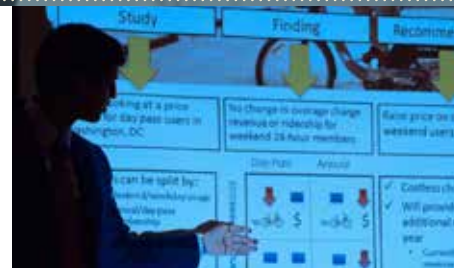


Can you turn a classroom inside out?

THE FLIPPED CLASSROOM. Active learning. Technological assistance. The future of learning looks very different. But innovation is something the Kennedy School has always been familiar with. “The school was born innovative,” says John Donahue MPP 1982, Vernon Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and faculty chair of the MPP program and of the school’s Strengthening Learning and Teaching Excellence (SLATE) Initiative. “It was a bunch of brilliant misfits who didn’t like either the content or the method of teaching in arts and sciences and set up something different.”

Today, the descendants of those brilliant misfits are back at it. Their vision for learning is a mix of traditional lecture and case-based courses, innovative experiential courses that put students in real-world situations, and a smart use of technology. Clickers, for example, help teachers get real-time feedback on what students are learning. Video allows students to view lectures on their own time and spend classes engaged with each other and with the teacher. And wishlist items include a remote teleconferencing center, where students can communicate with potential project partners without the expense of traveling. The most effective teaching, however, can still be remarkably simple in its conception: a mix of theory and practice, the dedication of a world-class teacher, and the enthusiasm of the future leaders the Kennedy School attracts.



ON THE GROUND

BY ROBERT O'NEILL
PHOTOGRAPHY BY MARTHA STEWART



IN A WINDOWLESS ROOM on the second floor of Somerville City Hall, five Kennedy School students crowd around a table and talk two officials through a spreadsheet projected on a large screen.

Switching from tab to tab, running down columns of numbers, calculations, and estimates, the students—part of Professor Linda Bilmes’s applied budgeting class, MLD 412—show the vast quantity of data they have collected and sorted on buildings the city owns and is unsure what it will do with. Former schools, nursing homes, courts, are now left abandoned or used as annexes or recreation centers. Should they be sold, taking advantage of Somerville’s current real estate boom? Leased to businesses to grow the city’s tax base? Or kept in reserve to meet the future needs of this increasingly popular and populous city?



75,754

Somerville is the most densely populated city in the state of Massachusetts with many residents living in triple-decker housing.

For the two city officials, this is a relatively familiar scene. One of them, Emily Monea MPP 2013, was a student in Bilmes’s class and was on the other side of the table just two years ago. The other, Daniel Hanley, has been working with students of MLD 412 since 2011. His position as head of the city’s SomerStat office—which uses data to track city services and performance—was created with the help of a study completed by Bilmes’s students in 2007.

» *We’ve put together this amazing cocktail of great students who really want to work, city officials who really want to work with them, and really difficult technical problems that require a lot of analytics—and it’s like magic.* « Linda Bilmes

The talk is candid. Hanley and Monea offer unvarnished opinions on the state’s use of funds or city policies and tell the students what particular features of the spreadsheet would be most valuable to Somerville and what the students can reasonably be expected to do. The atmosphere is one of trust and respect, because the relationship between the city and the school has worked really well for both parties.

The city has gone from a symbol of urban problems to an icon of modern municipal management. It is still a city of neighborhoods, where the mayor coaches the football team and the accents vary from broad Boston to Latino, Asian, and African.

But what was once “Slummerville”—a synonym for corrupt city governance; a poor cousin to Cambridge and Boston—is now a city brimming with young families, new businesses, construction, and its fair share of hipsters.

The partnership has offered the school a living laboratory, with real needs and problems and with the openness to engage an academic partner. It has helped create a new generation of students devoted to working at the municipal level (the class counts 13 mayors among its alumni) and has given the school new standing in the field (175 cities, including London and other foreign capitals, are on the waiting list of those wanting to work with the students). Together with other efforts, such as the Broadmoor project in New Orleans, launched after Hurricane Katrina by Doug Ahlers, adjunct lecturer in public policy, it has allowed HKS to pioneer experiential learning in public policy—complementing the school’s rich tradition of case teaching and core technical classes.

“We’ve put together this amazing cocktail of great students who really want to work, city officials who really want to work with them, and really difficult technical problems that require a lot of analytics—and it’s like magic,” says Bilmes, who has been teaching the advanced budgeting class since 2004.

An Opportunity

It was shortly after his election as mayor of Somerville, in November 2003, that Joseph Curtatone MC/MPA 2011 visited the Kennedy School for an Institute of Politics seminar for newly elected mayors.

He was all too familiar with the short trek to Harvard Square, which he’d taken hundreds of times as a youngster. “We’d walk to Harvard Square and sometimes pick up a bike on the way back,” Curtatone jokes. But he knew that behind the walls that separated someone like him from the quiet courtyards, there was a lot going on.

At the seminar, he attended a panel at which Bilmes spoke about performance-based budgeting.

