

Harrisburg Huddle

Episode 101 – Master of Public Administration

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[Host] Hello and welcome to the Harrisburg Huddle, the Penn State Harrisburg podcast. One of the great strengths of our campus is our location just next door to the Pennsylvania state capital. Our students have many opportunities to interact with state leaders, non-profits, state agencies and large and important organizations in the Commonwealth. A key part of this opportunity is our Master of Public Administration program. Today, assistant professor of public policy Administration Dan Mallinson sat down with Luke Yingling, a 2019 graduate of the MPA program. Together they discussed his experience as a student here and how it informed and benefited his career.

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[Dan Mallinson] I'm Dan Mallinson. I'm an assistant professor of public policy and administration here at Penn State Harrisburg and I'm pleased today to be speaking to one of our fantastic alumni, Luke Yingling. He graduated the program a couple of years ago and has been working in the legal sector and so we're going to talk a little bit today about the program about his experience and his career. So, to get started I will just ask Luke to tell us a little bit about himself and his background.

[Luke Yingling] Absolutely. So obviously my journey led me to the master's program here but before that I grew up in West Virginia, spent my whole life there. Grew up in a small town called Ona in the southwest corner of the state. [I] went on to play baseball in college, had an athletic scholarship, academic scholarships. So, I enjoyed that for a while but after three years of that I got an opportunity to work in state government. And so [I] worked for the state senate got to see how the sausage is made and I really loved that experience. And so after that I was pretty convinced I wanted to go on to do studies along those lines looking at government, how government functions. And so that's what led me here to Penn State. But after that I went on to get my law degree, back in West Virginia at WVU. And then it was during that time I founded my company where I work now and that's a company that focuses on legal analytics.

[DM] So walk us through... why did you choose to pursue an MPA specifically and what led you to Penn State Harrisburg?

[LY] Yeah. so I was interested in a couple different degrees initially including a law degree which I eventually went on to do. But before that I knew I had a strong research interest and I knew I was interested in subjects like public policy public administration political science. So I'd done political science as an undergrad. I felt like I was well-rounded there. But I knew that when I went on to study at the Master's level I was really interested in learning more about the nuts and bolts of government, how it functions, how to execute on ideas. And so that was more interesting to me than learning more about political philosophy and those types of things that I

might have gotten in a political science program. So that's sort of what made that decision easier, especially as I had witnessed so much going on in state government already. And that experience in state government was exciting for me because you got to be really intimately engaged with the policy-making process in a way that I wouldn't have been able to do if I was with a federal... in a federal position with a federal agency or whatever it may have been. So, I was convinced that state government would be a good place to go. So being in the state capital here made a lot of sense. And then also there was the teaching assistant and research assistant program here that became a great fit for me. So those things were decisive and choosing Penn State Harrisburg. And of course, the experience of working on research projects with you led us to publish a paper together. And that background in sort of research methods [and] understanding of government was really foundational to what I went on to do, which was founding a company looking at different types of research around judges and courts and briefs.

[DM] Before we get into more about the specifics of the program and your experience here, you mentioned that you considered law school coming right out of undergrad -- which is a common path for a lot of political science undergrads -- but you did the MPA first. I'm just curious if you could expand on that: why you did the MPA first and what benefit you think that may have provided as you then went on to pursue law school.

[LY] Yeah, so I took a hard look at law school right out of undergrad and I decided not to even apply because I was pretty convinced I wanted to go the research route and I was interested in eventually doing a Ph.D. And so I'd interviewed with Ph.D. programs right out of undergrad; I really thought that was the route I wanted to go. So I wanted to get a masters first. And so this became the perfect landing spot where I got to focus on all those research interests of mine and have the flexibility to look at, you know, different research questions of mine. Because law school is really not a place where people get to explore those interests very much. And so ultimately, through some of the conversations you and I had, I realized that the transferability of skills in a law degree was really significant to me and I was still able to explore some of those research interests on the side during law school. Ultimately, we went through peer review and published our paper during that time. But it was for those reasons that I decided to do an MPA instead of a law degree. A lot of my friends went on to go to law school straight away, but I felt like when I did decide law school was right, I felt like I came in with a big advantage having done a master's degree first.

[DM] So let's keep on the thread, since you brought it up, of your research experience in the program. Talk a little bit more about that, about your experience as a research assistant and then us working on the project about evidence-based policymaking in the states.

