

University of La Verne  
Master of Public Administration

Introduction to Public Administration  
PADM 501  
Dr. Susan MacDonald

# **What is the role of the Public Administrator?**

Due: May 17, 2006

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On April 22<sup>nd</sup> of this year, the foundation of our family was shaken when we learned of the death of my wife's older brother, Adair Satterfield. He was riding a mountain bike in Chino Hills State Park and apparently suffered a massive heart attack near the very end of his usual Saturday morning ride with a friend. Obviously, the loss was a tremendous loss to his wife, two sons, five siblings, their spouses and numerous other relatives and friends but it was also a loss to the education community of Chino. We will always have our memories but it truly saddens me that there are future students and educators who will never have the impact or know the presence of Adair in their lives. Adair spent over 30 years working in education primarily with the Chino Valley Unified School District and in my mind he exemplified throughout his life what the role of a public administrator should be.

It is ironic to me that I should be writing a paper on the subject of the role of a public administrator at a time when his loss has caused a great deal of reflection on life and on how we all can be better people. Although I have worked in nonprofit management for 13 years, I have never thought of myself as a public administrator. I have realized for many years that I found purpose in my career by working for organizations that helped people rather than working in the private sector where profit is the primary motivator. On the other hand, I also knew that Adair was a fine man who thoroughly enjoyed his work in education and had a tremendous gift for communicating with students. I knew he continually advanced up the career ladder in education but I never thought about him either as being a public administrator. I guess in actuality, I never gave much thought to a group of like-minded public servants in a broad career category such as Public Administration until I became interested in this program. However now I have an opportunity to reflect on the subject of public administrators, how Adair's life exemplified the role of public administrator and what affect Adair's legacy has on me as I move forward with my own career in Public Administration.

First a brief background on Adair's professional life, he was born on December 11, 1954 in Chino and attended St Margaret Mary Catholic School through 8<sup>th</sup> grade, Damien High School for a couple of years and earned his diploma at Chino High School where he was a running back for the Cowboys. He earned his Bachelor's degree and Teaching Credential from Cal Poly Pomona and began teaching science and coaching football at Don Lugo High School in Chino. He would go on to earn his Master's degree and enter administration at the Junior High level. He was assigned as Principal of Woodcrest Junior High School when it opened in the early 1990's while he was still in his 30's. It was quite an accomplishment for someone his age. A few years later, Adair and his wife decided that they wanted to try life in Northern California where her family had previously moved. Adair was hired as the Superintendent/High School Principal for a small school district in the Redding area. Although, Adair loved working in education, he soon found that the position of Superintendent was mired in politics and did not allow him to pursue his true calling of working directly with students. The family returned to Chino and the CVUSD immediately offered him a Vice Principal position at Chino High School in 2000. It was a perfect placement for Adair to work with kids at his alma mater. Last year he was promoted to a district position as Director of Child Welfare and Attendance. Although I believe that Adair had his sights on being appointed as Principal of Chino High School, I believe that his last position might have given him the biggest impact on the largest amount of students who truly needed him. He had such a gift for working with the toughest/most needy students and finding ways to help them succeed.

Although, one can plainly see by Adair's career path above that he must have been a person who understood education and had achieved success even at the point his life was cut short. For most education administrators, his accomplishments would have been highly satisfying for someone who lived much longer. However, there are aspects of his career that

could never have been conveyed in a professional biography or resume. It was the way that Adair put his heart and soul into his job and the way he truly touched people that made him an extraordinary public servant. This was obvious when over 800 people on a Friday night and almost 2,000 people the following Saturday morning attended his funeral services. Long articles including a publisher's column have been written in both the Chino Champion and the Inland Valley Daily Bulletin, meetings of the City of Chino, the Chino Valley Unified School District and even a session of the California State Senate have been closed with remarks in his remembrance and there is currently a community plea to name a new elementary school in Chino in his honor. The community has also graciously donated to a newly established Adair Satterfield Memorial Fund in order to provide scholarships to carry on his legacy of wanting to help students succeed especially those in the most need.