“At the end of the panel, I approached Bilmes and told her these were the things I had talked about in my campaign,” Curtatone remembers. “And I saw an opportunity. I asked, ‘How can I and my future administration work with Harvard Kennedy School? And by the way, we have no money.’ We literally walked right into her lecture hall, and I addressed 100 students. What we saw was an incredible opportunity. The city could be an

experiential classroom for the students. The school would be a resource of knowledge for the city.”

When Bilmes asked who would be interested, 80 hands shot up.

The students set about helping the new Somerville adapt a new approach to budgeting. The old budget was abstract and opaque.

“What it told us was how much we spent,” Curtatone says. “It didn’t tell us how we were spending taxpayer money. It didn’t tell us if the money was aligned with any goals or

Digital Learning Lab

The Digital Learning Lab is not really a lab. It may not even necessarily be digital. It’s the all-encompassing title given to everything the school is considering in relation to technology and learning. Given the speed of technological advances, in education and beyond, that’s an expanding field.

At the Kennedy School, it will mean providing digital materials to students to allow them to use their classroom time not so much on lectures, as on active, engaged learning. Other schools at Harvard have developed facilities to film faculty lectures—facilities the Kennedy School lacks.

Digital learning will also mean providing teachers and students

with the ability to link the classroom to the rest of the globe. Connecting via video to anywhere in the world is something all students now takes for granted, and the school considers it an increasingly important part of the learning experience as well.

This past year, while students were using a case study on a social enterprise founded by HKS alumni, the teachers were able to bring those alumni into the classroom from their offices in Colombia. The teachers were impressed by the value of that real-time connection, but also struck by how difficult it was to link an entire classroom. The capital campaign will help fund such efforts.



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Policy Analysis Exercise Pilot Program

The Policy Analysis Exercise is the capstone of the MPP program. A student (sometimes two) identifies a client and a project and produces a product for that client addressing a policy issue. It's a rite of passage for MPP students. It's also a pressure-filled exercise, taking up large chunks of students' time during their busy last few months at the Kennedy School.

Following the success of programs like those of Linda Bilmes and Doug Ahlers, the school is looking at new ways to improve this important teaching tool. Beginning in the spring of 2013, five faculty members began to consider programs, approached potential clients, and selected students (they were looking for teams of four or five).

The pilot program, carried out during the 2013–2014 academic year, is now being assessed by Kennedy School faculty.

The teams worked with the U.S. Department of Labor on middle-class earning power, with a nonprofit in Washington, DC, on juvenile justice, with the National Park Service on an economic valuation of the national parks, on a feasibility study for a major relief agency looking to expand into Africa, and with the city of

Shanghai on a carbon emissions reduction project. The projects leveraged each faculty advisor's unique area of expertise, for example, such as the contacts in China's energy arena of Henry Lee, a senior lecturer in public policy, and the Labor Department connections of Jack Donahue, the Vernon Senior Lecturer in Public Policy, who served as assistant secretary of labor and then counselor to the secretary during the first Clinton administration.

» *The pilot program experimented in two key areas: working with teams instead of one or two students; and building an on-site experience.* «

In addition to the faculty advisor's role in constructing the project and therefore defining the learning experience, the pilot program experimented in two key areas: working with teams instead of one or two students, and building an on-site experience.

Teamwork was a primary attraction for many students, according to debriefings of each group conducted last spring. Although the experience was largely novel for many of them, they believed it reflects an approach increasingly taken in the professional world. And

officials noted that the larger groups were often able to tackle more complex problems and provide better work products to clients than can the average one-person PAE.

The on-site experience was invaluable, students said. While e-mail and teleconferencing are important tools, being on the ground (having that extra candid conversation after a meeting, or simply being able to ask for data in person rather than having to go

through layers of bureaucracy) gave students unmatched insights into the issues they were dealing with.

The school is now considering whether and how to proceed with this new approach. Questions include whether the amount of faculty involvement is sustainable, and how the school could fund travel expenses for so many students.

objectives that we all embraced, not just as an administration but as a community.”

The students broke up into teams and were embedded in every agency and department across the city, talking with directors and rank-and-file city workers. They helped convert the line-item budget into a program-based format, giving administrators and citizens insight into how much was really spent on safety, on street cleaning and snow plowing, on education. (The city's budget, produced to look like a reader-friendly brochure, is now a model of competency and transparency.)

More projects followed, including SomerStat, a performance-management initiative based on the successful CitiStat and CompStat programs in Baltimore and New York City; an evaluation of the fiscal impact of charter schools on the Somerville Public School budget; the development of a fiscal rescue package for after-school programs that were losing state grant money; an analysis of the revenue implications of changing Somerville parking citations and meter fees; and a capital plan and operating model for a new recreational center in Foss Park.

The efforts of the mayor and his administration, combined with those of Bilmes's students, had a noticeable impact. The city was soon dubbed “The Best Run City in Massachusetts” by the *Boston Globe*. More concretely, in March 2014, Standard & Poor's raised the city's bond rating to AA+, the second-highest rating on the agency's scale.

