



**To: Prospective Students in Study Group on “Leadership and Governance in Turbulent Times”**

**From: Tom Perez, Visiting Fellow at the Watson Institute  
December 14, 2018**

I invite you to participate in a Study Group that will explore problem solving in today’s challenging world. This non-credit Study Group will meet five Thursdays in the Spring semester, starting on February 21.

In today’s turbulent times, the journey to form a more perfect union often appears as difficult as ever. The “shortest distance theory” is seldom part of the playbook of progress in Washington, D.C. and elsewhere. A host of factors have created a political atmosphere of hyper-partisanship in which effective governance is elusive, and principled compromise is frequently derided as a four-letter word. As a result, public confidence in our political institutions, especially at the federal level, is at a low ebb.

I have had the privilege throughout nearly three decades of public service to work in all three branches of the federal government, as well as in state and local government. I have run for office, and have experienced success as well as setbacks. My education at Brown laid an important academic and ethical foundation for my future work. At the same time, as a student, I had a strong feeling that there was often a wide gap between what I was learning in the classroom, and how things actually got done in the real world.

One of the main goals of this Study Group is to bridge the gap between theory and practice. Specifically, I want to give you a front row seat to problem solving in challenging times in a governmental setting—the “how does it really happen” (or not happen) dimension that is often absent from traditional classroom dialogue. Through a series of case studies of contemporary problems, we will wrestle with the core components of problem solving, and will tackle contemporary public policy issues in a variety of critical contexts. The case studies will focus on the following areas:

- Economic Issues
- Health Care
- Federal Effort to Address Income Inequality and Wage Stagnation
- The Future of Work in an Everchanging Economy
- Immigration
- Public Leadership in Turbulent Times
- The Role of the Media in a Turbulent World
- Problem Solving at the State and Local Governmental Level

The broader goals of the Study Group are:

1. **Bridging theory and practice and asking important normative questions** - As noted above, this Study Group will dig into the nitty gritty of problem solving at a federal, state and local level, that is, the “how does it really happen” dimension. Through a series of case studies tackling the issues outlined above, we will examine how problems get solved (or fail to get solved), and identify and wrestle with a variety of legal, administrative, communications, political, and other considerations. **Equally importantly**, we will examine the normative questions of how *should* these vexing challenges be resolved. As we dissect vexing issues, I will challenge you to “build a better mouse trap,” that is, devise a better way to bring seemingly warring factions together.
2. **Interacting with Leaders who have been in the fray-** Throughout the semester, participants will hear from a series of guest speakers who will reflect on their experiences and offer their insights into how they tackled (or were tackled by) a particular challenge.
3. **Introducing a Problem Solving Paradigm-** While every issue is different, and many problems require unique approaches and a healthy dose of creative thinking and mid course correction, there are some basic tenets of problem solving that can frequently guide a leader’s actions. Throughout the semester, you will be introduced to a problem-solving framework that can guide action in a variety of settings.
4. **Wrestling with Ethical Challenges-** Invariably, ethical challenges will arise in the course of wrestling with a particular issue, and the cases studies will allow you to work through these issues, and develop a framework for resolution.
5. **Wrestling with Leadership Challenges-** The issues that we will discuss raise important questions about leadership. Throughout the semester, we will step back and understand principles of leadership that can be gleaned from the issue at hand.
6. **Learning to how to debate hot button issues in a professional manner-** Many of the issues that will be addressed in this Study Group are hot button issues for which there are passionate views on each side. Our goal is to create a robust space in which participants can learn how to advocate with passion *and* mutual respect, that is, learning how to disagree without being disagreeable. This is increasingly a lost art in Washington, DC and elsewhere.
7. **Inspiring Careers in Public Service-** Times may be chaotic, and one might be tempted to run away from public service. It is a goal of this Study Group to inspire you to pursue a career in public service by gaining a more granular understanding of the remarkable opportunities that present themselves to build a more perfect union. While I have undoubtedly had some challenging, unpleasant moments, and no shortage of setbacks, I treasure the opportunities I have had to work in public service, and I hope to persuade you to follow or discover your passion for public service.

## **Study Group Materials and Classroom Rhythm and Flow**

There will be readings that will be assigned for each class. These readings will provide the foundational materials for class discussions. I recognize that each of you has other class responsibilities that go on your transcript. As such, I will attempt not to overload you with reading. At the same time, the more you read and the more prepared you are for class, the more you can meaningfully participate, and the more you will learn. As noted above, we will have guest speakers in a number of classes, and I will frequently attempt to arrange lunches or more informal settings in which we can interact with the speaker. Our speakers last year included Gina McCarthy, former Administrator of the Environmental Protection Agency; Denis McDonough, former chief of staff to President Obama; Governor Gina Raimondo; Mayor Jorge Elorza, and others. I am confident we will have an engaging group of speakers this term.

## **Meeting Times**

The Study Group will meet on the following Thursdays from 2:30-4:00.

**February 21**

**March 7**

**March 14**

**March 21**

**April 4**

In addition, I will attempt to be available for informal gatherings on Thursdays, and will have office hours to continue discussions and address other issues that students may want to tackle.

## **Career Services**

I hope to carve out ample time during my presence at the Watson Institute to brainstorm with you about your future, and address any questions that you have. I want to assist in following your dreams and identifying your passions.

## **Class One**

Our guest speakers will begin in class two. The assignment for our first class on October 4 is to study the Fact Pattern outlined below and be prepared to help your client.

### **Fact Pattern**

PODER Rhode Island is a grassroots nonprofit organization in Providence that serves the low income immigrant populations of Rhode Island. PODER has 20 employees and has a number of divisions, including the following:

- Employment and Training Center, which helps place clients in jobs;
- Education Department, which provides English classes and vocational training programs;
- Advocacy Department, which does legislative advocacy at a state and local level on behalf of clients; and
- Legal Department, which provides legal services.

Juan Osuna is a Providence resident who is an immigrant from Guatemala. He would love to find a full time job so that he can take care of his wife and two small children, and continue to send money home to his mother in Guatemala. He has had trouble finding regular work, and as a result, is living day to day, week to week. His mother relies on his remittances to buy medicine.

Juan worked for the past four weeks at Restaurante Estrella in North Providence. He worked there once before for two weeks and liked the work because he got paid in cash at the end of each shift. Restaurante Estrella has some of the least expensive entrees in North Providence, and does a robust business, including many political leaders. He came to your office because although he was promised \$11 dollars an hour, he has not been paid. When he asked his supervisor, he was told that his work was substandard and he did not deserve to be paid. His supervisor fired him and threatened to report him to immigration services if he filed a complaint.

You are part of the Senior Leadership team at PODER, and you were handling case intake on the day that Juan came in seeking your help.

**What are your potential options for assisting Juan?**

**What additional information do you need to know in order to make informed recommendations to Juan?**

**What do you think is Juan's best course of action?**

Be prepared to discuss a comprehensive plan of action for Juan.