Wicked Problems in Public Administration: How I Changed Directions and You Can Too
Career snapshot

- Branch librarian, Virginia Beach Public Library
- Original catalog librarian, Michigan State University
- Science librarian, Collection Access Services, Old Dominion University
- Reader Services Chief, Joint Forces Staff College
- Chief Librarian, Joint Forces Staff College
- Adjunct faculty, School of Public Service, ODU
Combining research skills and teaching interests

- So, why not go back to school at the age of 49!
- Instead of being a generalist, work toward being a specialist
- Refocus Department of Defense education experience into the broader public administration sector
- Pitch a course, and then another
Totally unexpected consequences

- Two opportunities to lecture in Russia as a guest of the U.S. Embassy in Moscow
- Nishnii Novgorod, Moscow, St. Petersburg, Ekaterinburg
- Civic engagement, public art
- Oral history
Background and Course Inspiration

- Exposure to “wicked problem” analysis at the operational level of war planning

- Personal experience:
  - Sea level rise: Land subsidence (depletion of aquifer) and rising sea levels
  - Plight of those experiencing homelessness
  - Very low turnout in local elections (10% or less)
Sea level rise and ground subsidence

Backyard, pre-rain garden
Briefly: Rittel and Webber

“Planning problems - societal problems - are inherently different...” Ten distinguishing properties:

- No definitive formulation; no stopping rule; solutions not true or false, but good or bad; no immediate/ultimate test of solution; every solution a “one-shot operation;” no set of potential solutions; each is essentially unique; symptom of another problem; discrepancies can be explained in multiple ways; planner has no right to be wrong.

Briefly: Weber and Khademian

- Effective management includes the transfer, receipt, and integration of knowledge across participants (This is what we do as information specialists!)
- Unstructured: Consensus hard to achieve; unanticipated consequences; causes and effects hard to pinpoint
- Cross-cutting: Multiple perspectives & stakeholders, interdependence, politically/socially complex
- Relentless: No ‘finish’ line, no long-term solution

Course Organization: Modules 1 - 6

- Theory (two weeks)
- Sea Level Rise
- Disaster Planning
- Public Participation in Government
- Environmental Justice
- Homelessness, Affordable Housing, Poverty (two weeks)
Affordable Housing, Norfolk, VA

- Population: 246,000
- At or below poverty rate: 19%
- About 20,000 affordable housing units available

Source: https://www.norfolk.gov/DocumentCenter/View/30139
A Very Complex Problem

- Poverty
- Working poor
- Living wage jobs
- Mental illness, PTSD, etc.
- Homelessness
- Affordable housing

Sleeping on a stoop in New York City, 8th Avenue & 23rd Street, 2018
Course Organization: Modules 7 - 11

- Immigration, Trafficking, Refugees
- Opioids, Methamphetamine
- Community Policing
- Mass Incarceration
- Food Insecurity, Food Deserts
Introductions, Standards of Conduct

- First discussion board: Narrated introductions
- Experience with complex social problems
- Sector experience; previous graduate degrees; undergraduate major
- Course expectations; topic sensitivity guidelines
- Setting the stage with gun control
Recurring Assignments and Extra Credit

- Discussion boards - 11 total - 15% of grade
  - Hurricane Katrina
  - Sanctuary cities
  - OxyContin

- Reflective essays
  - Six, lowest grade dropped
  - 25% of grade

- Extra credit
Mid-term exam and final project - 30% each

Mid-term exam: Fairly traditional, covering theory and the first five modules.
Final exam: Each student selects a wicked problem not covered during the semester and analyzes it (Cyber security, bullying, fast fashion, domestic terrorism)

Peck Iron and Metal Superfund Site, Portsmouth, Virginia. 33 acres bordering a tidal tributary, Paradise Creek. Elevated levels of lead, PCBs, arsenic.

In Lieu of Expert Speakers

- Podcasts
- TED Talks
- Frontline (PBS) documentaries
- U.S. Government (EPA) case study (DVD) Spartanburg, SC citizen scientist
- Canadian Broadcasting Corporation documentary on opioids
- Instructor’s narrated presentations
Lessons Learned

- F2F discussion in class and discussion online are very different!
  - Time on topic; focus on one aspect of topic (online) vs. more wide-ranging in classroom; eloquence (or not) online; introvert-friendly online; deeper “dives” into topic

- Instructor presence in discussions

- Web links; YouTube
Lessons Learned

- Library research and required readings; tailored LibGuide; wonderful partner librarian

- Instructor feedback to students: Reflections, discussion board posts, other graded assignments

Habitat restoration, Norfolk, Virginia
Summary

- Methodical, iterative
- Flexibility and spontaneity
- Discussion boards
- Student expertise varies
- Honest reactions (sad)

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Final thoughts

- Get out of your lane!
- Consider taking free courses that your agency offers.
- Stop being a resident of your community, be a real citizen.
  - It’s not enough to vote in national elections
  - Volunteer, participate, get involved
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Community Policing

Timeline for Course Production

- Months 1 - 2:
  - Pre-planning (faculty developer and instructional designer meet once or twice, discuss terminology, purpose of course)
  - Frequent F2F meetings (bi-weekly)
  - Course design analysis
    - Objectives
    - Assessment methods
    - Course outlines; copyright issues; graphics
  - Build course prototype (first three modules - theory; sea-level rise; disaster planning)
Timeline for Course Production

- Months 3 - 6:
  - Meetings (Every 3-4 weeks)
  - Faculty developer continues module preparation
  - Passes modules to instructional designer
  - Designer analyzes & clarifies
  - Designer & team build modules in Blackboard
Timeline for Course Production

- Course Wrap-up: Month 7
  - One or two final meetings
  - Studio sessions to video lectures for each module
  - Faculty developer reviews materials, completes quality assurance, and signs off on course
  - Completion of instructor guide
  - Publish course to CMS (Blackboard)
  - Open course to students
  - Celebrate!!
Instructional Design Partnership

- *Foundational Strategies for Effective Online Teaching* - a six-week course “suggested” for all new course developers at ODU

- Simulates an online learning community

- Weekly mini-tutorials

- Assignment of Instructional Designer (Dr. Kayla Jiang)

- Always focused on the six-month timeline (I did not meet the deadline)
Design and Prototype

- This aspect was the most challenging
- Analysis of face-to-face course in detail and translation to online
- Development of course design matrix
- Linking course objectives to module objectives, activities, assessment methods
- Writing module overviews and summaries; developing rubrics
- Estimating student workload requirements
- Review, revision; quality assurance
A Forbidden Word…and Bloom

- Why can’t I use the word “understand?”

- Module objectives: Calculate, inventory, construct, categorize, formulate, design, differentiate, identify.

- Using Bloom’s Taxonomy*
  - Analysis: Diagram existing examples of environmental justice sites in [region].
  - Synthesis: Construct a notional cross-sector/cross-boundary team charged with reducing the impact of street flooding during “normal” rain events

*The original taxonomy, 1956