelings (Mezirow, 1998).

Reflective Practice Framework

Dewey (1938) described reflective practice as “the active, persistent and careful consideration of any belief or supposed form of knowledge in the light of grounds that support it

and the further consideration to which it tends” (p. 9). Students who learn reflective practice and engage in this deeper thinking can improve their decision-making skills and have a better understanding of the impact they are making on the larger community.

Rodgers (2002, p. 856) attempts to consolidate Dewey’s ideas on reflections, condensing them down to four phases:

- 1) Presence to experience;
- 2) Description of experience;
- 3) Analysis of experience; and
- 4) Intelligent action/experimentation.

These phases describe the process of recognizing a situation and attempting to identify or define the problem. In analyzing the experience, the practitioner is searching for explanations and pulling from previous experiences to generate a new solution. Reflection must include action to complete the learning process. Experiencing a problem and developing a response is different from reacting automatically (Dewey, 1938; Rodgers, 2002). As graduates of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree face new situations and problems, they will experience these steps of reflection – of examining an issue, struggling to work through previous assumptions to come up with a transformed analysis of the experience (Larrivee, 2000).

Some of these situations are considered wicked problems, which appear to be resistant to comprehensive solutions, they are complex and unpredictable (Kettl, 2006; Rittel & Webber, 1973). While the solutions are difficult to come by, there are methods to create structures of public management to respond to these issues (Head & Alford, 2015). Public administrators who practice critical reflection can critique and examine their previous assumptions to understand

how to use the knowledge to create strategies for dealing with these difficult situations (Hickson, 2011).

Reflection serves a larger purpose of transforming information into meaningful action. It is significant to organizational learning and change. The MPA degree program needs reflective practice in its curriculum to broaden the field of knowledge, bring awareness, and lead to intelligent action (Rodgers, 2002). The purpose of public administration is to make government work more efficiently and effectively (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2015) while it is simultaneously filled with tension from opposing interests (King, Britton & Missik, 1996). Public administrators must deal with problems that have never been addressed and reflective thought helps the practitioner create solutions to these challenges by “not endorsing present standards of operation” (Larrivee, 2000, p. 297), but instead applying inter-sectoral thinking and offering insight into the unpredictable nature of complex problems (Bore & Wright, 2009).

CHAPTER THREE

METHODOLOGY

As stated in Chapter One, USC Price in Sacramento has been offering the MPA degree since 1971. The purpose of the USC Price Sacramento MPA degree program is to develop effective administrative professionals that will be able to successfully work through new and complex challenges. However, the graduates of the USC Price Sacramento MPA degree program have never been evaluated to assess the claims of the program. There was no contact database, research, or any kind of follow up information on how the graduates were doing or using the lessons they were taught in the program. Despite these limitations, this study looked at what USC Price Sacramento MPA degree program practices graduates thought were the most useful through surveys and interview, and how they were applying them to their workplace and professional development.

The research questions for this study were: (1) What are the perceptions of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA alumni regarding the extent to which the degree program prepared them for their career? And (2) in what ways do USC Price in Sacramento MPA alumni describe their implementation of reflective practice and their decision making practices in the workplace?

Qualitative inquiry, which “focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying significance when gathering and interpreting data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 14). Because this population has not been studied in this manner before, a more qualitative study design (retrospective survey and follow-up interviews) was the most appropriate. A more standard survey study design would presuppose that there were measurable variables with standard responses (Creswell, 2014).

Participant Selection

Initial contact with potential study participants was an introductory email message to let the alumni of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program from 2012-2016 know about the study and the role of the researcher and the University. This also served as a method to verify email addresses, as the school's records were not up to date. A second email contained a link to access the online survey questionnaire, with a PDF copy of the questions attached to the email in case the potential study participant was unable to access the online version.

The USC Price in Sacramento MPA 2012-2016 alumni contact information that was kept on record included the graduate's name, degree completion year, school email address and occasionally a personal email address. Information about the graduate's employment was not maintained consistently. The survey questionnaire contained questions about the purpose of the MPA degree in general as well as elective coursework specific to the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program. From the survey responses, five individuals were selected for follow-up interviews in-person or by phone, covering more in-depth discussions of their professional life after graduation from the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program. The study aimed to provide a broader range of understanding about how the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree has aided, and benefited, the graduates; Merriam (2009) stated, "we can only know what we experience by attending to perceptions and meanings" (p. 9).

This study surveyed USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program graduates from 2012 through 2016. This was to control for the changes in the USC Price in Sacramento administration, which had gone through some significant changes throughout the decades, for example, in 2012, there was a change in leadership. Additionally, the contact information was more likely to be up to date with the more recent graduates.

The survey pool consisted of 82 graduates who graduated over a five-year span from the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program. Depending on the year, the program enrolled between 15 and 30 students per academic year. Access to alumni contact information was available through the USC Price in Sacramento MPA student spreadsheets. The information was only accessible to the USC Price in Sacramento faculty and staff. The Director of the USC Price in Sacramento program gave permission to use the email addresses of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA alumni to conduct the study. From the survey results, the candidates for interviewing were selected using the following criteria: (1) survey respondents who provided their contact information to volunteer for an interview, (2) survey respondents who were working in the Sacramento region, (3) survey respondents who represented one of the graduating cohorts (to ensure a distribution of alumni interviewees across the cohort years), and (4) survey respondents who represented local, county, state, federal governments, the private and nonprofit sectors (for a cross section of different professional sectors).

Data Collection

Survey

The purpose for conducting an online survey was to reach as many of the target USC Price in Sacramento 2012-2016 MPA alumni as possible. The survey request was emailed out twice. The first introduced the study and obtained the current contact information of the graduate (see Appendix B). In the online questionnaire, the final question asked the graduate respondent to opt into an in-person interview, the goal of which was to get richer data on the reflective practices of the graduates (see Appendix C). The second email served as a reminder to those who had not yet responded that the survey was still open and to thank those who had responded (see Appendix B).

The survey link was sent via email to all of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA graduates from 2012-2016, all 88 graduates during that time period. Of the 88, there were 82 graduates who were eligible for inclusion in this study: they attended the majority of their classes at USC Price in Sacramento, they graduated with a MPA degree between the years of 2012 and 2016, and they were alive at the time of the survey. The ten-minute survey questionnaire was administered electronically through Google Forms. The site displays the results in a number of different ways and kept the identity of the participants unknown if they did not share their personal information, which meant that the survey was anonymous, unless respondents self-identified. The survey link was distributed by email in the spring of 2017. Of the 82 candidate subjects, 30 responses were collected, and five individuals interviewed.

The questions developed into three categories: (1) demographic questions to obtain general information about the subject's professional careers, (2) reflective practice application questions including how they defined the term and how they used reflective practice at work, (3) their lasting impressions of the MPA program and what they recall as significant lessons.

Over a two-week period, emails were sent to the 2012-2016 graduates of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program, requesting that they complete an 18 question survey questionnaire administered online through Google Forms. The questions ranged from demographic information to open-ended inquiries regarding their employment status, both while they were enrolled in the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program and at the time of the survey in Spring 2016. Again, the criteria for inclusion for the survey were being a graduate from the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program from 2012-2016, and having taken the majority of the classwork in Sacramento. A breakdown of the response rate per cohort is provided in Table 1.

Graduating Cohort Year	Response Rate	Percentage
2012	10 out of 20	50.0%
2013	3 out of 16	18.8%
2014	5 out of 14	35.7%
2015	7 out of 17	41.2%
2016	5 out of 15	33.3%
Total	30 out of 82	Avg. 36.6%

Table 1. Survey Response Rate

Links to the online survey questionnaire were distributed to 82 graduates from USC Price in Sacramento's MPA degree program, 30 were completed, providing an overall response rate of 36.6 percent. The number of alumni who were eligible for the survey totaled 82, a difference of six from the 88 who graduated from the USC program between 2012 through 2016. There were five students who were not eligible for the survey because of coursework taken elsewhere and one graduate had passed away. From the 30 responses, five graduates were selected to be interviewed, one from each graduating cohort. The interviewees were given pseudonyms and their identifiable information removed or masked for these findings. Specific information regarding the demographics of the survey and interview participants is provided in the next section.