“Maybe, when you're out on the street, the impact that a Kennedy School student has had on the city is not obvious,” says Emily Monea, the former student, who is now the city's Community Preservation Act manager. “But we can certainly tell the difference at city hall. And it really is almost a cultural change that's happened at city hall, just the way we approach

problems and problem-solving. I think that from the moment the Kennedy School students started working in the city, there have been those maybe subtle but really powerful changes.”

Fieldwork

The students' work has touched not only Somerville but projects in other Massachusetts municipalities, including Hull and Newton, and even Sea Bright, New Jersey, where students helped the town explore funding options to recover from the devastation of Hurricane Sandy. And although Somerville was the first, Boston has now become the largest “customer” of the school's budgeting class. (The class receives important funding from the school's Rappaport Institute for Greater Boston.) Since 2009, students have worked on projects ranging from street lighting maintenance to vehicle fleet optimization; from the economics of trash collection to expanded use of the Harbor Islands; from a pricing strategy for the Hubway, the bike-sharing program, to the development of a 311 hotline for Boston residents.

» *Being on the ground gave students unmatched insights into the issues they were dealing with.* «

Officials from states, cities, and towns across the Northeast, and even cities in South America and Europe, have come knocking on Bilmes's door, looking to team with the school in similar projects elsewhere. Scaling the program to take on clients that are more than a Charlie Card ride away is an ambition Bilmes openly shares, but for now that is too logistically laborious.





However, regardless of whether the model stays local or expands further, it is now largely set. And beyond what it offers to towns and cities, the benefits it offers students are well established.

About two dozen students enroll each year in Bilmes's advanced budgeting class. Almost all of them, representing all the school's degree programs (although most are MPPs), have taken her introductory budgeting class, so they are familiar with the budgeting tools they'll need.

» *We're not teaching them to be financial analysts, we're teaching them to understand how to use numbers, ... asking the right questions and really understanding the dynamics of an organization in a profound way.* « Linda Bilmes

The advanced class tests students by making them work with vast reams of messy, real-world data—pulled up from various city departments, compiled in different ways, maybe even with significant gaps or wrong information—not the small, cleaned-up versions they might find in a class.

Their work for real clients, who count on the final results for important policy decisions, gives them a sense of urgency and importance. And collaborating in teams of four or five, a rare experience at the Kennedy School, compels the students to learn to share information, delegate tasks, motivate one another, and build on one another's skills.

"We're not teaching them to be financial analysts or to be budgeteers or to be accountants," Bilmes says. "We're teaching them to understand how to use numbers, how to use finance and accounting and budgeting so that they can do well in their organizations, whether they're public or private sector, asking the right questions and really understanding the dynamics of an organization in a profound way."

The lessons have not been lost on the school. The success of Bilmes's class, and that of other experiential learning offerings, has struck a chord with school officials. Not only does it represent the sort of impact the Kennedy School espouses, it incorporates the sort of hands-on learning that modern pedagogy tells us is most effective.

Jack Donahue MPP 1982, Vernon Senior Lecturer in Public Policy and faculty chair of the MPP program and of the school's Strengthening Learning and Teaching Excellence (SLATE) initiative, has followed Bilmes's progress closely. In 2013, he began to incorporate several features of the class in a pilot Policy Analysis Exercise program. Teams of four or five students (instead of the customary one or two) work with a client chosen by a faculty member on a project developed by the faculty member and the client. (See the sidebar on page 20.)

Completing the Circle

Beyond giving students an understanding of local government finance, it has given them an appetite for the work. More than one-third of class participants have gone on to work with state and local governments or associated institutions. Many of them return to the class to teach and to recruit new graduates.

And Curtatone, keenly aware of what the students and graduates have helped do for Somerville, graduated from the school in 2011 and in 2014 became a senior fellow at the Ash Center for Democratic Governance and Innovation.

"The Kennedy School fosters those personal and professional bonds that open the doors for so many things: partnerships, innovations, relationships that last a lifetime," Curtatone says. "It's been the most powerful educational experience of my life." » RDO

A CASE IN POINT »

One-quarter of the MPP first-year cohort is in a classroom, teleconferencing with two Kennedy School alumni working in Colombia. The students have studied a case on their pioneering use of social impact bonds to leverage private capital for public good—in this case for a new infrastructure project—and now they get to quiz the two directly about their work. This is how the school's case program is evolving. Already home to the largest collection of case studies—2,000—on public management and the

nonprofit sphere, the program is adding to its collection with new interactive and multimedia teaching aids. Much of this progress has been made possible by the generous contribution of **Joe Tompkins MPP 1975.**

Tompkins's donation of \$500,000 to the Kennedy School has nearly doubled the program's case output, adding 15 to 20 new studies each year and allowing the school to maintain its position as the world's largest producer of case studies in the nonprofit and government sectors.



"This is about enhancing the Kennedy School's impact on the world," Tompkins says. "What the Kennedy School is doing is important, not just in the United States but in the world. When I was there, it was relatively small and composed mostly of students from the U.S. What impresses me now is the size and the international dimension of the school. To me, the case study program is even more important now in helping the school train today's and tomorrow's leaders."