

*Miles to go before I sleep*  
By Monica C. Chen

Whether it is the pioneering Adam Smith, the brilliant John Maynard Keynes, or the strategizing Milton Friedman, a famous economist tends to be close to the hearts of many economics majors. In my case, the charm of economist and 80s icon Alex P. Keaton, coupled with his fervent passion for numbers and math, gave him an unlikely appeal even before I knew the meaning of the word “economics.” Needless to say, like Alex Keaton, I am also a person who takes full enjoyment in numbers—a fortunate result of several amazing math teachers in my youth. I take pleasure in performing two-sample t-tests; I experience excitement when taking a derivative; and I can even recite the first one hundred digits of pi in song. Thus, when I was offered the opportunity to work with an economist at the World Bank through the UCDC program, it seemed to be a more-than-perfect match.

The World Bank embodied an ideal institution to pursue my first internship in the sense that it represented a multilateral institution whose groundbreaking research permeated into solutions for alleviating poverty in the developing world. Throughout my college years, I have searched for a way in which to fuse my academic interests in development economics and immunology, and the Bank, with many of its economists examining the socioeconomic implications of communicable diseases, served as an ideal organization that complemented my intellectual pursuits. More than anything though, I hoped the Bank would serve as an outlet to broaden my perspective on the value and virtue of research in public service.

Public service is often, and sometimes solely, associated with two schools of thought. The first association derives from the idea that public service is particularly related to politics and the government. With their strong command and public visibility, government officials, prosecutors, judges, and even congresswomen and congressmen, like the Honorable Robert Matsui, reflect the common perception of the types of occupations a public servant should undertake. While there is

no doubt that the individuals in such fields serve the public immensely, one unsettling stereotype has emerged—public service is reserved only to those who possess a public profile, a charismatic charm, or eloquent oration skills. The second school of thought reflects the idea that public service is charity work in action. Again, while I do fervently believe that the work volunteers and charity workers do is invaluable to any community, there still appears to be something missing in the midst of these two common representations of public service. If public service, in its most literal definition, is providing “service to the public,” then from my internship experience, I have come to realize that the basic and applied research related to improving the human condition has become an unseen factor in public service, subtly and effectively producing the evidentiary basis to back the legislation and the morale to fight for the public good.

The spirit and desire to serve the global public has established a dominant presence throughout my internship. A good quarter of my time is spent sitting in on seminars in various departments throughout the Bank. This experience has significantly developed my knowledge on issues concerning the global poverty agenda and the role of the World Bank; but more importantly, it has proven time and again to show me the commitment of researchers to bring their novel research back to public service. The global mindset of these researchers has endowed upon me a sense that, in a world that is getting smaller by the day, there is an important need to expand the dimensions of public service. In an age where economists, statisticians, and scientists could easily choose career paths in the corporate world, the researchers at the Bank have indeed traveled the road less taken. Challenging themselves intellectually by pursuing prestigious advanced degrees and then undertaking research that may be less than popular, these individuals have utilized their skills to provide the leaders of the world with invaluable data that has the potential to improve programs and legislation. From research on the microfinance systems in West Bengal to improving female

education in Afghanistan, knowledge capital is constantly being generated in order to improve the condition of the greater global public.

Perhaps the most profound seminar I attended in my time at the Bank concerned the Millennium Villages Project and mental health. As an individual who is particularly interested in communicable and infectious diseases, I honestly was not sure how much I would appreciate a lecture that focused on mental disorders in sub-Saharan Africa. Nonetheless, the presentation by two of the leading mental health experts in the world offered a newfound perspective of mental health that I had yet to consider. I was further moved by their desire to serve those in the public who are often the most marginalized and underserved in the developing world and their personal frustration with the lack of recognition that mental health care receives as a tool to alleviate poverty. With the original intention to do my UCDC research project on the socioeconomic implications of HIV/AIDS, I have since changed my research to examine the role of multilateral organizations in promoting mental health. By “forwarding” their studies on mental health, these researchers are bringing up an issue that is not only important, but necessary to address if we are to approach extreme poverty elimination holistically. And in its own way, the upstream research that they continue to pursue and address is an example of how public service is achieved in the realm of technical and applied research.

