Why “Public Administration”?  

“Public administration” is a term Woodrow Wilson coined in 1887 to distinguish the stable, ongoing operation of government from the political dynamics of government. Of more than 150 million people in the U.S. workforce, roughly 20 million work in government (mostly at local levels) and another 10 million work in the nonprofit sector. Our families, friends, and neighbors make up this public service workforce. They help our towns run smoothly, regulate banking across the state, manage hospitals and group homes, monitor environmental dangers, and much more. Most do very fine jobs.  

These jobs are set in the grit of the real world and exist to benefit the public rather than create profit. Public administration degree programs instill concepts, skills, and an ethical foundation that enable students to provide more professional and effective public service. The University of Maine is considering dropping these degree programs.  

Business administration and political science contribute to aspects of public administration education but leave critical gaps. Political science probes such things as democratic theory, campaigns and elections, and the legislative process rather than sustainable economic development and technology impact on public services. Business courses emphasize profit-driven decisions and domination of competitors rather than the public good, regional cooperation, and transparency. Bottom line: Although poly-sci and business complement public administration education, they are inadequate substitutes.  

UMaine’s public administration department is small, with four faculty members and a cooperating faculty member from another discipline. Through it, the university offers a bachelor of arts (BA) degree in public management and a master of public administration (MPA) degree. It is also a strong player in the university’s Interdisciplinary Ph.D. (I.Ph.D.) program. The public management undergraduate program began 65 years ago, making it the oldest in the nation. UMaine’s MPA is the only degree program in Maine with continuing accreditation from the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and was among the first programs to earn this accreditation. It is a destination for Fulbright scholars. The MPA program operates in Orono and Augusta, including classes at the State Office Building adjacent to the Capitol and, through videoconferencing, at the UMA campus and other sites across the state.  

Whether mid-career or just beginning public service, many public administration students undertake projects of value to the state, a community, or a nonprofit organization. Their projects range from hospital staffing forecasts to analyses of community transportation needs, from coordinating municipal comprehensive plans to examining landfill practices, from analyzing a donation patterns for a nonprofit organization to constructing environmental hazard risk-assessment tools and assessing the impact of grant programs. These students are dedicated to their fellow Mainers and their careers here in public service.
UMaine President Robert Kennedy formed a working group last spring to recommend cuts and priorities “aligned with state needs and global realities in the early 21st century.” This is a commendable goal, and President Kennedy has no alternative but to reduce spending. That said, eliminating students who seek public administration degrees is false economy for the short-term as well as the long-term.

UMaine’s public administration programs cost little alongside the university’s investment in business and engineering programs. But, for the people of Maine, the payoff is huge because the public sector affects everyone, everyday. This is something we expect leaders of our land-grant university to foster, not discard.

Respectfully submitted,

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