

A FULBRIGHT JOURNEY TO MAURITIUS

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ABSTRACT

As a Fulbright Scholar at the University of Mauritius in 2021-2022, I was able to learn a great deal about Mauritian students and public service in this country. Teaching undergraduates about public sector ethics provided an opportunity to internationalize my teaching approach and helped me gain greater empathy for student needs. Examining urban and public service issues in a developing small island state with a colonial past has provided insights that will offer scholarly and practical insights for years to come.

Keywords: University of Mauritius • public sector • ethics • internationalization



INTRODUCTION

Most people in the United States have never heard of Mauritius. This small island nation located in the Indian Ocean is smaller than most U.S. states and rarely makes the international news. Traveling to this beautiful island nation from the United States is difficult and expensive. In fact, it took approximately 46 long and exhausting hours of travel from Denver, Colorado to arrive and then begin my Fulbright award in October 2021.

This was not the first time that I visited Mauritius. Less than two years before, during the spring 2020 semester, I was teaching in an international program-Semester at Sea-when we made an unexpected week-long stop in Mauritius after COVID-19 derailed our planned itinerary. When the Seychelles, India, and Malaysia all closed their borders to our floating campus, Mauritius welcomed the ship full of students and faculty and even greeted us with a traditional Mauritian dance and music called the “Sega” as we disembarked. During that brief visit, I was able to begin to see some of the beauty of the island nation and the resilience and kindness of the people living there. I was intent on returning to learn more about the hidden gem that is Mauritius.

TEACHING IN MAURITIUS

Due to COVID-19, my arrival was delayed as quarantine requirements shifted and University of Mauritius (UoM) reorganized their course schedules. Colleagues at UoM were gracious and supportive of my transition into the country and supported my goals with kindness and excitement. My interdisciplinary background provided an opportunity for collaboration between faculties on campus, Economics and Political Science, and I have learned a great deal from faculty in both programs.

Less than three weeks after arriving, and with just a few days' notice, I was assigned to teach a course for 2nd year political science and public administration students. Since UoM remained closed to students I was scheduled to teach through Zoom. From November through April, I had the honor of teaching a group of 53 undergraduate students the course titled "Ethics of Public Service." Teaching in a non-US context enabled me to critically evaluate my teaching techniques as well as my approach to topics in ways that have already proven useful in my teaching career. For example, although UoM is an English medium school, most students speak and write in French or Creole as their primary language. As I reflected on this, it became clear that my tendency to speak fast and use informal phrases was going to provide a challenge for some students. To be an effective teacher meant that I needed to approach lectures more carefully and deliberately to ensure comprehension and learning. Unexpected technology challenges, varying perspectives on world affairs, and overall skepticism of political institutions factored into the weekly class sessions at UoM. Teaching this course also provided me with an unexpected opportunity to travel to and lecture in Seychelles during my Fulbright experience.

I have spent my career teaching at large, well-resourced, state schools in the United States. Teaching in Mauritius was my first experience with purely non-US based students in an institution with limited teaching resources. Typical online platforms, like Canvas or Blackboard, are not available at UoM. Instead, most instructors utilize Google Classroom and their university Google accounts for teaching purposes. Unfortunately, at the beginning of my teaching assignment the IT department was backed up in processing requests and I did not have an official UoM email address. Without an official UoM email, I could not create a Google classroom that allowed students to use their official University emails to connect to the classroom page. Most students did not have a second Gmail account that would allow them to join a classroom page created with my personal email account. This technology issue posed an immediate challenge for distributing reading materials, sharing course documents, and posting grades. With no estimate on when a university email account would be created for me, I quickly pivoted and created a shared folder for course documents. While this was an imperfect and inefficient solution, it enabled me to immediately provide the necessary learning materials to students and avoid losing any further precious course time. Flexibility and patience have proven to be important traits for being an effective instructor in Mauritius.

