

GET ON THE BUS!

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In this article, the author conducted preliminary research on public transportation systems in four countries to aid in the development of a Comparative Public Administration course. The four countries (Canada, Mexico, the United Kingdom and South Africa) each offer unique challenges regarding mass transit. Increasing investment in mass public transit is vital to controlling urban pollution, reducing dependency on foreign oil, and reducing traffic congestion. Additionally, the article looks at the use of sabbaticals as a tool for researchers, both as a method for revitalizing professionals in the academic world and as a way to encourage research on subjects which may be less well-funded. The research will be incorporated into the course as an example of the kinds of research the students can do themselves, regardless of area of interest.

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INTRODUCTION

Let me start by saying that I am not a comparativist by training; therefore I had no background in how to conduct a comparative public administration study. But, by a happy set of circumstances, I wanted a one semester sabbatical and our department needed such a course. The plan of study that I eventually embarked on can be easily adapted to many different disciplines.

IMPORTANCE OF SABBATICALS IN ACADEMIA

Why use a sabbatical to develop a course? Sabbaticals are a vital, necessary component of today's academic world which allows members of university faculties to perform their duties with enthusiasm, creativity and drive. The benefits of a sabbatical go far beyond the professor and extend to the students, who will reap the rewards of the faculty member's



new knowledge and who will pick up on the professor's renewed enthusiasm. The university benefits from having faculty members who are excited about their fields and who may be able to bring in more publicity and students based on their research. Academia in general benefits from the increase in information and the new areas of research to be explored.

For some professors, once a highly-sought tenure position is achieved, their willingness to step outside of their comfortable boundaries to learn new techniques and information becomes severely curtailed due to an unwillingness to jeopardize their position, or due to a lack of a need to do more than the minimum to maintain their current status (Carr & Tang, 2005). The problem with this is, however, that their knowledge stagnates relatively quickly and less than four years after their own college graduations, as much as half of their knowledge becomes "obsolete" due to rapidly changing trends and new developments in their fields of study. At this point, it becomes absolutely necessary for the educator to engage in some form of academic update in order to remain abreast of the latest trends in their fields; failure to engage in some sort of continuing education, such as a sabbatical could potentially result in teaching outdated, useless material (Carr & Tang, 2005; Sima, 2000).

In areas of research where grants are difficult to obtain, sabbaticals offer faculty a niche opportunity to engage in research that is of personal interest, but may be difficult to find outside funding for due to lack of broader public interest (Sima, 2000). Beyond this, being freed of the day-to-day grind of teaching allows the faculty member to step out of familiar formulas and develop new curricula or overhaul existing classes to better engage student interest (Sima, 2000).

Beyond this, however, are other more intangible benefits. Employees who participate in sabbatical programs say they feel a renewal of commitment and purpose in their work (Carr & Tang, 2005; Benshoff & Spruill, 2002). In one study of general practitioners of medicine who took sabbaticals, 14 percent reported a reduction in burning out on the job, 29 percent reported improved management skills, 27 percent said they improved knowledge in areas of specialization, and 43 percent stated that their personal confidence and levels of self-satisfaction increased because of the sabbatical (Hutchins et. al., 2005).

Another study of educators who participated in sabbaticals reported that 62 percent of respondents found academic benefit in sabbatical leave, 33 percent found the time to be rejuvenating and 51 percent found themselves to be more motivated as employees (Benshoff & Spruill, 2002). Beyond this, people who participate in sabbatical leave say they

come back feeling refreshed and invigorated, and ready to get back to work (Neil, 2003; Sima, 2000). Private companies report that offering a regular sabbatical opportunity is one of the ways they are able to recruit – and retain – better employees (Plummer, 1989).

PLANNING AND PREPARING FOR THE SABBATICAL

In order to complete my research within the sabbatical timeframe, I decided to study a specific and narrow aspect of public administration and use the sabbatical time to travel to a few foreign countries for some first hand experience. First, I had to focus on a specific area. I needed something that most countries had. I needed something that would be accessible to an outsider. I also needed to research a topic that I had at least a basic understanding of.

Choosing an Area to Research

Public transportation met all those conditions – with the addition of also being something that the United States struggles with. Public transportation is vital to successful economic sustainability: people need to get to work. Public transportation is also necessary to reduce reliance on foreign oil, to improve air quality in urban centers, to reduce traffic congestion, and to encourage greater tourist usage. Today, public transportation is more important than ever. Due to an increase in gas prices, motorists are cutting back on the amount of driving they're doing. Crude oil production has remained largely consistent since the 1970s, yet due to global industrial booms, more people are relying on the same amount of oil. China alone has nearly double the amount of oil use as the United States (Sachs, 2008).