When not attending seminars or symposiums, my internship time comprises of writing programs to produce statistics relating to the marriage transitions and HIV/AIDS in Malawi (MTHM) project at the Bank. Although this tends to sound less than appealing to the average student, I cannot help but be absolutely excited and challenged every time I work in front of the computer, my brain twisting and turning to figure out how to reproduce comparable statistics for comparison with recently collected datasets. Using my own skills in math and statistics to help support the research that elucidates many of the current and relevant issues in one of the poorest

countries in the world, I believe that the work I do, however small compared to the work that the brilliant economists at the Bank produce, contributes somewhat to the socioeconomic understandings and dimensions of development. And at the end of the day, my work can be easily summarized in charts and tables filled with statistics on various categorical and binary variables ranging from the presence of electricity in a household to the perceptions of Malawi's adolescents on divorce.

They are simply numbers. And yet, I have never failed to believe that numbers such as these, even in their purest and rawest forms, can serve as subtle actors and tools in public service. Although they are not eloquent speakers, public figures, and cannot physically interact with the people they reflect, these numbers provide the backbone for movements in social change and public service—creating an evidentiary basis to drive and motivate the public and prominent leaders to become more engaged in the community around them. These economists and sociologists are invisible public servants whose continual work to churn out data, statistics, and state-of-the-art research on the least known issues around the world is reforming the global agenda on poverty, and in that way, they are utilizing their specialized skills to serve those in the global public whose voices often go unheard. For example, while HIV/AIDS receives an incredible amount of attention with regard to orphans and adults, there is an alarming shortage of information on the effect that AIDS-initiated adult mortality has on the elderly. Since the elderly often lose their children to AIDS, they lack a principal caregiver in their old age, and at the same time, their orphaned grandchildren tend to be placed in their care. Acknowledging this as an important issue that needs attention, the economist that I work with at my internship has begun to research this topic in further detail, examining potential statistical relationships and socioeconomic effects. By addressing such overlooked issues, these public servants are augmenting the potential scope and foundation of public service.

There is a story in the public health arena that is often reiterated to students time and again. Sick bodies are flowing down a river and the people downstream tirelessly pull these afflicted individuals out of the river in order to administer the necessary care. Yet, while they continue to work downstream, they fail to recognize that by solving the concerns upstream the river, the problems downstream will likely become resolved. Throughout my internship, I have realized that this type of duality is a fundamental component in public service. As that common thread of human decency links us together in our drive to serve the public, we must be ever aware of the fact that, in conjunction with our efforts to directly aid our community, there needs to be a strive to promote prevention in the realm of public service. I personally believe that Matsui had a clear grasp of this concept. In his work on public safety, he realized that as the city of Sacramento grew, flood control solutions had to be addressed before future flood problems occurred. Furthermore, his efforts in promoting health care access for children reflected his understanding that addressing the health concerns of the young prevents future problems in their health, leading to positive externalities for the public. Likewise, as I watch the researchers at my internship consistently developing models and data, I know that, like Matsui, they are engaged in their own form of public service. For in the long run, their research is creating a groundwork that will develop solutions for the public concerns of the present while preventing the problems that the public may face in the future.

Reflecting on the life of Matsui, I am amazed at his dedication to public service and his ability to utilize his personal skills and experiences for the public good. Moreover, it is difficult not to be moved by his commitment and belief in the United States government, even as a Japanese-American who experienced internment himself. Perhaps he realized that no institution is completely perfect and the desire to serve the public should have no boundaries. In his own way, he channeled his skill and aptitude in law and political science to promote issues in health care access for children and public safety. And as for one his finest achievements, he effectively employed his legal talents in

influencing the Japanese American Redress Act. Till the very end, Matsui served the public the best way he knew how, mastering a personal and intimate approach to public service.

The spirit of public service is never ending, and I believe that Robert Matsui, in his role as a public servant to the United States government, and more importantly, to his constituents, was a key example of service in perpetual motion. When I think of those who participate in the many aspects of public service, and especially those I have met at the Bank, I cannot help but think of the Robert Frost poem I learned in my freshman poetry seminar which subtly ended with the phrase “and miles to go before I sleep, and miles to go before I sleep.” Indeed, I do have miles to go—miles to go before global poverty is eradicated, miles to go before neglected diseases are finally treated efficiently in the developing world, and miles to go before mental health care is seen as more than just a luxury in health care promotion. I do have miles to go; and like Matsui, I will be serving the public in my own personal way—one statistic at a time.