Interview

The purpose of the follow-up interview was to examine the individual ways in which the USC Price in Sacramento MPA graduates were applying what they learned in the MPA degree program to their current professional work. The interview questions were open-ended to allow the subjects to answer more broadly. The semi-structured interview style was flexible to allow each interview to develop around the experiences of the individual graduate (see Appendix D).

There were a few interview questions that built on the survey questions to assist in getting the interviewees to think about their time during their USC Price in Sacramento MPA studies. By using a retrospective interview question process, consisting of going back to the beginning of their USC Price in Sacramento MPA program experience and moving forward in chronological order, the interviewees were asked to reflect on how their abilities changed and developed over time.

The online survey questionnaire asked respondents to volunteer to be interviewed as a follow-up. Twenty-five of the respondents shared their contact information to be candidates for the interview. From the list of volunteers, one respondent from each year/cohort, or graduating year, was selected for a one-on-one interview. They were also chosen for the breadth of the sectors that they worked in: local government, state government, non-profit, education and private sector. The interviews provided an opportunity to gain deeper knowledge and information from the study participants, with richer detail than what was obtainable through the online surveys. The meetings with the interviewees were set at a time and location that was convenient for them, at a mutually agreed upon date and time. The researcher read through and shared a copy of a consent form (see Appendix A) with the research subject. The locations were quiet enough that the conversations could be audio-recorded without interruption. If they preferred to not be recorded, then handwritten notes were taken. The interviews averaged between 30 minutes to 45 minutes to conduct. If an interviewee wanted to continue the conversation, a follow up meeting (in person or over the phone), or emailed reflections were accepted.

To transcribe the taped interview results, an interview log method was used. The interview log method consisted of listening to each recorded interview in five minute increments

and summarizing the segments with time stamps. Using this approach, only the sections that contained information relevant to the research questions were transcribed, thus saving time and resources on the transcription process.

Artifacts

In order to observe a snapshot in a moment of time, the syllabi from the final capstone course, PPD 546, was used as source material. The USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program does not require a dissertation or thesis paper. Instead, all of the knowledge and skills that are learned throughout the MPA program are applied to the final culminating capstone project. This is a practical assignment where the students are put into working groups and are paired with a real world client with whom they consult.

The language in the curriculum for the capstone course describes the purpose of the course PPD 546 (Spring 2016 syllabus):

The focus overall is on sharpening skills in the professional practice of public administration by putting into action the competencies developed in the core MPA courses. Through your work in the capstone project and other activities, you will demonstrate the abilities that are identified as universal competencies for all accredited schools of public affairs and administration: to lead and manager in public governance; to participate in and contribute to the policy process; to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions; to articulate and apply a public service perspective; to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry.

The syllabus of PPD 546 outline what the MPA program and more broadly what the USC Price School in Sacramento MPA program hopes to provide as insight into the learning

objectives for the students in terms of goals, skills and competencies, both in the course and after graduation. Copies of the syllabi for each class offered at the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program are kept on file, are public information, and readily obtainable.

Data Analysis

Using the various techniques of case study (survey, interviews and artifacts) were used to validate the information collected in this study through triangulation (Merriam, 2009). As a graduate of the USC Price School in Sacramento MPA program and employee of the university at the time of the study. I am positioned in a unique situation where I am both a graduate of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program and I am currently employed by USC in Sacramento. I have support from the administration at USC Price in Sacramento and access to the alumni lists, syllabi, and other administrative documents.

Concerns about selection bias responses should be minimal as the issue was anticipated and minimized. The alumni of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program were prompted to give candid responses. As the study participants have all completed their MPA degree requirements, there is little fear of negative repercussions from USC Price in Sacramento. Among the benefits of the study, the responses from the graduates will assist in making the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program stronger to benefit future students as well as create a reputational benefit for the alumni.

The research conducted in this study was aligned to the reflective practice framework that was established in Chapter Two, following the research of Dewey (1938), Schön (1987) and Rodgers (2002). Dewey (1938) describes reflections as an active, constant consideration of one's actions and their implications. It follows a logical progression from awareness to an

examination of consequences (Cranton, 1992). Rodgers (2002) condenses Dewey's ideas on reflection into four phases that was used for the framework of this study:

1. Presence to experience: perceiving, having an awareness of a situation and not jumping to conclusions when trying to identify or define an issue.
2. Description of experience: stepping back from a situation to see the whole picture, searching for explanations and pulling from previous experiences to understand the issue.
3. Analysis of experience: possibilities are being generating and connections starting to be made at this phase, "a series of intellectual dry runs through the problem/ question and its various conclusions" (Rodgers, 2002, p. 854).
4. Intelligent action/ experimentation: after careful thought, considering actions that are intelligent and different from previous actions.

In analyzing experiences, the practitioner is searching for explanations and pulling from previous experiences to come up with new solutions. Reflection must include action to complete the learning process. Experiencing a problem and developing a response is different from reacting automatically (Dewey, 1938; Rodgers, 2002). As graduates of the MPA degree face new situations and problems, they will go through these steps of reflection - of examining an issue, struggling to work through previous assumptions to come up with a transformed analysis of the experience (Larrivee, 2000).

Reflection serves a larger purpose of transforming thoughts and experiences into meaningful action (Callahan, 2013). It is significant to organizational learning and change. Public administration needs reflective practice in its curricula as it broadens the field of knowledge, brings awareness, and leads to intelligent action (Rodgers, 2002).

The participants of the survey shared that they engage in reflection at various times in their decision-making processes. In the coursework of the MPA, students were asked to apply the theories and concepts they were learning about in the classroom to real world application of the steps outlined by the research of Rodgers (2002) where the students thought back on experiences, analyzed them and created a new plan of action for how to deal with those challenges in the future.

CHAPTER FOUR

FINDINGS

The MPA degree at the University of Southern California, at the time of the study, sought to develop professionals who were able to tackle organizational challenges and unknown public policy issues of the future. This study was conducted to fill a gap in knowledge by surveying and interviewing graduates from USC Price in Sacramento's MPA degree between the years of 2012 and 2016 on their perceptions of how the program helped them with their careers. From the survey and interviews, three themes emerged from the data analysis:

1. The study respondents were using and applying the MPA degree as a tool for professional development and upward career mobility.
2. The three types of coursework that emerged from the analysis of survey and interview data that the respondents cited as the most beneficial for their professional careers were human factor courses: human behavior/ organizational theory, leadership and strategic planning.
3. The respondents demonstrated and shared that they were going through different reflective phases (Rodgers, 2002) and attributed to the MPA degree program improved awareness and ability to think, learn, and develop problem solving skills with reflection.

Research Methods

The study used, as its research methods, an electronic web-based survey and interviews. The electronic web-based survey link was sent to 82 graduates to obtain demographic information and gain insight about the impressions of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program. Thirty responses were received over a two week period, a response rate of 36.6%. From the 30 survey responses, 25 volunteered to be interviewed; from that pool, five individuals

were selected, one from each graduation year for one-on-one interviews. The 45-60 minute interviews allowed for a deeper dive into the graduates' experiences with the MPA degree and reflective practice. All of the information has been coded and pseudonyms used to maintain the confidentiality of the participants.

Findings and Themes

From the analysis of the survey and interviews, there were three main themes that emerged:

Theme 1: Professional mobility – The respondents referred to job promotions, upward mobility and career change 28 times in the survey results. This frequency of response suggested that professional mobility was a major factor in the respondents deciding to pursue an MPA degree and what they hoped to get out of the program.