Most city planning today includes a component of public transportation. Some experts say that the key to long-lasting and efficient transportation is to work public transportation into the design of the city (Farrell, 2008). In the United Kingdom, an excess in traffic in major cities has caused legislators there to enact a "congestion charge" – a fee charged to commuters, which would help fund updated buses, tramlines and metros while reducing the number of individual cars on the road (Wolmar, 2008). An investment in public transportation could easily address many of the problems facing cities today, including congested roads, high levels of smog, and workers whose wages barely pay enough to fill up their gas tanks to get them to and from their jobs. Former labor

secretary Robert Reich even suggests that through investing in public transportation, the economy could be stimulated by encouraging people to keep their jobs (Reich, 2008).

After developing a plan of study, my research plan consisted of scheduled interviews with government officials concerned with public transportation at whatever level I could gain access, personal experience with the actual public transportation available – riding the buses, trains, light rail, and trolleys – collecting public documents, and talking to users of public transportation in each country I visited. In some places, this plan worked better than in other places.

My next challenge was coming up with a list of possible countries to visit. I wanted one more similarity: capital cities. Two challenges immediately presented themselves: lack of language skills and lack of financial resources.

Funding

I managed to cobble together several thousand dollars from a variety of sources – not enough to cover all the expenses, but enough to cover the airfare to four countries. The travel funds I was able to access consisted of \$1000 from my department's e-course funds¹, \$1500 from my own MPA (Master of Public Administration) funds, and \$1500 from another state institution with which we have a joint MPA program. In addition, I received \$2000 from a summer research grant that I used to offset the costs of travel. I will also receive \$4000 from Marshall University for development of an e-course once I offer the class. I came up with a list of eight or nine countries that were either affordable or English speaking.

Deciding Where to Go and Who to Talk To

Now what? Having led a somewhat sheltered life, I don't actually know anyone in a foreign country. Thank goodness for the Internet. A quick search turned up a number of institutions of higher learning in each place – all with a public administration or political science department, and email addresses of their professors. I composed an email explaining who I was and my interest in visiting their country. The assistance that I solicited was minimal: a point of contact, help with contact information on government officials concerned with public transportation and hotel recommendations.

Based on my areas of interest as well as some of my practical limitations, I created a list of countries I wanted to take a closer look at.

From a list of ten countries, I narrowed it down to Canada, South Africa, the United Kingdom and Mexico. My original plan also included France and South Korea, which were eventually dropped from the list of potential countries to visit. My emails to professors at a variety of different institutions in France were either ignored or I received a return email indicating an inability to help me. It seems that every person who professed a willingness to help me were, unfortunately, going to be out of town during my visit – regardless of which dates I indicated I would be in Paris. The problems with South Korea were similar, but less maddening. My email was forwarded on to this person and that, with each successive stop engendering more heartfelt apologies, but no offer of actual assistance.

THE RESEARCH

Each of the countries I ended up visiting offered different challenges, from language barriers to the most basic problems to getting solid information while in country. Once I was able to overcome any problems I happened to be having, it was surprisingly easy to sink my teeth into the local systems. Even so, I found out very quickly that no matter how much planning I did beforehand, my plans would almost invariably change, often at the last minute and with little to no notice. An ability to be flexible and adapt rapidly to the changing situation was absolutely crucial to me being able to successfully conduct my research.

Canada

Planning for the trip to Ottawa came together the quickest and the easiest. A professor from the University of Ottawa promptly responded to my email and was eager to help. She put me in contact with government officials and citizen activist groups. Meetings were arranged and every thing fell into place. Plus, actually traveling to Canada presented no difficulties – no culture shock, no language barrier. Canada would become a good template for me to use to plan my other trips. For any educator planning their first sabbatical with overseas research, I recommend starting the trip with a similar, fairly low-stress environment. If things go wrong, and they probably will at some point, it will be far easier to make adjustments if there are no culture and language issues.

The transport situation was particularly interesting. For several decades, Ottawa has relied on a Bus Rapid Transit (BRT) with great

success. Just days before my arrival, a private contractor who had first been awarded a light rail building contract, then lost the job after the project was cancelled because of an intervening election which resulted in a change of mayoral leadership, filed a multi-million dollar lawsuit against the City of Ottawa. Suddenly, all my meetings with local government officials were cancelled! Fortunately, individuals at different levels of government were less reticent, and community activists were outspoken about the challenges of public transportation in Ottawa.

