

Using Focus Groups and Stakeholder Surveys to Revise the MPA Curriculum

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ABSTRACT

Data generated by focus groups and stakeholder surveys indicated that revisions were necessary in three components of the MPA curriculum at Western Michigan University. Due to the strong support accorded to written and oral presentation skills, their prominence in MPA courses has been enhanced. Research design and statistics generated the lowest survey scores, while strategies for locating information and best practices garnered stronger support. These results, in conjunction with focus group feedback and informal discussions, revealed a disconnect between quantitative skills as taught by academics, and the time constraints under which administrators function. Consequently, the quantitative courses have changed to incorporate a scientific method that can be accomplished within the time constraints of agency personnel. The surveys also suggested that diversity and the related topics of group dynamics, consensus-building, and negotiation will require additional attention in the MPA curriculum.

INTRODUCTION

During the past decade, an iterative Masters of Public Administration (MPA) curriculum review and revision process at Western Michigan University reflected, to varying degrees, the University of Baltimore's backward-mapping process (Durant, 1997). Although the data sources differed, MPA programs at both institutions began the process by defining the skills, knowledge, and values that students should possess upon completing the degree. This step was followed by a determination of whether, in which required courses, and in what manner each element should be taught, and what is the extent of overlap among required courses. Experiences in both programs clearly indicate that the process can be a challenge for faculty. It can also reveal additional skills, knowledge, and values that the students need, but that the faculty cannot provide, either because of academic background, willingness, or time (Durant, 1997).

External forces at both institutions furnished the impetus for overcoming barriers to the study's implementation. The University of Baltimore responded to significant reductions in state financial support and accompanying demands

for outcomes measurement. The process at Western Michigan University was facilitated by the desire to enhance the off-campus program's financial viability by increasing student enrollments at several sites. Even though the origins of the curriculum-review processes differed, they both reduced the influence of academic turf, and the constraints imposed by the faculty's skills, knowledge, and desire to minimize retooling (Durant, 1997).

In order to establish the context in which the backward-mapping process transpired, the next section outlines the evolution of the curriculum review and revision process at Western Michigan University (WMU). The third section reviews the data generated by focus groups and surveys of students, alumni, and employers. The findings' impact on the MPA curriculum and the study's conclusions are addressed in the final two sections.

EVOLUTION OF THE CURRICULUM-REVIEW PROCESS

As was the case at the University of Baltimore, at WMU a mid-1990s MPA curriculum review and revision was based on the faculty's perceptions of key skills, knowledge, and values. There was, however, one important difference between that review and this one. The University of Baltimore faculty delineated a list of critical elements before examining the MPA curriculum. Western Michigan University faculty, on the other hand, based their analysis on whether important elements should be added to each course. Due to the incremental approach, each faculty member's capacity to protect his or her course's turf was maximized, while the amount of time dedicated to the curriculum-revision process was minimized. Because the incremental approach was not accompanied by a prohibition against increasing the total number of credit-hours, the faculty elected to split the quantitative-methods course into a statistics course, and a research methods course, instead of requiring a major realignment of course content.

During the next four years, questionnaires distributed to students enrolled in the program's capstone course, plus informal faculty-student discussions, revealed dissatisfaction with the extent of repetition among required courses. In order to address this issue and undertake a more in-depth review of the curriculum, a second-phase grid was developed to compare the content of MPA courses to the list of recommended skills, knowledge, and values fostered by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA).¹ The process of highlighting gaps in the curriculum's coverage generated a few revisions in required and elective courses. For example, the ethics components of the Foundations of Public Administration course, and several other courses, were strengthened. In order to tailor several of the required courses to students' needs, the budgeting, human resources, and law courses were moved from the core to the concentrations. These transfers and resulting changes in course content enable students to focus on skills, knowledge, and values that cut across fields, as well as those that

are unique to their concentrations. Greater congruence between the curriculum and student interests was also facilitated by adding public-management and human-resources-administration concentrations to preexisting concentrations in nonprofit and health-care administration.

The use of backward-mapping during the second phase reduced the constraints imposed by turf and faculty skills and knowledge, but not to the extent exhibited at the University of Baltimore. With the exception of (1) creating two new concentrations, (2) transferring three courses from the core to the concentrations, and (3) infusing concentration-specific content into each course, the process produced only minor adjustments to the MPA curriculum.

In 2001, the faculty embarked on a third-phase, two-year process of reviewing the MPA mission statement and goals, as well as defining the program's objectives and assessment mechanisms. During the final year of the process, an analysis of enrollments and the market for each of several diverse MPA-delivery sites was supplemented by an informal discussion with students and alumni who worked for one of the major employers of WMU's MPA degree-holders. The feedback from this session, and subsequent discussions with other students and part-time faculty, suggested that there are additional opportunities for strengthening the MPA curriculum. In order to assess the extent to which these sentiments were representative, and to minimize method-specific factors that mitigate reliability and validity (Roberts, 2001; Williams, Plein, & Lilly, 1998), focus groups were conducted and surveys were distributed to students, alumni and employers.