In Mauritius, the experiences and opportunities of the local students vary widely and required me to adjust my long-held approaches to teaching. For example, very few of my UoM students have ever been outside of Mauritius. Their experiences are limited to the day-to-day activities on this small island and what they are exposed to through various media sources. For many media outlets, the U.S. dominates the news in the evenings so much so that I was

told “everyone goes to the U.S. at 6 pm and then returns at 7 pm.” Unfortunately, much of the news reporting focuses on crises and other negative events taking place. It became common for students to utilize discussion time to ask questions about things they have heard about the United States. A common question that was posed to me concerned the 2nd Amendment and gun rights. Many students, having only learned about this issue through the media, believed that walking down an average street in the United States was inherently dangerous and that guns were ever present. Others were keen to learn about the legal structure, identifying the 2nd amendment by name, particularly as it permits the right to firearms even when mass shooting events continue to happen. For many of these students I was the first American that they had ever met, and I was certainly the first they had the ability to ask these types of questions. These conversations meant that I was able to both dispel some myths that they held about the United States, but also provide valuable comparative lessons with respect to public administration and public service that will help them on their journeys to becoming public servants in the future. Alongside the curiosity about the U.S., students varied widely in their trust and respect for various political institutions. In a class about public sector ethics, it seemed that the many students believed the public sector, in Mauritius and abroad, were corrupt and incapable of serving the public interest. Talking through the imperfections in systems alongside opportunities for improvements allowed students to gain some perspective on how they might make a positive change in their future careers in public service.

In addition to the overall lack of international experience, my students also came to class with very different resources. For example, from a logistical standpoint, class assignments and course expectations needed to shift to accommodate the reality that many students do not have personal computers or reliable Internet service. With campus closed to students due to COVID-19 restrictions, access to computer labs was not an option for the students needing to utilize computers. At least half of the class did not have regular access to a computer or word processing software. As a result, class assignments and the class test were often submitted through photos taken of handwritten work and classes were often attended through a cellular phone with uneven connection quality. Alongside these individual differences in technology access, Mauritius frequently has power outages. These power outages usually last only a few minutes but are very common and can happen several times a day. This structural issue poses a unique challenge for a class being held through Zoom. At any given time, several students would drop off the Zoom class and return a few minutes later. I, too, was impacted by these outages and experienced my own drop from Zoom during the term when my electricity went out. That said, such structural challenges and differences served as an opportunity for me to really evaluate what it means to be an effective teacher, mentor to future public servants, and interest students in public administration and public sector ethics. Patience, compassion, and understanding are all key traits that I have expanded in my role as an educator through this teaching

experience. Furthermore, the electricity outages and internet access also provided real-time examples of some potential public service opportunities in Mauritius. Understanding the limitations of nonrenewable power sources on an island provided a real-time discussion opportunity of the potential of investing in more solar and wind power in Mauritius through the Government.

UoM structures classes into a two-hour lecture followed by a one-hour tutorial. Having never taught in this type of schedule, I elected to utilize the weekly tutorials for an in-depth case study analysis and discussion on important public sector ethics topics while I utilized lecture to cover theories and information important to the weekly lesson. Preparing and teaching this class offered me the opportunity to expand my own teaching into a deliberately international and comparative context. For tutorials, I included case studies that covered several continents and different types of government so that students could learn about ethical challenges across many different contexts. Including this diversity in cases and approaches to public sector ethics was as good for me as it was for the students. At no point in my career have I been able to study and teach about the ethics infrastructure of Zimbabwe, but this course enabled me to be deliberate in my global approach to the subject by forcing me to go beyond my comfort zone in case examples. As such, this course provided me with a unique opportunity to expand my own knowledge and understanding of the landscape of global public administration in unique ways that will positively impact my future students as I bring these examples back to my U.S. classroom. My future students will be exposed to important public administration lessons from around the world due, in large part, to this Fulbright experience.

My teaching experience in Mauritius has also already had a visible impact on my UoM students. In the aftermath of my course, I was able to meet with and discuss various opportunities with students that had gained a newfound passion and interest for public administration. Several of these students are currently working towards applying for a Fulbright Student award to continue their own educational journey in the United States. Others are actively preparing for the GRE exam to apply for a Masters program in public administration. Many of these students will remain in touch as I begin my journey back home and I fully expect that several will enter public service roles in their futures and make a positive impact on the world. The passion and desire to improve the global community I saw in my UoM students bode well for an improved public service future in Mauritius and abroad.

AN UNEXPECTED PUBLIC SECTOR ETHICS OPPORTUNITY: SEYCHELLES WORKSHOP

Teaching public service ethics at UoM afforded me an unexpected opportunity to experience a neighboring country, Seychelles, during my Fulbright experience. The U.S. embassy in Mauritius serves as the embassy for both Mauritius and their neighbor, Seychelles. In early 2022, I was asked to participate, as the lead speaker, in a weeklong workshop in Seychelles focused on public ethics. After more than two years of only virtual events, a widespread desire to return to in-person events prompted the development of a multi-day public ethics event sponsored by the U.S. State Department and organized by the group “Citizens Democracy Watch” in Seychelles.