This outpouring of affection and acknowledgement did not occur for just an average public administrator, it happened for someone who epitomized what the role of a public administrator should be. I don't think Adair tried to achieve greatness; it happened to him naturally by doing the work he enjoyed doing. I know Adair would have been truly embarrassed by all the accolades because he was the last person to boast or even talk about himself. He let his actions be his voice and obviously those actions were loud. The first role I would think of for a public administrator like Adair is to be an achiever. Adair didn't talk about doing things; he just went out and got it done. Like Adair, a public administrator needs to be someone who is driven internally by the accomplishment of a good task, for a good purpose and not by the rewards and recognition given by others. Let the politicians be driven by the popular acclaim but it is the public administrator who has to navigate beneath the competing political winds to implement the laws and policies of the elected officials.

Adair was actually a quiet man but when he spoke, he was always listened to. I never had an opportunity to hear him teach but I heard him speak in public many times and he always conveyed his message clearly and with authority. He seemed to avoid small talk and waited until there was something important to say. He especially communicated well with students who gravitated towards his down-to-earth, honest attitude. He was always ready to help a student especially those who had challenges in their life. He had a knack for figuring out how to help them get back on the right track with school or with life issues. Since his death, we have heard countless stories from families of students who he has helped and the deep sense of gratitude they had because he took the time to care about them. Therefore the next role that a public administrator should have that Adair exemplified is that of communicator and someone who cares. Adair excelled at communicating with students but all public administrators have to be able to interact with a variety of constituencies in order to carry out the mission of their agency or organization.

Adair was also an unselfish person who always gave with his heart. I had one of my staff members tell me that her daughter was having trouble with grades but Adair helped her out. The daughter was able to improve her grades to a level that allowed her to qualify for a school-sponsored trip. She successfully raised money through fundraising only to have it stolen in school one day. When Adair encountered her that day in tears, he reached into his pocket and replaced that stolen money himself. This is just one act of generosity that Adair displayed towards one of his students, there have been so many more that it is impossible to count.

Adair was a deeply religious individual, a trait he inherited from his mother just like his other siblings. I have no doubt that Adair truly believed that his acts here on earth would be rewarded in a greater and glorious afterlife. That's why he was able to perform the multitude of generous acts in this life without seeking credit or glory. I don't believe that a religious call to

good works has to motivate all public administrators but it certainly worked for him. The essential characteristic is to be a giving person who places their work, community or mission in front of their own desires no matter where the individual finds their basis and guidance.

Adair kept a journal in his desk at work along with a Bible. He would arrive at work early each day to read a passage, reflect on its meaning and jot down notes in his journal about how he could do better each day. One passage that was used on his memorial booklet was “Lord, I want to make a difference today, help me to do the best that I can do”. His journal is filled with entries that encouraged him to be a better person and to lead others to do the same. He believed that everyday, he needed to be doing something special. He knew that life was short and that there was no time to waste. He had an energy and enthusiasm that he carried with him on each task he did and allowed him to lead others to follow him. The difference he made each day was in guiding young students and fellow educators to be the best that they could be.

In summary, I believe that a public administrator in Adair’s mold must have the following characteristics: achiever, communicator, compassionate, unselfish, giver and leader. As we have learned through the course this term, public administration can be a thankless profession. Administrators are caught between the politicians, citizens, interest groups, and media among other groups in an effort to implement the mission of their agencies or organizations. The concluding chapter of Stillman talks about balancing all the various ethical obligations and being able to navigate through the “administrative morality” issues that we all face. I believe that a strong public administrator with the characteristics described above can balance the variety of pressures that might be applied and be able to maintain their ethical bearings. Ethics has certainly become the hot issue in both private and public sectors in the 21<sup>st</sup> century and public administrators like Adair do not have a lock on being ethical people. However, if more people would commit to these characteristics in their professional and personal

lives with greater emphasis on participating in some way to assist their communities, even by volunteering, our world will be a much better place.

I realize that this paper reads more like a eulogy than a scholarly paper but at this time in my life, I could not answer the question of the role of a public administrator without thinking and reflecting about the life of Adair Satterfield. There were so many more personal qualities and attributes about him that I would have loved to share but they are outside the scope and limits of this paper. I hope I was able convey his devotion and dedication to his chosen profession. I will never have the direct impact on individuals as he did because my role is different in managing the business operations of a non-profit organization. However, I can hopefully make an indirect impact by providing the resources and tools necessary in order for the direct care staff, educators, social workers or whomever else I may be supporting can deliver the level of public service that Adair did. In that way, I too can say that I am continuing his legacy of making a difference. I was proud to call him my brother-in-law and friend but now I know he will always be my role model as a public administrator.