The following two sections describe the study's methodology and the impact of its findings on the MPA curriculum.

METHODOLOGY

During the 2003-2004 academic year, informal meetings with students and alumni indicated that the MPA program was not adequately addressing the needs of government and health-care employees. A common theme of these meetings was the import of program-management skills. Several participants stated they were constantly bombarded by workloads that exceeded their available time. As a result, time management and prioritizing work within the broader context of project management were deemed to be essential skills.

Because the MPA curriculum did not adequately address a portion of these topics, the MPA faculty decided to systematically solicit feedback from the program's students and alumni, along with the agencies that are prone to hire MPA graduates. A two-step process of focus groups and surveys was employed, in order to identify the need for curricular changes and meet the needs of most students. The first step involved individuals who earned the greatest grade point averages because prior informal discussions indicated they were the most likely to identify neglected curriculum components, propose innovative changes, and think "outside of the box."

Students who were eligible for Pi Alpha Alpha induction were invited to participate in focus groups. Participation was limited to individuals who qualified for induction after 2001, because they were familiar with the redefinition of the MPA core, the addition of two concentrations, and the shifting of three courses from the core to the concentrations, which were implemented during the Fall 2001 semester.

During March and April, 2004, 20 students and alumni participated in focus groups that were held where MPA courses are offered. Each of the discussions was facilitated by a Sociology doctoral student and her associate. The doctoral students — not public administration faculty — were selected as facilitators for three reasons. First, the doctoral students had more training and experience in running focus groups than did the public administration faculty. Second, participants were more likely to be candid with individuals who were not associated with the MPA program. Finally, the propensity to engage in the focus group discussion also was facilitated by assurances of anonymity. The final report, which did not include identifying information, was the only material that the facilitator shared with the public administration faculty.

The report contained primary themes that were mentioned by at least three focus groups, and secondary themes that were voiced by at least two focus groups. In order to minimize the possibility of developing a curriculum that was geared to the needs of a select group of students and alumni, the focus group themes were integrated into a survey that was then distributed to a random sample of MPA students, alumni, and employers. The survey also included three to four topics that the faculty identified as essential for each required course. Although most of the topics were components of existing courses, there were some items that the faculty felt should be added to the curriculum. The inclusion of these components assessed the extent to which the curriculum was providing relevant job-related competencies and skills (Roberts, 2001; Tompkins, Laslovich, & Greene, 1996), while the survey's third component measured the import of each MPA goal.

A systematic random sample of 620 MPA students and alumni was derived from alphabetized files of active students and graduates. Nineteen of the surveys were returned because students no longer lived at the addresses listed for them. The sample of employers from the state's southwest quadrant included (1) directors of urban hospital emergency rooms, operating rooms, human resource departments, and nursing departments; (2) directors of the region's largest nonprofit organizations; (3) appointed administrators, fire chiefs, police chiefs, and public works directors of municipalities with more than 2,500 inhabitants; and (4) directors of state-agency human resources departments.

DATA ANALYSIS

As indicated in the previous section, the primary and secondary focus group themes were incorporated into a survey that was sent to MPA students, alumni,

and employers prone to hiring MPA graduates.

Focus Group Themes

There was a strong consensus among focus group participants that their biggest challenges included:

- A lack of time,
- Insufficient financial and staff resources,
- Large amounts of information to process and effectively communicate to diverse audiences, and
- Strategic staff- and project-management in a bureaucratic and political work environment.

The participants, in other words, overwhelmingly contended that there was insufficient time to complete all of their assigned tasks. The primary impediments to completing assignments are constant interruptions from phone calls and an incessant stream of e-mails. The challenge of managing one's time is magnified by budget cuts and an expanding volume of regulation. The effects of these factors were summarized by a participant who stated

The bureaucracy is terrible; it's bad enough to get your approvals to go through when you've got money. But, when the State is financially constrained, you have to jump through 24 hoops to get something that [previously] might have taken only four hoops to get. So everybody is cautious of money, which makes it a lot more difficult, and a lot more work to get what we need in the way of resources (Mullins & Curtis, 2004, p. 7).

There also is an avalanche of information from e-mails, regulations, laws, policies, etc. that require interpretation and communication to staff, policy makers, and the public. These challenges occur in conjunction with a more diverse workforce that enhances the need for effective conflict-management, negotiation, and the ability to coordinate staff efforts across organizational boundaries and administrative levels.

When asked to identify the skills needed to address these challenges, focus group participants primarily dwelt on effective communication and managerial tasks. Essential communication skills included the ability to write clearly, convert bureaucratic language into information that is easily understood by many audiences, make effective oral presentations, and the ability to think on one's feet in front of a group. Many of the managerial tasks replicated challenges arising from workplace diversity, and operating across organizational boundaries. More specifically, conflict-management, mediation, and negotiation were subsumed under the general category of personnel management in a multicul-

tural environment, and with policy makers who focus on different agendas and goals. Other key managerial skills included financial- and risk-management; leadership; time- and project-management; performance-management and measurement; and research skills.