Theme 2: Impact of human factor coursework – The most frequently cited courses that the respondents recalled using in their current work were human behavior/ organizational development, leadership, and strategic planning. All of these courses center around the human factor, in that they emphasize interpersonal management methods and how they work within groups and organizations.

Theme 3: Reflection as a tactic– While often cited in the survey results, all of the interviewees indicated that the concepts and approaches from these classes were beneficial to their professional growth. The respondents used reflection to look back on their time in the MPA degree program to consider if they would recommend the program to others and strategize ways to ensure professional growth.

The research questions that guided in the development of these themes were:

RQ 1: What are the perceptions of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program alumni regarding the extent to which the MPA degree program prepared them for their careers?

RQ 2: In what ways do USC Price in Sacramento MPA alumni describe their implementation of reflective practice and their decision-making practices in the workplace?

Research question one revealed the themes of professional mobility and impact of the coursework. Research question two revealed the theme of reflection practice.

Analysis of Research Question One

The first research question asked what the perception of the MPA degree program the USC Sacramento graduates held and their thoughts on how it prepared them for their careers. Analysis across the series of questions in the electronic survey and in-person interviews found the themes of career mobility and the impact of the human factor coursework.

Professional Mobility.

The findings from the survey portion of the study reported that many of the respondents were looking to gain the skills, confidence, and professional network to change their career trajectory. The respondents stated that ‘job promotion/ upward mobility’ were the main outcomes they hoped to gain from the MPA program. To these graduates, the value of the MPA was being able to demonstrate the various leadership techniques and skills to their employers and show their value to their organization. Analysis of the responses to the range of four different questions on careers found that upward mobility was a consistent theme expressed in several ways – job change, career, networking, and promotion. Respondents wrote in these terms more than 80% of the survey answers.

“The networking alone has been crucial to my success as a public administrator... I earned a deeper level of understanding around policy setting not just at the state level but at all levels of government.”	Cohort 2012
“It turned my past work experience into advanced, marketable skills and prepared me well for management/leadership.”	Cohort 2013
“Simply put, I do not have the career I do without the networking opportunities afforded me by USC and the MPA program.”	Cohort 2013
“Without the MPA degree I would not have developed the skills and training in association management necessary for my new job title and responsibilities.”	Cohort 2013
“All of the positions that I have gotten to date, have been gotten because I became a Trojan. I would not have the career I have today without USC.”	Cohort 2014
“The degree has opened doors to new opportunities within my current job. Further, the skills I obtained over the course of my education have led me to excel and thus advance in my workplace.”	Cohort 2016

Table 2. Selection of responses regarding professional mobility from the online survey

Table 2 highlights the patterns in the data regarding the graduates’ responses to professional mobility outcomes from the MPA program. In terms of negative responses, there was concern expressed by a few respondents ($n=3$, or 10%), which revolved around external factors such as tuition cost, the return on investment, and the benefits of employment. There was one respondent who could not identify specific benefits to completing the MPA degree “not confident that [she or he] could pinpoint the benefit of an MPA degree.” A different graduate stated that the “MPA is not highly valued in the public sector, many jobs just require a bachelor’s degree.” However, professionals from these sectors continued to enroll in the degree program. Forty-three percent ($n=13$) of the respondents stated that they worked in the public sector (local, state, and federal) while enrolled in the MPA program.

The USC Sacramento MPA program was developed to allow students to continue working full-time while simultaneously pursuing their education. Ninety-six percent ($n=29$) of the respondents were employed either full or part-time while enrolled in the MPA degree. In the words of Graduate A, who graduated in 2012, “I think when you’re working, having work-based learning as well as studying at the same time, that is key. You’re just reinforcing everything you’re learning.” Graduate A shared that she used the MPA to obtain a job that aligned with her values and interests and took on increased leadership responsibilities along the way. Another graduate shared “while in the program, I felt my workplace provided a real-world complement to the academic foundation of the MPA program.” The MPA degree program, according to the literature, may result in multiple outcomes – general skills and knowledge, critical and communication skills, overall personal, intellectual and moral development (King, Britton, & Missik, 1996).

Scholars have identified features of MPA programs as instrumental to the development of public administrators (Janousek, 2017), some of those elements include the program design, course curriculum and program outcomes. The USC MPA degree program was developed with the working professional in mind. Having working professionals in the classroom and making them relate their work experiences to the coursework, was to make them engage in reflective practice regularly throughout the degree program. Reflective practice had the added influence to assist in the growth of purposeful thinking and helped the survey and interview respondents from stagnating in their work, as evidenced by the high number of job changes. Dewey (1938) considered reflection to be that a person was conscious of past events that influence the present, which is what the MPA degree helps the students learn. Public administrators have to deal with issues and challenges that have not been previously dealt with. They cannot rely on past or

present standards, but apply reflective and complex thinking to situations to find solutions to these problems (Bore & Wright, 2009; Larrivee, 2000).

Graduate D graduated from the MPA degree program in 2015 with two job offers and was happy to have a choice in his future. He decided to accept a position where he thought he could move up into different roles. However, he learned that the job kept him isolated in a cubicle “crunching numbers in Excel” all day. Graduate D stated, “I started looking for other ways to advance myself in the healthcare field and understanding what I could do to advance myself.” The student’s desire for upward mobility and potential growth kept him attuned to the job opportunities and what it could provide him in the future. The literature suggests that reflection enables observations of the present into “enriching thought and action” (Miettinen, 2000) and connect concepts into actionable steps (Schön & Rein, 1994) which was evidenced in Graduate D’s desire for professional growth.

Because of the course content in the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree, Graduate D wanted to be able to have a larger impact on the “systems” and help sharpen the decisions that directly impacted the public. He switched jobs after about a year and half after graduation and found the professional satisfaction he was seeking at his position in state government. “I really found [Professor A] and [Professor B’s] classes to be really fascinating so I wanted to do something more in policy, use my writing skills, and maybe see something from a bigger picture.” From the survey responses, one graduate from 2013 wrote, “it turned my past work experience into advanced, marketable skills and prepared me well for management/leadership.” The data, including the selected quotes in Table 2, suggested the significance of the respondent’s acknowledgment of his desire for future professional mobility. As reflective practice is critical

to effective functioning of supporting professionals (Magnuson & Norem, 2002; Strong, 2003), it is also critical in their motivations for choosing the type of work they go into.

After completing the USC Price MPA, 66.7% ($n=20$) of the respondents stated they had changed jobs. The survey did not ask questions about the motivations for moving, or why a third of them had stayed in the same organizations. Ninety-six percent ($n=29$) of the respondents shared that they had held a different position (including within the same organization), at least one time since starting the MPA program. Two respondents shared that they had held as many as seven different positions since starting the degree. This could be an indicator that the MPA degree program helped the graduates with their confidence to ask for new roles or leave their job and seek alternative employment. From the survey results, we cannot tell the motivations behind the changes in positions or if these are promotions or lateral moves, simply that there were changes.

Fifty percent ($n=15$) had been working at their current position for 1-5 years, 43% ($n=13$) were at their job for less than one year, 6% ($n=2$) had been at their current job position for 6-10 years, and no one claimed to be over ten years at the same position. This meant the two respondents who reported that they were at their job for over six years had been working at the same position since before they started the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program and were still there at the time of the study. One of the respondents who shared she or he was in the same job for over six years shared that she or he was working in education as a teacher. She/he wrote “the MPA program gave me the opportunity to sharpen some of the skills I gained in the workplace [qualitative research, reflection, formalized processes for data inquiry and analysis]; these are skills that I continue to use when collaborating with colleagues and meeting with

community stakeholders.” Although this respondent did not change jobs, s/he was able to share development into a more effective professional, using increased skills from the Program.

Coursework Impact.

The USC Price MPA program takes theoretical concepts and applies them practically through the curriculum. The respondents reported that for the most part they were better able to face the “wicked” problems that are associated with public service. As Weschler (1997) wrote, MPA students “become agents of their own learning” (p. 387) by appreciating existing paths, finding new ones, and creating alternate ways.