[LY] Yeah, so as an undergrad, I had an interest in research particularly around courts and specialty court programs. So, I was interested in drug courts in particular, which was a sort of a significant development during my time as an undergrad in West Virginia. Those programs were really sort of starting to bubble up. So, I was doing research on that -- how it was producing return on investment for the state -- and so that sort of was a foundational interest of mine coming into the program. I didn't yet know what I came to learn here about federalism, policy

diffusion, those sorts of topics that you and I spent time on. But, coming into it, I knew that there was going to be a strong research interest around state government interaction between state and federal and local governments, and so that was sort of the foundational interest that led me in those directions. And then the time I spent with you -- working on your book, looking at policy diffusion, doing a meta-analysis of different articles -- served as a perfect foundation. [I] read a lot of literature on the topic and so that sort of informed my interest and pushed [me] in that direction. Ultimately, obviously, we published about evidence-based policymaking, looking at, really, a political science topic through a public administration type of lens. I thought that was a really interesting angle and that's sort of the feedback we got about that paper.

[DM] Yeah, great. So, let's pick up now then on that thread about state government. So, we are at Penn State Harrisburg, where we're in Middletown, so we're just down the street from Harrisburg. We have a lot of involvement in state government, and also in the city. So, could you talk a little bit about the advantages of that? And also you had some experience doing an internship while you were here.

[LY] Right, so one of the things that I found exciting about the program here was that I had interviewed with other MPA programs. Some of them would offer to pay your tuition for both years, some would offer to give you some kind of stipend. But what the program here offered was tuition and stipend, fully covered for the first year with the idea being that in the second year, you would transition into a paid role in state government. And that's exactly the path that I followed. And like I said, before I was interested in being in one of these unique positions where you can engage directly with policymaking in a more intimate way than what you might have with a federal position. So, that's exactly what I did. So after my first year being a research assistant with you, I went on to work for the state's Opioid Command Center here. So then-Governor Wolf had declared a state of emergency around the opioid crisis, [and] set up the Opioid Command Center. And so I got to work in this group that included, I think it was 16 or 17 state agencies, all collaborating with the Opioid Command Center at the center of that. So that was an excellent way to learn about policymaking in the executive side of things involving numerous agencies, and I got to be, you know, right there in the middle of it. So that was a really exciting experience for me.

[DM] And now that experience also built on some experience you had in undergrad...

[YL] That's right.

[DM] ...and eventually then in law school, correct?

[YL] That's right. So when I was an undergrad, I was interested in drug courts and those sorts of things like I said. And then when I was a law student, I went to work for the West Virginia's Office of Drug Control Policy, so I was engaged with issues around substance use specialty programs to help people and those suffering with addiction. And so that was a trend that carried from undergrad through my master's program and on into law school.

[DM] So, let's talk now a little bit about the program itself. Can you give, you know, the viewers a brief understanding of the types of courses that you took and maybe what were some of your favorite classes to take?

[LY] Right, so I knew that the flexibility in the program was something important to me; there are numerous tracks that you can take focusing on different subject matter areas. I knew that the non-profit direction wasn't quite right for me, and I wanted to focus more on government research-related topics. So, research methods -- this class that I had with you -- was really important to me. Working with some of those statistical software [packages] was really interesting and important to me. [It] became really relevant for me later on when I was in law school and started my own company. But some of the other courses I enjoyed were ones looking at various issues of state government. I think you had a course where we had a survey of all different types of various problems afflicting state governments across the country. Those are interesting to me. So, there are several courses, but it was the flexibility in the program -- the ability to pick and choose off a menu what things you want to focus on and make it your own, create your own experience -- that was important to me. And I was also able to do a thesis-style paper instead of a capstone, which was important to me as well. And it was that paper that we went on to publish together, ultimately, a version of it.

[DM] Sure. So, for those who are watching, the MPA program requires a capstone project which is usually a team-based research project that is fairly practically oriented -- which makes a lot of sense for students who are interested in going into public management -- but for those who have a research interest, you can work directly with a faculty member on a research project. Which is what we did for the evidence-based policy making.

[LY] Right.

[DM] Okay, so another theme to talk about is mentorship in the program, and your working with faculty. You know, of course, there was our relationship -- which we can talk a little bit more about -- but then also you know I'm one of several faculty in the program and in the School of Public Affairs here at Penn State Harrisburg. So, you can talk a little bit about your interactions with the faculty [and] mentorship that you received while you were here?

