Welcome Remarks

Evergreen MPA Orientation

September 21, 2019

Good morning and welcome to The Evergreen State College’s Master of Public Administration Program. I begin our time together today by acknowledging the Medicine Creek Treaty Tribes of Squaxin Island, Nisqually, and Puyallup, upon whose land the Evergreen State College stands. I extend respect to all Native people from the many Native Nations present.

We are very excited that you are here because you in this room are the very first cohort of Master of Public Administration students at The Evergreen State College’s Tacoma center. Our orientation today marks the launch of Evergreen’s Tacoma-based MPA program. So I think it would be appropriate to recognize my predecessor as Evergreen’s MPA program, Doreen Swetkis. Doreen spearheaded the effort to establish the MPA program that we begin here today and it is because of her efforts that we can all be here in this room today. Thank you Doreen!

Thanks go as well to our program’s Assistant Director, Puanani Nihoa. Puanani not only has spent considerable time planning our orientation today, she is the person who has shepherded most of you through our admissions process and prepared you to enter our class. Thank you Puanani!

On behalf of Evergreen’s MPA program, I would also like to thank all of you here for your commitment to public service. Evergreen’s Tacoma Center motto is, “Enter to Learn, Depart to Serve.” These are particularly apt words with which to charge an entering cohort of MPA students. Public administration professionals face the challenge every day of actually making governments work to improve our communities and therefore our lives. Yet we live in times when public servants are often unrecognized for their vital contributions to our communities, even by those at the highest level of our government. It gives me great hope for our future to see talented people such as yourselves make the choice to pursue careers that will make a difference in our city and state. Hence we salute your professionalism and dedication to public service.

Like most of you in this room, I am a newcomer to Evergreen’s MPA program. So I thought I might share a little bit about my path to Evergreen’s MPA program. What I have valued most in my university career is the opportunity it provides to improve the communities we serve. I honed my teaching practice at Michigan State University’s James Madison program. In my time there, I came to recognize the value of preparing students to be active participants in the policymaking process, as citizens, public and nonprofit sector professionals, and leaders in state and local government. And more recently, I had the opportunity to serve as a faculty member in UA Little Rock’s master of public administration program. What I really valued about my experience there was the opportunity it provided for me to integrate my research and teaching in urban management and public finance with the needs of disadvantaged communities in Central Arkansas.

What I learned from this that has really stuck with me is that MPA programs that do their jobs well teach by doing. They cultivate opportunities in the public and nonprofit sectors where students can gain experience that cannot be taught in a classroom and to demonstrate what they have learned in ways that benefit society. And faculty and student expertise can be marshaled to address public problems and policies in ways that help solve those problems while providing generalizable knowledge to practitioners and academics around the globe. For example, our most recent capstone students carried out project on neighborhood engagement in the City of Olympia, evaluation of recreational programs for underserved youth, addressing the digital divide in Skagit County, and evaluating public safety programs in Tacoma.

Hence, I envision a Tacoma MPA program that uses its resources to work collaboratively with our region’s public and nonprofit sectors to address its most persistent challenges. We are accomplishing this in multiple ways, through our service learning and capstone projects and our unique model for integrating tribal governance into the program. Our MPA program’s mission statement charges us to “advocate powerfully on behalf of the public” and “to accomplish positive change in our workplace and in our communities.” We look forward to helping you to learn ways to do just that.