

# Washington Statistical Society Leadership Seminar

Director's Remarks as Prepared for Delivery

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- Good afternoon, folks. It's comforting to see so many familiar faces. In fact, I feel this is a bit of a homecoming for me. I've enjoyed being a member for many years. I even served as a board member just over a decade ago. So it's really important that I acknowledge all my friends and colleagues who are members of WSS. And if you aren't a friend or colleague, then please know that I'd like to meet you!
- I'm delighted to have an opportunity to be part of a Washington Statistical Society event. It's an honor to be here in my role as your director of the U.S. Census Bureau. And I hope you noticed... I did say your director. This is a position that serves the public... it serves our nation, and that includes everyone viewing today.
- That's how I'm approaching my role: as a public servant in a leadership position who's accountable to you and the public. It's part of the reason I accepted this invitation and why I actively engage the public every chance I get, be they professional associations, advocacy groups, academia, people from tribal lands, local community organizations, Congress, everyone.
- And with that, let's move on to the festivities. Today, I'll talk to you about two things. The first is my leadership role at the U.S. Census Bureau... how I think about it, and how I apply it. The second is the independence of a federal statistical agency like the one I happen to lead. Independence is and should be a core value of any federal statistical agency.
- I'll begin with a few words about leadership. So... what exactly is leadership? Well, if you look it up in a dictionary, the definition will talk about things like:
  - Leading a team for the 'win'
  - Managing people to realize a mission or achieve a goal
  - Being a good steward
- You might also read about different types of leaders, such as autocratic, democratic, laissez-faire, and transformational.
- From my view, leadership is all of the above – plus a lot more. And to me, none of those characterizations really matter. Why? Because leadership is too personal. And applying it is too situational.
- There are times when I am faced with a situation where I choose to be an autocrat, while other times when I feel the democratic method works best. What matters is what you believe leadership to be, not what someone or some book tells you it is. And what matters is how you use who you are as a human being to motivate and create the person you are as a leader.
- Each leader has their own strengths and limitations. So let me tell you about how I have done that. My approach to leadership requires three inputs.

- The first, of course, is knowing who you are, and bringing your whole self to the table. This includes recognizing your strengths and limitations because no leader is ever perfect. It also includes knowing your values and leveraging them in all that you do – in your decisions, in your interactions, and in the processes that you put into place.
- The second is having a knowledge about the state of the organization that you lead. This includes its mission, culture, policies and practices, infrastructure, budgets, and strategic directions. And with an organization as big as the Census Bureau, it takes a little time to learn how the place operates. Hey, I'm still learning!
- Anyway, in a director role, I lead a group of senior managers much differently than I would lead a project team of junior and mid-level technical staff. And I lead people differently in a nonprofit research organization or a professional statistical association than I would in a federal statistical agency. The bottom line is that organizational context and knowledge matters.
- And the third input is one's goals and priorities. They need to advance the mission of the organization and flow from the organizational values. Moreover, the people in organization you lead must know them, they must know why they are being espoused, as well as what they can help accomplish.
- OK, with all that as background, I'll now say a few words about who I am as a leader who also happens to be a political appointee of the largest federal statistical agency.
- As some of you know, my vocational interests have historically focused on statistics and helping people. And those two contribute to the core values that guide my work and my leadership.
- For instance, I believe that federal statistical agencies should embrace scientific integrity, objectivity, independence and transparency. I, too, espouse those values with a passion. And I believe that data relevance and timeliness are often underappreciated aspects of data quality that impact utility of data.
- But I also champion the integration of diversity, equity, and inclusion – or DEI – into the workplace. They can be highly beneficial to any organization. In fact, I believe that utilizing these principles in the daily work of a federal statistical agency can promote a more talented workforce. DEI also motivates innovation, critical thinking, and excellence. This includes higher levels of data accuracy, relevance, and utility.
- I cherish and am in awe of career civil staff at federal statistical agencies. These dedicated staff are the cogs that produce statistical products and strengthen our democracy by doing so.
- As a leader of a federal statistical agency, I see my leadership role as that of guiding the organization by setting priorities while empowering staff to excel at their work, be it administrative, managerial, technical, statistical... whatever. All such functions are critical in achieving our organizational mission.
- I also see my leadership role as being an enabler, one who grows leaders and nurtures talent by setting priorities and objectives, articulating organizational values, and then giving space for innovation and measured risk taking.
- In this context, I seek to add value to existing leadership, rather than handing down decisions and making changes just to brand them as my own. My principal focus is that of helping.
- Next, I believe it's critical to lead by example. For me, that means being supportive and aspirational while challenging staff to be creative and excel at their work. It means demonstrating how I'm bringing my whole self to the table, and showing firsthand how doing so creates diverse perspectives that add value. It leads me to tie into and strengthen existing initiatives, preferably ones that are employee inspired.
- It also means being inclusive by seeking and listening to feedback before finalizing decisions – and, of course, being willing to make hard decisions as needed.