[LY] Yeah, it's something really significant that you don't get in a law degree, for example. So, when I went to law school after this experience, I asked some people, you know, is there sort of a mentorship program, or is there, you know, is there a way of getting in touch with faculty and talking about research ideas. And that really didn't exist. And then my understanding is that it really doesn't exist in any other law program. It's something unique about the Master's experience that we had here that was really special -- for me -- being able to, sort of, sift through [or] sort through, different research ideas, figuring out how to operationalize, you know, research along those lines. That was really important to me and so that was really important to my development and maturation. So that was significant, and I know that a lot of other faculty members in the program had a similar relationship with other research assistants. So, I know it's not unique to me; it's something that happens here with a lot of folks on campus

looking at different research projects. And then interest beyond that, you know, practical things: looking at state government, non-profits, all those topics.

[DM] Yeah and a lot of that happens through conversations. Right?

[YL] Um-hmm.

[DM] We would have a lot of conversations when you were my research assistant, but then also after [that] about research, about career, and that's how I find with a lot of students in the program. And it's a nice part of a residential program. You know, we also have an online program and that provides different advantages for different students as well including geographic disbursement. But one advantage of residential part of the program is that contact time, you know, with faculty. And having those conversations.

[YL] Yeah, and something else that I found really useful was the ability to take so many classes in the evening. Because once I transitioned out of the research assistant role and into the state government role, I was able to work full-time every day of the week. That internship turned into a full-time job that I continued on there through the summers and everything. But the flexibility to come in and take classes in the evening was another thing that was significant.

[DM] It allowed you to take advantage of the opportunities being here in the state capitol. So let's talk now a little bit about your trajectory then after the program. So, tell us a little more about what you're doing now, about law school, but also your company and how the MPA, you know, helped in that trajectory.

[YL] Yeah, so, becoming accustomed to reading large, large amounts of information and digesting that, figuring out how to synthesize that and make use of it in a practical way—something developed in a master's program—is extremely important in law school. Law school is famous for making you read just loads and loads of cases, and that's true, that's exactly what you do. But having had that experience, especially doing literature reviews for some of our research projects, was a really important thing, so that helped me out a lot. I felt like I had a leg up because of that, but law school—parts of it I really enjoyed, parts of it were not so fun. I think that's pretty much everybody's experience with law school.

But through the time that I spent here, looking at research problems, understanding that this is really one of my major areas of interest, is research methods—sort of coming up with ways that are unique to operationalize the measurement of different variables and things—that was really important to me. And I wanted to find a way to use that knowledge while I was in law school. So, I started looking at different research projects, and eventually, I realized that there was something more to come out of that, those interests, along understanding judges and how they think, their emotions, how they reason in a legal way. And so that led me in the direction of starting a company.

So ultimately, the problem we're trying to solve is—you could articulate it a few different ways—but the basic problem is that if you're a litigator who's working on a case, there are different ways of pulling in information. Some of them are just reading cases, reading lots of cases, but there are also analytics that help pull insight out of that loads and loads of data that exists. So there are different levels of analytics, though, that could help a litigator. There's descriptive analytics, which just describes what happened in the past, and then it sort of leaves it to the litigator to figure out how do I practically apply this information and can I practically apply it to the case for any sort of advantage. Beyond that, there's predictive, so it's going to predict the outcome of motions in a case, which can be useful. But again, knowing that Judge X is five percent more likely to rule for the defense than the plaintiff on emotion is only so practically useful if it doesn't also tell you how to move the needle in your client's favor.

And so, we want to go a step beyond that, which hadn't really been done in legal, which is prescriptive analytics, sort of helping prescribe some of the language, some of the argument types that you should employ as a litigator to persuade a judge in your client's favor. And that's what we wanted to do. That was an unmet need that I sort of saw in legal, and so that's what we went after. And so now we're looking at a couple of things principally. One is judge sentiment—what are the emotional things that judges say about different sets of legal facts? So if you're working on a water pollution case, let's say, and you want to see the emotional language that a judge has used about those types of facts in the past, we can populate a list of quotes about that. But also, if you're making a lot of arguments in your brief for a judge, and let's say it's a textualist judge and you're not making very many textualist arguments, we can point that out and help you remedy that problem so you can make a brief that's more persuasive to that judge.

