The Ethics Primer for Public Administrators in Government and Nonprofit Organizations

Second Edition

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This book is dedicated to my students at the University of North Carolina at Greensboro, North Carolina State University, and Arizona State University, with whom I learned a lot about ethics.

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Preface

Ethics is an essential aspect of public service, but it is often left out of discussions on the development of the field and its major functions. Ethics is sometimes treated as a specialized topic studied for its own sake. For ethics to guide the attitudes and behavior of public administrators, it must be integrated into the way administrators think about their practice and incorporated into their everyday behavior.

I come to the exploration of ethics from a general scholarly interest in political-administrative relations. In my research and teaching, I seek to understand how public administration contributes to the political process, how politicians and administrators interact with each other, and how administrators relate to citizens. Examining these topics naturally brings up the issue of appropriate limits and goals, particularly regarding the behavior of public administrators. What is, and should be, the role of professional public administrators in governance? What are the characteristics of political-administrative relations? What do we expect administrators to do—and not to do? How do administrators relate to citizens? How should they balance their accountability to elected superiors and their professional standards with their responsibility to the public? The normative side of each of these questions involves "big" ethical issues, and these are the focus of this text.

John Gaus (1950) argued many years ago that a theory of public administration is also a theory of politics. I agree and hope to make the case for a further broadening of our understanding of the field. A theory of public administration in the political process is also a theory of ethics.

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I believe that the same logic also applies to understanding the ethics of administrators in nonprofit organizations because of the basic similarity in the nature of administrative responsibilities in the governmental and nonprofit sectors. The city manager who works with the city council and serves the public, and the nonprofit executive director who works with a board of directors and serves clients, share many important characteristics in their work, in the ethical challenges that they face, and in their duty to serve. The text is also concerned with administrators who have little direct interaction with the public, whether in national or state government or in nonprofit organizations.

This text is a primer that introduces the reader to the fundamentals of administrative responsibility and ethics. It links these ideas to the nature of the administrative process and the work of professional administrators. It seeks to help the reader understand why ethics is important to people who choose to be administrators in governmental and nonprofit organizations and how to relate their own personal values with the norms of the public sector. Furthermore, the text offers assistance in working through the complexity and controversy surrounding ethical problems in public administration. It avoids prescription—thou shalt, thou shalt not—as much as possible and seeks instead to enable the reader to form his or her own judgments about ethical choices. It is an introduction to fundamental issues that equips readers to make informed choices about their own behavior. It also provides a foundation for exploring the topic in more depth in other courses or training opportunities.

I approach this text with 16 years of teaching ethics and professional practice—a core course in the master of public administration (MPA) degree—and more years teaching related topics. I hope to create in these words-on-pages some of the dynamic exchange that occurs in the classroom as students grapple with the important issues in administrative ethics. From this experience, I know quite well that this text does not "teach" ethics, in the sense of trying to fill in a blank slate. The reader already has a basic understanding of what it means to be an ethical person. Like my students, the reader comes to this text with a reservoir of ethical and moral values upon which he or she can draw.

In addition to my teaching, I bring perspectives from the experience of being an administrator, a program director, and department head. Some important generic issues in supervision, interpersonal relations, resource use, reporting, and planning are encountered even in the rather disorganized sphere of academic administration. I also benefited greatly from a year on leave working in Washington, DC, from 1976–1977 at the Department of Housing and Urban Development as a National Association of School of Public Affairs and

Administration (NASPAA) Fellow. Furthermore, a lot of my research and training involves interacting with politicians and administrators, both in the United States and other countries. I think that I have come to appreciate the kinds of challenges that administrators face and how often there is an important ethical dimension to these challenges.

My research reflects a blending of my early focus on urban politics and political leadership and my deepening interest in administrative leadership and values. I explore professional administration in a political context. Although much of my writing has focused on local government, my teaching addresses issues at all levels of government and in nonprofits. I conduct empirical research on topics that have a normative dimension and examine the normative implications of my quantitative research. I have merged empirical research findings with analysis of the development of public administration to suggest a new (but I believe historically grounded) way to conceptualize political-administrative relations. This approach stresses the complementarity of politics and administration rather than a dichotomy or strict separation as the conceptual foundation of the field. This model informs my approach to administrative ethics.

The *Ethics Primer for Public Administrators in Government and Nonprofit Organizations, Second Edition* presents a simple theme that, of course, gets complicated in the telling. People enter the field of public administration, just as the reader enters this text, with an interest in public service and a set of values shaped in part by that interest. These values reflect most of the essential elements of ethical thinking, but they are not developed in a very sophisticated way. Like most adults, people who have not formally studied administrative ethics tend to have values that are grounded in respect for conventional norms. Also, they tend to have fairly substantial respect for people in positions of "authority." This condition creates tension between the sense of duty to serve and act responsibly, on the one hand, and the deference to the superiors and established rules, on the other. Most people who have not expanded their knowledge or thought systematically about ethics and the nature of public service are dependent on external sources of direction.

I hope this text will help the reader broaden and deepen his or her understanding of the nature of the public service duty and major approaches to thinking about ethics. I hope the reader will internalize this knowledge so he or she is able to form independent judgments about ethical options based on universal values. The reader will not necessarily reject the external influences he or she receives, but will be better able to weigh his or her own reasoned sense of what is right against what others say is right. Finally, I hope the reader will be able to use this

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knowledge to take actions that are ethically sound based on a careful consideration of all the relevant options. Because the reader is already or is preparing to become an administrator who is responsible for directing other persons and shaping his or her organization, I hope this text will also help the reader see ways that he or she can raise ethical awareness in others.

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I have been a member of the faculty in the School of Public Affairs at Arizona State University and want to thank my colleagues and students there for their support of my research on ethics. I also want to express my gratitude to a number of colleagues and students at North Carolina State University who helped, both directly and indirectly, with the original text. Debra Stewart helped me understand the importance of the development of ethical reasoning and how it changes over time. Jim Brunet offered comments, suggested sources, and made a test drive in a class he taught with an earlier version of the manuscript. Former doctoral students Dr. Jack Kem and Dr. Julie Raines wrote dissertations on ethics topics and added to my knowledge of the issues and the literature in administrative ethics, and current doctoral students Ljubinka Andonoska and Chin-Chang Tsai at Arizona State University conducted research that contributed to the new edition of the text.

I have had unique opportunity to work on the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) Code of Ethics review process for the past two years. I am grateful to the 31 members of the working group who diligently examined the current Code of Ethics and thoughtfully proposed revisions that build on ASPA's prior codes. It was a pleasure working with Jim Nordin, member of the ASPA National Council and retired federal government administrator, who co-chaired the working group with me. My understanding of professional ethics has been deepened by this experience.

My wife, Claudia, has been both patient and supportive over the extended period of this writing project. She is also a model of the ethical professional who exemplifies the duty to service at the highest level in her practice of medicine.

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