There were a range of four questions related to the coursework, such as “What skills or lessons do you use from the MPA degree in your workplace?” Across these questions, the most frequent response given was the course on human behavior and organizational theory. The theories and ideas made an impact as evidenced by the frequency with which they mentioned *Human Behavior in Public Organizations* (PPD 545). A core curricular course, PPD 545 taught students how to navigate and manage both organizational and professional relationships. This aligned with the other survey responses, indicating that the “soft skills of navigating and organization,” “change management,” and organizational behavior, development, assessment, and frameworks were important to the graduates.

“I particularly found the human behavior class to be useful in my position as a new supervisor.”	Cohort 2016
“Yes, [the MPA] allowed me to learn about organizational leadership and taught me practical skills to implement as a leader. It also gave me several opportunities for practicing public speaking.”	Cohort 2016

Table 3. Selection of responses regarding coursework impact from online survey

Graduate C completed the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree in 2014 and had been working in professional development training since starting the degree program. At the time of the study, organizational behavior was a major component to getting to the outcomes she was seeking from the program curriculum. Graduate C said that she “constantly utilized what I learned from the classroom to my work projects. I used it to help my clients to reorganize their organizations, understanding behavior, reflect and analyze situations.” She continued, “as a senior leader within my company I have to make decisions on a daily basis that impact my clients, internal staff and citizens [through public policy]. Following my [MPA] degree I was promoted and am in a rewarding career. My confidence with public speaking increased, and many of the OB [organizational behavior] and leadership lessons have been applied to my team.” The data point shows that the respondents were not only using the MPA degree program knowledge practically, but using theories and teaching methods for others. Schön (1983) wrote that practitioners must trust their tacit knowledge as they reflect, and going through the MPA degree helps develop that trust in their knowledge and experiences.

Graduate E was the most recent of the graduates in the set of interviews, having completed the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree in 2016. In her work as a school administrator and teacher at a community college, she said that she had been able to utilize many of the lessons and skills from the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree in both of her places of work. “What I most appreciate however, are the skills that I learned in understanding organizations and implementing – learning how to work well with others and impact productive change or just be a leader amongst my peers.” And that has instilled in her the overall importance of reflection to be a better professional:

“I learned a lot about myself [...] I learned that everybody has their own style, good, bad or indifferent, and sometimes just thinking about who you are in the situation and recognizing you don’t always have to be right, and that sometimes it’s just better to keep the peace and put your head down and get your work done as opposed to causing more problems.”

Across the range of course related questions, the next two most frequently reported skills were leadership and collaboration with colleagues. From the interview results, it appeared that the respondents used strategic planning as a skill for clarify personal, team, or organizational direction. They came away with tangible processes of working with people that they could demonstrate as evidence of learning and use for future growth. Graduate C learned the most from the Los Angeles campus-based strategic planning course. She uses the lessons and readings from this class the most often post degree completion.

Respondents reported wanting to learn about leadership and management skills and they reported that this was one of the main takeaways after program completion. There was one respondent who stated “no, unfortunately” that she or he claimed to utilize nothing from the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program in her or his current position.

Related the most frequent responses were human factors type of issues, such as working with a range of people skills in negotiation, collaboration, explaining decision making. Some of the highlights of the other responses were as follows:

“The political aspects of understanding confluences of interest is very helpful.”	Cohort 2012
“It's hard to summarize, every class I took applies to what I do on a daily basis. I would say that applying reason to my decision making	Cohort 2012

was a key takeaway from my time at USC. We can't do everything for everyone, but ensuring some level of reason is applied to my decision making processes allows me to stand by those decisions when they are brought into question.”	
“Honestly the best lessons were learning to delegate/trust your colleagues and how to make decisions in a more focused and ethical manner.”	Cohort 2013
“There were several exceptionally useful courses, but the top for me was Strategic Planning [in LA], which helped me better focus on how to set and achieve relevant goals, both personally and professionally.”	Cohort 2013
"Strategic plan formation, process improvement, organizational behavior theory and leadership theory are all specific skills that I apply on a continual basis."	Cohort 2015
“I have gained numerous skills that I lacked before. Examples are strategic planning, policy analysis, and overall project management.”	Cohort 2015
“The rigor of the program coupled with the expertise of the professors exposes students to the process involved with making public policy, program analysis, and working with team members to achieve common goals.”	Cohort 2015
“...allowed me to learn about organizational leadership and taught me practical skills to implement as a leader.”	Cohort 2016

Table 4. Selection of responses to what course/themes they took away from the program

Research question one asked how the graduates felt about how the MPA degree program helped prepare them for their careers and Table 4 highlighted the range of responses.

Graduate D credited his first job with strengthening his analytical skills, but like many of the graduate responses to the survey, he was keeping his options open for the next job opportunity and did not want to get pigeon-holed into a specific role. At his position at the time of the study, he had been tasked with increased responsibilities and was asked to give

presentations to various stakeholders. “It makes me feel like I’m using the skills I was hoping to develop. It sounds silly, but it really is the soft skills that I think are helpful, where you’re doing anything more than just number crunching and using your analytical skills. You need critical thinking and analytical skills to do any high-level job.” Schön (1987) stated that problems do not present themselves in well-ordered structures, by focusing on knowledge and experience, those professionals can work through the challenges.

Graduate B who graduated in 2013 was responsible for speaking to and recruiting vendors to attend events and demonstrate their products. He had been learning techniques for how to manage organizations and their different interests. Graduate B shared during the interview that he had been figuring out “how to keep people on task with trying to figure out what they want to do through the year. Because those types of meetings tend to go off the rail very quickly.” When it came time to plan in the internal meetings, Graduate B had been expanding the responsibilities of his job and had recently put together a project proposal to present to the leadership in his organization. He used the lessons from the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program to think through and work out the implementation and marketing strategy.

“We put together a job board... they did not have one on their website before and it just opened up this past week and it's getting a lot of traction so far and I’m particularly proud of that idea because - this is totally going to sound like bragging but – I put together the idea for it, and I put together a marketing strategy, and a way to implement it and I put it together seemingly well enough that when I presented it ... no one had any adjustments to it.”

The proposal was strongly developed, and the leadership decided it was ready for the public without needing any revisions. Graduate B obtained feedback at the front-end of the project, having used a similar strategy in his class work (learning that not communicating with classmates contributed to an unsatisfactory project outcome) and learning about organizational culture and practices, and the views of his stakeholders. The direct strategy of applying skills from the classroom into the workplace gave this graduate the feeling of success and accomplishment.

Graduate D commented on his capstone project, “which is strategic planning, although I’m not using it as much in the moment, but I think that’s one class that I really got a lot out of and want to do more of.” He also stated his lifelong learning strategy; “I know what I need to do, know that if there’s some research over there - grab it, if there’s more research over there - grab it. It may look like Greek right now, but keep reading through it and eventually pieces will come together and it will sort itself.” Graduate D learned in the MPA program through reflection, how to problem solve through challenges. He was able to use the strategies of the MPA degree to move forward and overcome obstacles, as Schön and Rein (1994) shared, one can use reflection to better understand situation and connect concepts into actionable steps to learn, grown and become a more effective leader.

Graduate E was in a challenging situation as she reported to two different supervisors. “My direct boss is in Los Angeles ... but I work with the [local department director] and my direct boss to make decisions for my position which is a unique situation and I think that the MPA has provided me with skills that help me handle that type of interaction.” She reported using strategic planning concepts to manage this reporting situation:

“I have to go through that process to make sure that I am understanding what they are saying. That I know what I’m getting out of the exchange and it’s different because you’re passing it by two different people who sometimes have very different perspectives so it’s really important to have that time to think about the things outside of the moment, and think back on decisions that were made before so you know the precedent and you can kind of avoid further confusion.”

This quote demonstrated how Graduate E directly applied the techniques from class to apply to her unique working situation.