And so, it really does take us to the level of prescribing the right course of action for a litigator to help persuade a judge in their client's favor. That's something we really hadn't seen, that kind of custom-tailored information for litigators to take advantage of. So, the idea is that you can provide a competitive advantage, but it also provides some efficiencies as well and can produce a return on investment.

[DM] Can you share the company's name?

[LY] Sure, the company's legal name is *Analytica Legalis*, which is Latin for “legal analytics.” We learned that name's pretty difficult to pronounce --- not a brilliant insight.

[DM] (*laughs*)

[YL] Uh, so we're changing it to *Rhetoric*, which describes something about what we're doing. It sort of encapsulates it nicely, and the feedback about that name is much better than for *Analytica Legalis*.

[DM] Nice, okay. Yeah, cool. Um, great. Well, one of the other things that we've continued on is doing, well, really a new research project that you brought to me. Um, that again links, you

know, my interest in state government and policy diffusion, which is just the spread of policies, particularly among the states. Could you talk a little bit about why you continue to do some academic research and also your ongoing connections with the school?

[LY] Yeah, so part of the reason that I went in the path that I did, raising capital to start a company, was because it provides a lot of latitude to explore different interests of yours. And so, obviously, through the company, we spent a lot of time on research. But it also allows me to go do these side projects where I can look at publishing papers about things that just happen to be of interest to me. So, I think the paper I'm working on now is pretty significant in a couple of different ways. It's definitely an ambitious paper in terms of the number of things it wants to talk about and the new concept of federalism it puts forward. But to give some background on the paper, we're looking at some of the shifting that we're seeing in our Federalist structure in the United States. We're seeing that states are sometimes resorting to courts to enact policy change. So, sometimes, what that looks like is states passing laws that they may believe are either right on the outskirts or maybe even beyond the limits of Supreme Court precedent, in hopes of initiating review by the Supreme Court, pushing it up the ladder of the federal court system. So, that's an interesting trend that's noteworthy by itself. But there's also an interest group aspect to this, looking at how interest groups work on model legislation, they put it through state legislatures, and so there's a collaboration there that's really interesting and noteworthy. And so, I think it's a significant paper for a couple of different reasons. So, it's been exciting to work on.

[DM] Yeah, it's always nice to have those ongoing connections with our students even as they move forward from Penn State Harrisburg. You've also agreed to be on our Advisory Board, which is great. Fantastic.

[LY] I didn't know you knew that!

[DM] I do. I was the one that recommended it.

[LY] I figured. (*laughs*)

[DM] That's really important, actually, because our program is accredited by NASPAA, which is an accrediting organization for public affairs programs. That means the program meets certain standards, and one of the things we do --- we're going through reaccreditation now to be accredited for the next, I think, four to five years. And, you know, one of the things that NASPAA wants to see is us have outside eyes on things like our mission, our vision, our core structure, and things like that. So, we have an Advisory Board that includes alumni that are working in a variety of different areas to give us that kind of feedback. Yeah, so it's also a way, again, for us to keep engaged with alumni. So, we appreciate you being a part of it.

[LY] Yeah, absolutely. It's my pleasure.

[DM] We've talked about our work together and our research work together. Are there other faculty that you worked with while you were at Penn State Harrisburg? And you can talk a little bit about that.

[LY] Yeah, absolutely. So, I got to work with some other faculty looking at criminal justice issues. That involved me spending a lot of time leading and reading literature reviews about a whole bunch of different issues in criminal justice. A number of issues that also involved some things around substance use. It kind of built off my work in public policy, looking at the Office of Drug Control Policy in different states and the Opioid Command Center work that I ultimately did here. But it built off that, and it was an interesting thing being able to work across departments with other faculty outside of the MPA program. So, that was a good way to get an outside perspective on some different issues.

[DM] Yeah, and I want to pick up on that because it relates to what you said earlier about the flexibility of the program. So, we are a Master's in Public Administration program, but we're within the School of Public Affairs at Penn State Harrisburg. The school has not only a Public Administration program, but also Political Science, Public Policy, Criminal Justice, Health Policy and Administration, and Homeland Security. So, we attract a lot of students who will take the core MPA courses, which are things like research methods, budgeting, organizational theory, and human resources. They will then wrap around that with the elective courses, not only from our program but also from those other programs. Somebody can come in with an interest in criminal justice, either policy or working in the criminal justice system, earn their MPA, but focus their electives on criminal justice. Or again, we have that a lot with the Homeland Security program as well, which is an entirely online program. What that allows for students to do is they can have a hybrid program where they take some of our courses in person or online and then take MPA or Homeland Security courses online as well. That's one advantage of our school – we are broader than just public administration, and students can focus on those different areas beyond the traditional public administration. I think that's an advantage here for our school, and that's a good example of that.