South Africa

South Africa was surprisingly easy, but by far the most expensive air fare and longest flight. The professor I contacted at the University of South Africa (UNISA) recommended two lodges near his home, emailed a list of conference attendees from a recent transportation conference, picked me up from the airport, arranged rides, and had his wife take me on a tour.

My biggest challenge in South Africa was the inability to actually ride the limited public transportation that was available; I was consistently warned NOT to ride the mini van taxis or the commuter train since they are considered unsafe due to criminals, poor equipment and rival gangs of mini van drivers involved in turf battles (who shot each other). Travelers can certainly be on guard for pick pockets and avoid the vans that are in the worst shape, but it is impossible to predict when gun fire will erupt from a disgruntled mini van driver who thinks someone is encroaching on his territory.

A light rail system is in the works (the Gautrain) that will move people from the airport to downtown Johannesburg and Pretoria. There have been complaints about the cost and the heavy handed acquisition of land needed for the tracks, but the Gautrain will help with the growing numbers of tourists who need to get from the airport to their hotel. It is especially important that the Gautrain be completed without delay: South Africa will be hosting the 2010 World Cup Soccer matches!

United Kingdom

My strategy of contacting an academic in London to serve as a resource and point of contact never gelled; so I found an email address for England's Minister of Transport and sent my request for assistance to him. I received an immediate response from his Public Affairs Liaison who put me in touch with individuals in London transportation. Actually

setting up meetings with individuals was delayed until the week before I was to arrive in London, but it all worked out. London's system is highly institutionalized and well used.

The tube, the BRT, and the trains all work together to move people. To reduce private automobile usage further, London has instituted Congestion Charging, a system where each vehicle must pay the equivalent of \$15 per day to drive in the city. Aided by the multitude of CCTV (closed circuit cameras that blanket London) and vehicle tag recognition software, congestion has been reduced. Additionally, funds have been raised to enhance other aspects of public transportation in greater London.

Mexico

The trip to Mexico City started to fall apart three weeks before my departure. In response to an email I sent to my academic contact (asking for confirmation of meetings he was supposed to be setting up), I received an official notification that my contact had passed away. Unfortunately, the communication also informed me that no one else would be able to assist me. That same day, the person I had arranged to take with me to serve as translator backed out of the trip. Hotel and airfare had already been booked and paid for.

Having a "Plan B" suddenly became essential. A Spanish phrase book became my translator, gathering information by personal experience my only source for data. (It is impossible to engage in a professional level conversation with just a phrase book and sign language!)

Mexico City has three different levels of bus – cheap, cheaper and cheapest. Bus equipment reflects the price of fares (the nicer the bus, the more costly the fare – but all still incredibly inexpensive). Several different taxi services race around the city and there is a metro system (light rail) patterned after that in Paris that is heavily utilized. Congestion and pollution are constant problems; in fact, one weekday each week on a rotating basis, private cars that are more than a year old are not allowed on the road to help alleviate these two concerns.

LESSONS LEARNED AND COURSE DEVELOPMENT

I discovered that lots of people are excited to tell you what they know and that international travel takes planning and lots of money. You may

need inoculations or a visa. It helps to speak the language, but it is not a requirement. Still, I am now motivated to improve my Spanish!

Big urban areas in the United States have public transportation systems that are more than adequate (Washington DC, New York City) and yet, problems persist. Increasing investment in mass public transit is vital to controlling urban pollution, reducing dependency on foreign oil, and reducing traffic congestion.

The differences in approaches from the four countries visited offer unique opportunities for further study. Well-established systems, as found in London and Ottawa, face problems of aging rolling stock, as well as the need to increase ridership to control pollution and reduce oil consumption. Systems in need of development face issues of funding, public buy in, and unproven usage.

Incorporating this research in a comparative Public Administration class as an example of the kinds of research the students can do themselves will both model and add a “reality” dimension to the course. Happily, this type of comparative study works for a wide variety of topics, regardless of Public Administration specialty.

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ENDNOTES

1. E-courses (electronic or internet based courses) generate additional funds for the institution. If an instructor chooses to teach an e-course as an overload, the instructor is paid additional monies, dependent upon student enrollment. If the e-course is taught in-load, the additional funds are credited to the individual department, to be used to support further investment in e-learning.

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