USC Price in Sacramento MPA graduates claim that the most useful information to their professional development was the skills and knowledge in public administration, management and policy. As the findings demonstrate with the professional mobility, the respondents have developed confidence in their abilities to be effective manager, leaders, and reflective practitioners.

Analysis of Research Question Two

The second research question asked how the USC Price Sacramento MPA alumni described their use of reflective practice in the workplace. Analysis across the series of questions in the electronic web-based survey and interviews found the students demonstrated use and reliance on the skill of reflection as a strategy method for professional development.

Reflection as a Tactic.

All the respondents stated that they use reflective practice in their professional work, 90% ($n=27$) “frequently” and 10% ($n=3$) “sometimes.” Ninety-three percent ($n=28$) reported that they remembered using reflective practice while they were students, with only two saying that they

did not remember using reflective practices while they were students. This may be attributed to the inconsistent use of terminology across the USC Price in Sacramento MPA course curricula.

Larrivee (2008) wrote about different levels of reflective practice, which were used in the survey questionnaire to gauge where the respondents self-identified where they most frequently use reflection:

- Pre-reflection: Interpreting situations without thoughtful association to contexts.
- Surface reflection: Examining methods with a focus on how to best achieve objectives.
- Critical reflection: Engaging in ongoing reflection and critical inquiry.

When asked what level of reflection the graduates typically engage, the respondents chose from the above three options, which included the same descriptors. Of the 30 respondents, most ($n=18$) shared that they engage in critical reflection, 33% ($n=11$) stated they engage in surface reflection, and one claimed to use pre-reflection.

“I believe I am better able to think systematically, and I have a foundation of organization knowledge to apply to new situations.”	Cohort 2014
“Reflection, variety of leadership skills and understanding what type of leader, employee and person I am and how to effectively interact with others in all aspect of my life (personal and professional).	Cohort 2016
“The MPA program gave me the opportunity to sharpen some of the skills that I gained in the work place (qualitative research, reflection, formalized processes for data inquiry and analysis); these are the skills that I continue to use when collaborating with colleagues and meeting with community stakeholders.”	Cohort 2016

Table 5. Selection of responses regarding use of reflection post-graduation

The following question was used to clarify how reflective practice was used in the workplace: “when using reflective practice to make decisions regarding your work, where have you found it functions best?” The results were distributed across all possible responses with 33.3% ($n=10$) graduates reporting “at the end,” 30% ($n=9$) reporting “at the beginning of the process,” 20% ($n=6$) reporting “in the moment,” and 16.7% ($n=5$) stating “other” or a combination of all three stages.

“At the beginning of the process” refers to the time when one is trying to assess options before a challenge or problem is addressed. It correlates to how Dewey (1938) first wrote about reflective practice, by taking a moment to pause and consider possible actions and critically evaluating a situation. It is a way of demonstrating learning from previous experiences. “At the end” is reflection-on-action, reflecting and analyzing a situation after it has occurred (Schön, 1983). This was demonstrated in the findings by respondents referring to meetings or debriefs to look back and evaluate a situation or experience and learn from what happened. Questions such as what worked, what did not work, what could be improved help prompt reflective thinking on a past event. “In the moment” reflection is reflection-in-action. Schön (1983) described this as thinking on one’s feet. This was demonstrated by the following: when confronted with a new problem, working to consider what occurred in the past and applying critical thinking to the situation and gaining new knowledge.

The subject matter in the strategic planning courses had the most applicable practices for Graduate B’s work, particularly the assessment post project, of going back and evaluating the best practices and lessons learned, were directly applicable to the task required at work. He reported that he first had to learn from observations, when tasked with coordinating conferences. On one of the first projects that he worked on, there was an issue with attendance.

“The general vibe of the event was that the quality was strong and the event itself was profitable but it was very poorly attended. Because of things that I had taken away from the class, I was able to look at it from a more analytical viewpoint, and try and figure out why I think that people didn’t go, and we were able to narrow it down for a few reasons. One, it was a little bit more expensive than past years. Two, it was in Napa, which is very pretty place it’s difficult to get to, it’s an hour away from any of the closest airports so it was difficult for people in California to get to, it’s difficult for vendors coming from across the country to get to. So we were able to identify what did and didn’t work, and we can’t really account for things like that, for things like the Brexit vote, but we decided that for this year, we would go to Coronado Island, right by San Diego, close to the airport.”

In reflecting on this assessment, he said that in contrast, “cause as I’m getting older, I realize a lot of people just look at something and go “X didn’t work so we’ll try Y instead’ without trying to figure out why X didn’t work and not checking to see why Y might not be a better idea, they just go for a different strategy.” The literature shows that practicing public administrators often face situations and use reflection to think back on past experiences and create new opportunities (Schön, 1983; Weschler, 1997). Eisenhardt (1989) wrote that decision makers that keep pace with change are linked to strong performance. By practicing reflection, the graduates learn how to become better decision makers by learning from past to apply to new challenges.

Other responses to the question of when reflection was used included: “I would say it varies by situation- I have used reflection at the beginning, the end, and in the moment”; “All three! They each serve a different, but beneficial purpose”; and “Throughout the process as more information becomes available.” One interpretation of these “other” responses was that these

respondents were using reflection to connect concepts into actionable steps to learn, grow, and become more effective leaders in their organizations.

The previous two themes of professional mobility and coursework impact, emerge from the alumni reflections on their experience. A majority of the respondents affirmed that they would, or already have, actively let others know about the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program and recommend they look to pursue an MPA degree. Many respondents stated that if others were interested in pursuing a career in public service, then this was a useful and rigorous program.

Graduate A stated that the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree gave her “confidence, knowing that when you see people day in and day out and they see how you act, that it gives you license to take a calculated risk in dealing with a problematic person.” In a relatively new position, Graduate A was learning about the organizational culture of the company. There was a colleague that had a reputation for getting in the way of progress on various projects. The lessons from class on how to manage people and learn to maneuver one’s position within an organization helped Graduate A to be successful in her job despite the problematic colleague. She reported that she used reflection to slow down and “to shake off your emotions so that you can make a rational, logical decision... it’s taking time.” Reflection helped guide her work when her direct supervisor was located at a separate facility and had multiple other roles and responsibilities.

Graduate E’s primary role was as a recruiter, she shared that the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program gave her an understanding of how the various government agencies functioned, how private firms and non-profit organizations worked together, and their general roles and purposes. She was able to expand on her understanding of how government

works at all levels and found that it “has been really helpful in my recruitment and understanding of different policies” when recruiting students who work in policy. Graduate E found she was able to better tailor her message to prospective students because of this understanding. “I work with students and those relationships are primarily relationship based. It’s about quickly making judgments about a person, not in a negative sense, but identifying who they are, where they are coming from, what things make them tick, and then enhancing and highlighting those when I’m pitching the program.”

When approaching the value of leadership lessons instilled from the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program, Graduate A shared that it gave her “maturity” and “self-awareness” to be able to reflect more deeply before taking action, especially when working within the constraints of multiple stakeholder interests and establishing her own reputation each time she relocated to a new organization. Graduate A wanted to make sure that others could rely on her and see her as capable in moving projects forward. The leadership lessons that she used in the workplace include “tak[ing] a leap of faith” and trusting in her past experiences to be able to trust her instincts when making critical decisions.

She recalled in a leadership class, there was an assignment where the students had to reflect and “think about three to five different scenarios and think about the different leadership scenarios, methods that we were learning in class and kind of tease out these kinds of experiences. We had to provide solutions and how we would have reacted in those situations.”