Over the course of several 8+ hour days, I met with various groups in Seychelles including civic organizations, the University of Seychelles, and public servants to lecture and teach about public ethics. For many of the participants, public ethics was a topic of great interest as Seychelles continues working to improve their public ethics standing in the world. The Seychellois people proved themselves to be exceptional hosts with a passion for public service. By experiencing an island very similar to Mauritius, this unique opportunity has provided me with the ability to possess an even greater understanding of the opportunities and challenges faced by small island developing states as they continue to evolve beyond the time of British rule. During my short stay in Seychelles, I was able to provide important information on ethics infrastructure as well as make connections between local organizations and evidence-based work in the U.S. to support their long-term goals of good governance. The relationships forged in Seychelles will offer longstanding opportunities for collaboration and learning for me and for them.

CONDUCTING RESEARCH IN MAURITIUS: EMBRACING GLOBAL AND COMPARATIVE CONTEXTS OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

In addition to teaching in Mauritius and leading the workshop in Seychelles, I have been able to conduct research in Mauritius through a public policy and administration lens. My experience as a faculty member in the public administration field has been one of a mostly Americentric discipline. While there is a growing group of scholars that can be classified as international or comparative scholars; most of the core public administration research is U.S. based. My time researching various public administration and urban policy issues in Mauritius has provided me with the unique ability to refine and refocus my own research agenda into a more global perspective that will help move my own research toward a deliberate international and comparative approach in the years ahead.

For a discipline uniquely concerned with improving public service through applied research, there are many valuable lessons to be gleaned from approaching research in a comparative way. Lessons from other experiences, contexts, and cultures can provide unique and valuable knowledge for those concerned with improving the quality of public service in the United States. Focusing purely on the American approach to ethics infrastructure, for example, fails to recognize the many lessons that can be gleaned from the experiences of building this infrastructure in a young developing country with aspirations to modernize and improve their institutions. Examining and studying the actual building blocks of a public service organization offers unique insights into ways to improve the delivery and successes of America's public service goals.

The legacy of colonialism as well as environmental challenges associated with being a small island state have contributed to a range of challenges in urban development, planning, and policy. Mauritius provides an excel-

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lent opportunity to learn about urban problems and policy solutions that will provide insights to the academic and public servant communities alike. The trial and error of delivering public services and the policy learning associated with this series of experiments can offer some important lessons for older communities in the United States that have similar challenges. At minimum, researching the public service challenges in Mauritius will provide lessons to future researchers and public servants seeking to understand the evolution of basic public services in a post-colonial context. This knowledge can offer the opportunity to refine urban planning and policy knowledge, offer insights to other developing countries, and even offer lessons for the United States when faced with similar public service challenges. Small island developing states, like Mauritius, are known in the academic literature to be resilient and adaptive. This resilience and the policy learning associated with it, can be viewed as an opportunity for scholars and practitioners seeking to improve their own work.

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CONCLUSIONS

It is easy to see Mauritius as a world-class resort destination with beautiful beaches. However, to only see the beaches is to miss the richness that is the community and the hard work that everyday Mauritians put into making this island a beautiful, sustainable, and safe place to live. My time as a Fulbrighter in Mauritius has provided me with greater empathy for

student needs, a wider perspective on global policy issues, the credibility to engage in robust comparative and international public administration work, and an overall appreciation of the kindness provided to me by the Mauritian people.

NOTES

1. University of Mauritius, Faculty of Social Sciences and Humanities, <https://www.uom.ac.mu/fssh/index.php/overview-hps>
2. Government of Mauritius, <https://govmu.org/EN/Pages/default.aspx>
3. University of Seychelles, <https://unisey.ac.sc/>
4. Mauritian Sega, <https://mauritiusattractions.com/mauritius-sega-i-106.html>
5. US Embassy for Mauritius and Seychelles, <https://mu.usembassy.gov/>



Participants in the public service ethics workshop in Seychelles hosted by the US State Department and organized by the group “Citizens Democracy Watch” in Seychelles. Dr. Opp was the lead speaker at the workshop.

BIOGRAPHY

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