- Related to that, I see the role of Director as being a “heat shield” for the career staff – I take the heat. And the credit belongs to the career staff.
- The strategies I’ve just articulated allow me to pursue my leadership priorities for the Census Bureau. Chief among them is pursuing the “impossible dream:” I’d like to augment and evolve the work culture to infuse the principles of diversity, inclusion and accessibility in all we do.
- In that vein, I’m reinforcing our ongoing transformation and modernization initiatives that the agency has undertaken. All such initiatives can benefit from leveraging DEI from conception to implementation and assessment.
- I’m also working to invigorate and expand our stakeholder and partner initiatives, especially those representing communities of color. Our engagement will be continuous. Between decennial censuses we’ll show tangible benefits of census data to those communities.
- We hope this will engender participation in our data collections in historically undercounted communities which in turn will lead to statistical data products that better represent all of our nation.
- OK, that’s what I wanted to say about leadership. Now let’s pivot to another topic related to my leadership role – the importance of the independence of federal statistical agencies, specifically the U.S. Census Bureau.
- I’ll start with a few words on organizational values.
- Independence of our statistical work is a core value of the Census Bureau, along with scientific integrity, objectivity, transparency, and of course, diversity, equity, inclusion and accessibility.
- Taken together, these values effectively guide the planning and decision making of the Bureau to pursue our mission to be the nation’s leading source of quality data on our nation’s people and economy.
- Independence is what protects a federal statistical agency from impugning its scientific integrity and objectivity. It helps sustain the trust of our nation. The Bureau must never cede to outside influence to adjust or otherwise politicize its products in support of a particular message or obscure reality from the American people.
- In fact, the principal federal Statistical Agencies jointly developed and released a statement committing to scientific integrity that includes a key principle that I’ll now quote:
  - “a Federal statistical agency must have a strong position of independence within the government.”
- Ok so now let’s dive deeper into the director’s role. As you know, the Census Bureau director is a politically appointed position requiring senate approval. And appointments align with a five-year term to intentionally overlap with succeeding administrations in support of this being a scientific managerial role.
- In contrast, the Bureau’s deputy director and Chief Operating Officer is a member of career staff, responsible for day-to-day operations.
- This mix of political appointee and career staff leadership can be leveraged to bolster the independence of a statistical agency. That is the approach I am taking in this role.
- In fact, at my senate confirmation hearing last July, I made it explicitly clear that “I am not a politician...” Nor do I wish to become one. I hold as sacrosanct the critical role that the Census Bureau plays to uphold our democracy by publishing data on who we are as a nation and doing so as an independent statistical agency.
- I understand that independence can only be achieved with a statistical agency that maintains its scientific integrity, objectivity and transparency. That means statistical products must be developed, controlled and disseminated by career staff.

- It also means that the director must be cognizant of actual as well as perceived undue influence on the Bureau's operations and statistical products. And by the way, that includes actions by the director him- or herself.
- Now, I do some very specific things as director to protect the Bureau's independence. They are all driven by my values, but let me give you a flavor with some examples.
- As many of you know I am a sampling statistician and policy researcher with lots of experience in survey operations – as in data collections and data processing. I often come up with wild and crazy ideas at meetings with various teams working on things like the decennial census, the ACS, SIPP and ACS, and so forth.
- I like to suggest ideas to consider but, I stress that these are suggestions, not mandates, and that the career staff need to decide for themselves the worthiness of the suggestion and whether they want to act on the idea.
- I am also careful to avoid creating a risky precedent. For example, I would never want to dictate the value of the privacy-loss budget for a statistical product that uses differential privacy for disclosure avoidance.
- On the other hand, I do encourage the development of a metric that reflects the balance between utility and privacy and the need to create a more efficient – as in less time consuming – process for finalizing data products that are protected against disclosure.
- Similarly, I'd never dictate how our Population Estimates are to be calculated or what data are to be used. Instead, I actively encourage developing and evaluating improvements and I make it an institution priority to have those efforts properly resourced and budgeted.
- By the way, it's important to note that in all areas of statistics the subject matter experts know far more than I do, and I very much like it that way.
- Having said that, I still find creative ways to think differently about a problem at hand and come up with some suggestions. But the experts know best.
- Dissemination of results is also a key area where independence must be maintained. The career staff is careful about the timing of when to share findings with me. There are norms that guide the timing and sharing of such information, and I abide by them.
- For example, I don't see the results of key economic indicators produced by the Census Bureau until they are released to the public. Another example involves the Post-Enumeration Survey which is a part of our quality assessments for the 2020 Census. Early consultation could create a misperception of meddling. So I am apprised after the results are finalized.
- I see my role as facilitating the dissemination of our data and statistics, not contributing to their formation. I respect the rule of law and my "chain of command," so to speak, which includes the U.S. Department of Commerce, the White House, and Congress. That included my role to reinforce agency independence.
- For instance, I do not weigh in on draft legislation. But do work with the executive and legislative branches to clarify data products and address their data needs.
- I also think that independence and transparency go hand in hand. Transparency allows us to reveal the true nature of statistical products. We communicate that nothing is perfect, that data are collected and processed to be fit for purpose.
- Moreover, all statistical products and strengths and limitations, and knowing the limitations actually adds to the utility of the data product. Such transparency makes it even more difficult for outside influences on methods and results.

- In the spirit of transparency, I make it a point to speak publicly about our statistical releases as well as all things Census. Being an active public voice of the Census Bureau is an important part of preserving our independence.
- One last point about my leadership is to disclose that I am a work in progress. I don't claim to know everything or to have everything right. But please know that my heart and my values are in the right place to support the Bureau.
- I have had – and will continue to have – my ups and downs, just like everyone else. And I look forward to learning and growing from everyone I work with including the career staff, stakeholders, the Department of Commerce, the White House, and everyone else.
- Oh, in closing I would be remiss if I did not tell you about the amazing secret weapon we have at the Bureau to preserve independence. Perhaps the greatest guardian of an independent Census Bureau is the Census Bureau staff, themselves.
- I have never met a more committed set of professionals committed to mission and committed to upholding the U.S. Constitution than the Census Bureau staff. They are the true guardians of Census Bureau independence, the last line of defense when all else fails.
- I have full confidence in the integrity and commitment of the staff, and that is why a major focus of my leadership is that of supporting and enabling them to excel at their work.
- Thank you for your attention. It's such an honor to serve. Now, I would love to hear your questions.