Specifically “learning about what didn’t work and what we could do better and not just change what we’re doing but after it in a way that will work.” Graduate B was sharing how he was utilizing reflective practice within the framework of system improvement at his workplace. He recalls having an unsatisfactory professor for his organization behavior course,

and wondered if he could have gained a better understanding of the course content if he had a different instructor. Graduate B stated, “it’s still surprising to me how, five or six people who generally have similar personalities can see things in very different ways. I don’t think it’s led to any problems over the years, but I just feel like if I had a deeper base on what that class probably would have instilled, then I would have a deeper understanding of how to apply it to the work right now I guess.” As Wills and Clerkin (2009) wrote, without the reflection process, students would “not know how to improve their future transactions or why they did or did not succeed” (p. 255). The respondent demonstrated the importance that learning on a surface level was helpful in observing challenges, but with further study and practice, would have a better understanding for how to deal with the problem.

In spite of that, Graduate B would recommend the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program to others. He said that it taught him how to be a better professional overall and that it could help others from picking up bad habits. “If you are a in a well-running association you’ll be fine, but if you get into the wrong one and learn the wrong strategies, you’re going to be hosed.”

At a new organization and feeling overwhelmed with all of the information, Graduate D shared that the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program helped him “to get over the mental block... I have to focus myself and take each little, think one step at time... being able to say ‘okay, I got this’ being able to understand policy I can read through. I know what I need to do.” When tasked with a new assignment, Graduate D's supervisor told him to seek guidance from a colleague with more experience. He followed this advice, but his colleagues had differing opinions on how to move forward, “so I’m managing people and managing the process. Even though I don’t know what the subject is, learning where your resources are and

what I call ‘levers to pull’ to try to actually try to figure something out. I think every day I get a question that I don’t understand but I know where I can go for research.” Graduate D has the confidence to speak up at his office and said that “I am able to articulate what I want... I’ve gotten more responses from applications than I had before the program.”

Graduate E found the exercises provided a foundation for her second job as a teacher for an introductory communications course. The students were required to give a few presentations throughout the semester. Graduate E implemented a subsequent assignment that had the students reflect on their presentations. After they spoke, they would have to discuss how they felt while presenting and why. It helped the students discover why they were anxious, to be more aware of their actions while they were presenting. Graduate E learned the value of structuring time to think about one’s actions in order to learn and make adjustments for the future. She took time to learn from past experience, make adjustments to create more effective strategies. “I was put in a position to facilitate quite a few conversations between both educators and employers and that was quite a challenge. I would attribute being able to speak diplomatically and be the liaison and facilitate an effective conversation from some of the experiences and tools that we learned through the courses that I took [at USC].”

Graduate E also commented on aspects of program evaluation as a reflective practice:

“I operate and am constantly thinking about what to do next, and who to talk to, where to talk to, where do I need to go, what checklist I need to check, and so reflection for me is the most calming and meaningful type of thinking I can do and you don’t often get time to do it. Because it’s more than just reviewing your day. It’s becoming more aware of what you really gained from an experience or what you got out of your day.”

Ninety-three percent ($n=28$) of the respondents claim that they have influence within their organizations to make decisions or that their actions have an impact on their organization, constituents, and/ or stakeholders in some way. Students who pursue an MPA are often focused on public service and how they can make communities better. USC Price students are already having opportunities to make decisions in their organizations and want to gain more skill and knowledge on how to deal with difficulty situations, peoples, and other challenging dynamics.

CHAPTER FIVE

DISCUSSION

This study assesses the usefulness of the Master of Public Administration (hereafter MPA) curriculum on reflective practice for graduates of the USC Price School in Sacramento campus MPA degree program. The importance of reflective practice in the professional setting was conceptualized in this study following Donald Schön (1983, 1987), John Dewey (1938), and John Mezirow (1998). A review of the literature outlines the value of reflective practice for professionals and their development as leaders (Dewey, 1938; Schön, 1983; Mezirow, 1998) as well as for MPA programs across the United States tout their ability to create effective leaders. The accrediting body for MPA degree program, the Network of Schools of Public Policy Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), has included reflective practice as an integral part of the learning outcomes for students in accredited MPA programs. As Schön (1983) notes, when reflective practice is taught well, the activity becomes implicit, so the research challenge is how to find and then unpack that implicit knowledge.

This study researches the role of reflective practice in professional decision-making for MPA degree graduates from the USC Price in Sacramento. The focus for this study were the following two questions: does the MPA degree teach reflective practice?; and do alumni practice reflective practice? The study design assesses the application of the MPA in Sacramento in professional setting surveying how MPA graduates were using reflective practice and its role in their decision-making processes. The study was designed to clarify the strengths and weaknesses of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program specifically in relation to reflective practice.

At the time that this study was conducted, there had been no post graduate surveys conducted with the graduates of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA program. There are two reasons that this study was timely and relevant: (1) USC Price in Sacramento is facing a changing labor market and (2) there is increased choice in the region with more MPA degrees offered in the classroom by local universities and more online programs offered nationally by a wide range of universities. This study addresses a gap in the available information on MPA graduates applying classroom lessons after completing the degree program.

The study design consisted of two elements: an online survey of graduates from 2012-2016, and in-depth, follow-up interviews with five individuals, with one individual purposively drawn from each cohort. The survey was restricted to the last five years of graduates in order to maintain consistency with similarity to program leadership and curriculum trends. As a retrospective study design, this study relied on the participants to remember and to be able to articulate their changes in practice they experienced entering the MPA degree program and after completion. Interviews comprised the second element in the study design. More generally, qualitative inquiry, which “focuses on meaning in context, requires a data collection instrument that is sensitive to underlying significance when gathering and interpreting data” (Merriam, 2009, p. 19). Care was taken to use terminology that could bridge the five cohorts, with similar meaning to different graduates in differing year in order to collect meaningful data to be analyzed.

Implications

One implication of the research is that MPA graduates from the program work full-time, with the survey finding that 29 out of 30 participants were employed either full or part-time while enrolled in the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program. The full-time employment is significant because while simultaneously attending school was how the school

was developed and designed to be an impactful model, and it is working. By applying the lessons in the classroom to the workplace and the experiences from the workplace to the theories in class strengthen the experiences for the students. And it offers a context of a professional setting for reflections in that the graduates have an understanding of reflective practice in order to problem solve challenges in their organizations. As the literature states, problems do not appear in the real world as a “well-formed structure” (Schön, 1987, p. 4) and the graduates are utilizing reflective practice in order to work out the processes they need to tackle these complicated challenges. Without reflection, the graduates would not know how to improve for the future when the next problem arises (Wills & Clerkin, 2009).

The implications of the responses as positive and favorable on the perception of usefulness of the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree: (1) better management and leadership skills, (2) better/higher paying job, and (3) networking are that graduate focus on the tangible in contrast to abstract benefits of their MPA degree. These are all exterior facing, interpersonal skills or outcomes suggesting the difficulty of unpacking an interior facing skill, intrapersonal, which is inherent in reflective practice. The question then becomes does reflective practice link to these exterior, interpersonal skills. The implications of the responses to the lessons learned applied in the workplace question, continue with interpersonal skills. The most frequent response given was human and organizational behavior. The next two most frequently reported skills that the respondents reported learning in the USC Price in Sacramento MPA degree program were leadership and collaboration with colleagues.

The implications of the responses on reflective practice suggest the pervasiveness in students’ degree work with 28 of 30 respondents reporting that they remembered using reflective practices while they were students, with only two saying that they did not remember using

reflective practices while they were students. The implications of the distribution of the results are important to note as 100% of the graduates reported that they use reflection in their professional setting. They shared that they are able to “think systematically,” “make decisions in a more focused and ethical manner,” and “effectively interact with others.” As the research of Hammer and Stanton (1997) and Larrivee (2008) verify, reflective practice ranges from analyzing a single aspect of a lesson to considering the ethical, social and political aspects of practice. The results were distributed across all possible responses with ten graduates reporting “at the end,” nine reporting “at the beginning of the process,” six reporting “in the moment,” and five stating “other” or a combination of all three stages. There were concerns raised by respondents, regarding the return on investment and the cost of the degree.