You also picked up on... we've talked a bit about addiction and opioids, which is a big issue in Pennsylvania and also in West Virginia. That's something that Penn State, more broadly, but also Penn State Harrisburg has built a focus on. So, there's the Consortium for Substance Use and Abuse at Penn State that I'm a part of, and many other faculty are part of. And here at Penn State Harrisburg, we have the Douglas Pollock Center, which they work directly with community organizations that are working on the opioid epidemic and helping those addicted to opioids. There has been a lot of collaboration there -- between our school and the Pollock Center and some of those initiatives – that I think continues to grow. There are a lot of opportunities there.

I think it's also worth mentioning, too, about our program, is that Penn State Harrisburg is geographically located close to the capital, but we are also close to Penn State's Dickinson School of Law and the Penn State Hershey Medical Center. We have a joint MPA-JD program that students can take advantage of with Dickinson. We also have students that will go to Dickinson afterwards for law school. And then with the College of Medicine, we have students

who will do public health work over there -- take public health courses -- or intern at the hospital or in health administration. So, that's another nice thing about our geographic location that's it not just our campus but we have some other important Penn State campuses where students can take courses, do research at, and intern at.

So, could you share with us some maybe some anecdotes or things that you learned during your graduate school experience here that that you would share with people who are considering grad school?

[LY] So, one thing for me was like, I came in with this idea that, you know, research for me was the primary interest. I knew that it remained a primary interest all the way through the program, but I thought that looked like, uh, you know, it was going to carry me towards academia. I realized pretty quickly that's not really where I wanted to be, even though it was still my primary interest. Ultimately, I decided that's going to look like something in the private sector, something with a think tank. Those things were much more aligned with my interest over time, and I don't think I would have discovered that except for being in a program like this one where you had the flexibility to explore a whole range of interests. So, that was a significant thing that came out of being in the program. And then, again, the flexibility to look at, you know, doing a thesis rather than the capstone was really important because that allowed us to publish the paper. And publishing that paper gave me a lot of credibility when I went to raise funding from investors to show that, you know, I know something about research methods and there's this background. I've been through peer review.

One of the other things that's really interesting, that I'll note, is that there are studies about, you know, what is it, what's the best predictor of success for a startup? The best predictor is having been in a startup before. And so, I don't have that prior startup experience, but I think there's something somewhat similar in having done research because you're taking an idea, you're sending it out, you know, putting it out in the world, exposing it to criticism through the peer review process. And so, that ability to iterate, to put an idea out in the world, get feedback, mature the idea, that's really significant. That's pretty similar to what startups do as they're finding out where their niche is, where's their market, how do they produce something that's important, significant, you know, in the eye of the beholder. So, that's a significant thing that I was able to do through the program, that I'm not sure would have done elsewhere.

[DM] So, do you have any uh any advice for students who are considering graduate school for being successful in graduate school?

[LY] Sure, um, there's a lot of cliches about what you put into it is what you get out of it, and those sorts of pieces of advice, but I think there's a lot of truth in that. If you know that you want to push your career in a certain direction, you can really move the ball down the field during your master's program or during your law degree, or whatever it may be. I saw, you know, these different times in my education journey as free "runway" to work on things on the side that were significant to me. So, during the master's program, I saw that as runway to work on a research project that was important and interesting to me. During law school, I saw that as

free runway to work on a startup. And so, I think for people who have a lot of interest and want to explore them during the program, that also provides you with some runway to look into other things in other areas of your life. And having that passion, being able to explore it simultaneously doing the education, I think that's really important, really valuable.

[DM] Well, Luke, thank you so much for this conversation. I appreciate you continuing to engage with the program, and personally, I appreciate getting to see you after a few years and actually, since before the pandemic. So, it's nice to meet in person and chat. So if you're interested in more information about our program, you can contact us. You can also go to the Penn State Harrisburg website and find the Master's in Public Administration, and we'd be happy to answer any of your questions. Thank you so much, Luke.

[LY] Yeah, thanks for having me. My pleasure.

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