Following the completion of the online survey, interviews were conducted over the span of a few weeks in the spring of 2017. The interviews functioned as essentially case studies. This qualitative study method allowed for more context and nuanced information than from the survey answers alone (Merriam, 2009). The implications of the five interviews is that the graduates are using the degree program and the lessons taught in the classroom for career mobility. The graduates shared in their remarks that they use reflective practice as a technique to demonstrate proficiency in their roles. Another implication of the research was finding a number of respondents reporting on leadership and strategy as skills. These might be connected to reflective practice in a way not fully captured in the research design.

From these implications, there are a few recommendations for the future research on this subject matter. One option is to recommend to NASPAA, the accrediting agency for schools of public administration, to develop a sample of MPA degree programs to survey alumni with these questions on reflective practice. NASPAA could consider reflective practice as part of the

competencies for programs to consider incorporating into their curricula. For the USC MPA program, a similar survey could be given to the graduates of the MPA at the Los Angeles campus or the online modality.

Another recommendation would be to develop a survey of MPA directors to request their curricular design and learn how many programs explicitly teach reflective practice. Interview a set of non-MPA graduates working in California state government to consider a comparative study between the populations. The final recommendation would be to develop a research instrument to survey the direct reports of future respondents who indicate a use of reflective practice to consider how and if this impacts those reporting to be a self-described reflective practitioner.

Future Research

These results suggest that reflective practice is used by graduates in their efforts to problem solve and to move upward in their careers. Future research could apply the study design to other programs, to explore potential ways to deepen understanding of Schön's questions. The following are possible study designs for confirming and expanding on the results reported in this study. Essentially, the study design offers the potential to develop comparative analysis across locations, levels of government, career professions, and internationally.

- Method follow-up. Using the same methods as this study, electronic survey and selected interviews, applied to a larger respondent pool across more cohorts.
- Expanded survey collection and methodology. Allow comparisons across the different locations where the MPA degree is taught (Los Angeles, Sacramento, online) and see if there are changes across time in different cohorts in these different degree modalities.

- Use these results as a baseline study to understand what changes, if any, the students go through during the degree program, to ascertain how students in the MPA program learn and retain reflective practice.
- Compare different practices across MPA graduates in levels of governments, local, county, special districts, state and federal agencies and across different types of public agencies.

This study and further research offer great potential for deepening understanding of how public-sector professionals with MPA degrees engage in reflective practice.

Limitations of Survey

There are limitations to the findings of this study. The highest response rates to the online survey were the cohorts from 2012 and 2016. There may have been an implicit or social-desirability bias towards the researcher, as I was classmates with the cohort of 2012. It was also an example of convenience sampling; the survey was not anonymous in the respect that all of the research subjects knew the researcher of the study. All conclusions of the findings are suggestive and not definitive. The subjects were queued into thinking about reflective practice in the context of their time in the MPA program, but the term may have slightly varied meanings to different people.

There may be a selection bias issue, with those respondents who answered the survey potentially more likely to be reflective than those who did not reply to the survey invitation. In effect, that reflective practitioners are more likely to respond to a survey that asks them to reflect than those who are not as engaged in reflective practices and therefore less likely to respond to an instrument calling for their reflections. There are limits to cross sectional data responses in one point of time, not capturing any changes in the degree program material or delivery, as well

as potential differences in recruitment of students across different years. Finally, as this is only one degree program, at one location, there are significant limits on the generalizability across even the same degree program at USC delivered in Los Angeles, as well as with the other MPA degree programs nationally.

Concluding Thoughts

As an MPA graduate from the USC Price School, this study has a personal connection to me. There are anecdotal experiences about the student and alumni experience but surveys on alumni or students have not been conducted to find out what is going on from the perspective of the student. What the research findings concluded, mostly aligned with what I thought would be the benefits and drawbacks to the master's degree.

In completing the research, I was surprised by the extent to which the graduates used the degree program and reflective practice to gain a new job or promotion. Previously I had thought the degree in and of itself was what propelled the graduates forward in their careers, along with the alumni network. I learned that there are a handful of courses from the degree program that resonated with the graduates due to their ability to demonstrate certain skills and techniques. I learned that there are many students who change positions multiple times after completing the MPA degree, but that the career trajectories of the graduates is going exactly where they want to go. There were no responses that indicated they were unhappy with the work they were able to position themselves into.

This research provides the opportunity to apply the research design to other MPA programs nationally, as well as internationally for comparative and cross-cultural comparisons. As researchers like Janousek (2017) theorize, “university-based MPA programs may offer substantive educational and assistive contributions to the development, enhancement, and

utilization of professional public administration within their geographic regions,” (p. 606). With my fluency in Japanese language, and familiarity with the culture, I am looking to adapt this to a study design of the MPA equivalent type of program at a university in Japan and compare the results internationally.

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Appendix A
Consent Form

Consent for Participation in Interview Research

I volunteer to participate in a research project conducted by Juliet Lee from the University of Southern California. I understand that the project is designed to gather information about reflective practice and the Master of Public Administration degree. I will be one of a few people being interviewed for this research.

1. My participation in this project is voluntary. I understand that I will not be paid for my participation. I may withdraw and discontinue participation at any time without penalty. If I decline to participate or withdraw from the study, no one on my campus will be told.

2. I understand that most interviewees will find the discussion interesting and thought-provoking. If, however, I feel uncomfortable in any way during the interview session, I have the right to decline to answer any question or to end the interview.

3. Participation involves being interviewed by a researcher from the University of Southern California. The interview will last approximately 30-45 minutes. Notes will be written during the interview. An audio tape of the interview and subsequent transcript will be made. If I don't want to be taped, I will not be able to participate in the study.

4. I understand that the researcher will not identify me by name in any reports using information obtained from this interview, and that my confidentiality as a participant in this study will remain secure. Subsequent uses of records and data will be subject to standard data use policies which protect the anonymity of individuals and institutions.

5. Faculty and administrators from my campus will neither be present at the interview nor have access to raw notes or transcripts. This precaution will prevent my individual comments from having any negative repercussions.

6. I understand that this research study has been reviewed and approved by the Institutional Review Board (IRB) for Studies Involving Human Subjects: Behavioral Sciences Committee at the Century University. For research problems or questions regarding subjects, the Institutional Review Board may be contacted through [information of the contact person at IRB office of University of Southern California].

7. I have read and understand the explanation provided to me. I have had all my questions answered to my satisfaction, and I voluntarily agree to participate in this study.

8. I have been given a copy of this consent form.

Signature

Date

Printed Name

Signature of the Investigator

For further information, please contact:

Juliet Lee at juliet.lee@usc.edu or (916) 637-8972

Appendix B
Email Request to Graduates

Date: February 9, 2017
Subject: Assistance with Dissertation

Dear [Name],

I am currently a doctoral student in the Rossier School of Education at USC and am conducting a research study as part of the dissertation process under the instruction of Dr. Paula Carbone.

As a graduate from the Sacramento MPA program, I would like to request your participation in one online survey taking up to 15 minutes.

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your identity will remain confidential at all times. Your relationship with USC will not be affected whether or not you participate in this study.

If you have questions, please contact me via email or phone: juliet.lee@usc.edu or (916) 637-8972.

Thank you for your consideration.

Juliet Lee
University of Southern California

You may access the survey at the following link: <https://goo.gl/forms/vkHfbwYrOxEfjdih1>

If you have a problem accessing the survey (created on Google Forms), I will send the questions in a PDF form.

Date of preparation: February 2017

UPIRB #: UP-17-00066

Date: February 23, 2017

Subject: RE: Assistance with Dissertation

Dear [Name],

I would like to thank everyone who has responded to my research study! The results have been encouraging but I am still hoping to get a few more responses. If you have not had a chance to complete the questionnaire, the survey will be open until the end of next week. It should take no longer than 15 minutes to complete: <https://goo.gl/forms/vkHfbwYrOxEfjdih1>

Participation in this study is entirely voluntary. Your identity will remain confidential at all times. Your relationship with USC will not be affected whether or not you participate in this study.

If you have questions, feel free to contact me at juliet.lee@usc.edu or (916) 637-8972.

Thank you for your consideration.

Best,

Juliet Lee
University of Southern California
(916) 637-8972
juliet.lee@usc.edu

You may access the survey at the following link: <https://goo.gl/forms/vkHfbwYrOxEfjdih1>

If you have a problem accessing the survey (created on Google Forms), I will send the questions in a PDF form.

Date of preparation: February 2017

UPIRB #: UP-17-00066

Appendix C
Survey Instrument



Rossier School of Education, 3470 Trousdale Parkway, Los Angeles, CA 90089

INFORMATION SHEET

**STUDY TITLE: REFLECTIVE PRACTICE AND THE MASTER OF PUBLIC
ADMINISTRATION DEGREE**

You are invited to participate in a research study. Research studies include only people who voluntarily choose to take part. This document explains information about this study. You should ask questions about anything that is unclear to you.

PURPOSE OF THE STUDY

This research study aims to understand how the Master of Public Administration degree prepares its graduates to be effective decision makers through reflective practice.

PARTICIPANT INVOLVEMENT

If you agree to take part in this study, you will be asked to complete an online survey which is anticipated to take about 10 minutes. Please complete all questions to the best of your ability, all responses will remain confidential. The last question of the survey will ask you are willing to participate in a follow-up interview that will ask you to expand on your experience with reflective practice. The interview will ask about your personal experiences with reflective practice and how you are utilizing the skills in your work. The interview will be recorded with your permission, for accuracy of data collected and will last approximately 30 to 45 minutes.

CONFIDENTIALITY

Any identifiable information obtained in connection with this study will remain confidential. Your responses will be coded with a false name (pseudonym) and maintained separately. The audio files will be destroyed once they have been transcribed. The data will be stored on a password protected computer in the researcher's office for three years after the study has been completed and then destroyed. When the results of the research are published or discussed in conferences, no identifiable information will be used.

The members of the research team and the University of Southern California's Human Subjects Protection Program (HSPP) may access the data. The HSPP reviews and monitors research studies to protect the rights and welfare of research subjects.

INVESTIGATOR CONTACT INFORMATION

Principle investigator/ researcher, Juliet Lee at (916) 637-8972 or juliet.lee@usc.edu

IRB CONTACT INFORMATION

University Park Institutional Review Board (UPIRB), 3720 South Flower Street #301, Los Angeles, CA 90089-0702, (213)821-5272 or upirb@usc.edu



What year did you graduate from the Sacramento campus? *

- 2012
- 2013
- 2014
- 2015
- 2016

How long did it take you to complete the MPA degree?

- Less than 2 years
- 2 years
- More than 2 years

Did you specialize in any focus area?

- Healthcare
- Leadership
- Non-Profit
- Public Policy
- None
- Other :

Were you employed while earning your degree?

- Yes, full-time
 Yes, part-time
 No

If you answered "yes" to Q. 4, what sector were you employed in while earning your MPA?

- Public - local
 Public - state
 Public - federal
 Private
 Non-profit
 Other :

How long have you been in your current position?

Less than 1 year

- 1 - 5 years
 6 - 10 years
 Over 10 years
 Other :

Since completing your MPA degree, have you changed jobs?

- Yes
 No
 Other :

How many different positions have you held since starting the MPA degree?

Choose

Thinking back to when you were enrolled in the MPA program, do you recall assignments or exercises that required you to use reflection?

Yes

No

Other :

Are you in a position where you make decisions that have an impact on your organization/ constituents/ stakeholders?

Yes

No

Other :

How often do you reflect on situations, individually or with colleagues during work?

Every day

Occasionally: a few times a month

Rarely: a few times a year

Never

When using reflective practice to make decisions regarding your work, where have you found it functions best?

- At the beginning of the process, when I am trying to assess options.
- At the end of the process, when I am trying to sort through the information and analyze the process.
- In the moment, as situations arise.
- Other :

In which level of reflection do you typically engage?

- Pre-reflection: Interpreting situations without thoughtful association to other contexts.
- Surface reflection: Examining methods with a focus on how to best achieve objectives.
- Critical reflection: Engaging in ongoing reflection and critical inquiry.

What did you hope to get out for the MPA program?

Your answer

What skills or lessons do you use from the MPA degree in your workplace?

Your answer

Overall, have you found the MPA degree to be beneficial to your professional development?

Your answer

Would you recommend others to pursue an MPA? Please explain.

Your answer

Are you willing to be contacted for a follow-up interview related to this study?

Yes

No

If you answered "Yes" above, please provide your contact information: name, email, phone number.

Your answer

SUBMIT

Never submit passwords through Google Forms.

Appendix D
Interview Protocol

Time of Interview	
Date	
Place	
Interviewer	
Interviewee	
Title/ Organization	

Introduction

Thank you for agreeing to participate in my study. I am a doctoral student at the University of Southern California working on my dissertation and studying the Master of Public Administration degree and its applicability to the workplace through the framework of reflective practice. As a graduate of the program, I would like to hear about your thoughts and experiences during your time at USC and after. The interview should take about 30 to 40 minutes and will not exceed an hour. Does that timing work for you?

I am strictly functioning as a researcher today. I am not evaluating or making judgements on what you share with me. The answers from everyone that I interview, which will be three to four subjects, will be combined in the final report. Nothing you say will ever be identified with you personally.

As we go through the interview, if you have any questions about why I am asking something, please feel free to ask. Or if there is anything you do not want to answer, just say so. The purpose of this interview is to get your insights into the MPA degree and if you are using any of the lessons or skills taught when you face work challenges.

I have brought a recorder with me today so that I can accurately capture what you share with me. May I have your permission to record our conversation? If at any time during the interview you wish to discontinue the use of the recorder or the interview itself, please let me know. At this time, I would like to remind you of your written consent to participate in this study. I am the responsible investigator. You and I have both signed and dated each copy, certifying that we agree to continue this interview. You will receive one copy and I will keep the other separate from your reported responses.

Your participation in this interview is completely voluntary. If at any time you need to stop or take a break, just let me know. You may withdraw your participation at any time without consequence. Do you have any questions before we begin? [Answer questions if needed]. With your permission we will now begin the interview. [Turn on the recorder].

Interview Questions

1. Tell me about yourself: when did you complete the MPA degree at USC, what was your occupation at the time and what are you doing now?
2. What did you hope to get out of the MPA program? (promotion, change sectors, skills, networking, other goal?)
3. To what extent do you feel the MPA prepared you for your current career?
 - a. What is your typical work day/ week like, who do you interact with -both within your organization and external constituents?
4. What kind of challenges do face on a regular basis?
5. Could you describe a time where you felt successful after dealing with a challenge?
 - a. Would you attribute any of that success to what you learned in the MPA program?
6. How are you applying the lessons learned from the program to the workplace?
7. Have you been able to problem solve situations using those skills?
8. How do you define reflection?
9. Describe how you use reflection at your current work.
10. In your opinion, would you say that having an MPA degree has helping you at your current job or on your career trajectory?
11. What do you think was missing from the MPA curriculum, were there any gaps in your education that you wish were covered?
12. Do you think it's necessary to have an MPA degree? Would you recommend the MPA to others?
13. Is there anything that you would like to add that we did not cover?

Closing

Thank you for participating in this interview. Please be assured that I will hold all responses confidential. Should I have any further questions regarding your interview responses or experiences, may I contact you for a follow-up interview?

Alignment of Instrument and Protocol to Research Questions

Research Question	Survey Questions	Interview Questions
1. What are the perceptions of the Sacramento Master of Public Administration alumni regarding the extent to which the degree program prepared them for their career?	10, 14, 15, 16	2, 3, 10
2. In what ways do MPA alumni describe their implementation of reflective practice and their decision making practices in the workplace?	9, 11, 12, 13	4, 5, 6, 9