Three of the four focus groups struggled to define tools that could assist them in addressing the challenges they confront at work. Items mentioned included (1) computer software such as Access, PowerPoint, Excel, and GIS; (2) analytic tools for cost-benefit analysis and project-management, as well as budget-, economic-, and policy-analysis; (3) listservs, professional associations, and literature that provide opportunities to network and update skills and knowledge; and (4) research skills to identify variables, collect primary and secondary data, select appropriate statistical tests, and interpret the results.

Pertinent theories listed by the groups included political, economic, organizational, ethical, and communication. Political and economic theories promote an understanding of the internal and external contexts in which agencies operate. Insights into their agencies' reactions to these elements, internal dynamics, and relations with other entities are provided by organizational theory. Ethical theories were listed because they pertain to agency and individual actions and policies, while communications theory facilitates effective interchanges among diverse groups. An additional theme was the importance of linking theories to their work environment, thereby gaining a better understanding of the world in which they operate.

ANALYSIS OF SURVEY RESPONSES

There was a 20-percent response rate for the student and alumni survey. Analysis of the respondents' characteristics indicate that they are representative of the population. More specifically, an equivalent percentage of MPA graduates and survey respondents completed the program in each of the past four decades. Approximately 50 percent of the program graduates and 50 percent of survey respondents were male. Because the program's data base does not include individuals' ages or years of work experience when they began the program, a comparison of these traits for survey respondents and MPA graduates is not possible.

Forty percent of the employers responded, with considerable variation among sectors. Respondents who were employed by local governments were overrepresented, while employees from health care, nonprofit, and state human resources agencies were underrepresented.

Although MPA program goals were defined prior to convening the focus groups and distributing the survey to students, alumni, and employers, the focus groups and survey results supported most of the goals. As indicated by Table 1, six of the 10 MPA goals garnered an average score of greater than 4.0 on a 5.0 Likert scale. The goals in descending order of mean survey scores were (1) the development of leadership and managerial skills, (2) effective writing and oral

presentation skills, (3) administrative skills, (4) an understanding of the social, political, economic, and cultural variables that affect an agency’s policy options, (5) the ability to use a variety of computer software features such as spreadsheets and data bases, and (6) valuing diversity. The final goal was the only instance where there was a significant difference between the means of the student/alumni and the employer surveys. (See Table 1.)

Research is the only area in which the MPA goals and the focus groups’ primary themes diverged from the survey results. Although the MPA goals and focus groups addressed the importance of research, the surveys’ lowest mean survey scores were generated by research methods and the integration of faculty research into classroom discussions. Anecdotal evidence suggests that the differing reactions emanated from different data-collection formats and connotations of “research methods.” Focus groups provided an opportunity to examine how informed decision-making and research contribute to desirable outcomes, while survey responses were constrained by the term “research methods.” This difference is not trivial. Research-methods courses and the journal articles that populate course syllabi emphasize the import of literature reviews, and set the foundations for defining useful hypotheses and methodologies. Although students understand the merits of the scientific method, the requisite resources for completing literature reviews and research processes are often alien to the world in which public administrators function. Given their workloads and political environments, agency personnel either do not have sufficient time to conduct literature reviews, or choose to collect information on strategies that other ju-

Table 1. Likert-Scale Scores for MPA Goals

	Employers		Students/Alumni	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Leadership competencies	4.7	0.69	4.6	0.65
Managerial competencies	4.6	0.56	4.5	0.65
Oral presentation skills	4.4	0.78	4.4	0.70
Writing skills	4.4	0.89	4.3	0.98
Administrative competencies	4.4	0.75	4.4	0.84
Understanding the environment in which administrators operate	4.3	0.85	4.2	0.79
Information technologies	4.1	0.83	4.1	0.88
Valuing diversity	4.1	1.00	3.7	1.09
Public and community service	3.8	1.11	3.4	1.12
Research skills	3.3	1.02	3.4	1.06
Integrating faculty research into instruction	2.9	1.12	2.8	1.07

risdictions have used to address problems. The administrators' relevant research methods/strategies, therefore, include the elements cited by focus group participants — listservs, professional associations, best practices, sources of benchmarking data, etc. One focus group participant cited the importance of converting a supervisor's directive into a strategy for collecting and interpreting data. Even though students and alumni would support a focus on defining research questions, and developing strategies for economically collecting and interpreting data, focus group discussions suggest that the academic's reliance on journals contributes to survey respondents with low-priority attachments to research methods.

The preceding results match the findings of a California State study that employed the Delphi method. In this instance, as well as in the Western Michigan University survey, writing, oral presentation, and leadership skills were among the top-five skills or goals. Although an estimated 40 percent of participants in the Delphi study were academics, literature reviews also garnered the lowest scores for this study (Saint-Germain, Ostrowski, & Dede, 2000). Conjectures concerning the literature review scores were not included in the Delphi article. However, differences between academic and practitioner literature searches, and research methods, are a logical, common thread between the two studies.

The low mean survey scores for encouraging involvement in public and community service reflect an emphasis on developing the skills and knowledge that are essential for survival. The emphasis on coping skills is clearly conveyed by the focus group's primary theme of developing the requisite skills and knowledge for effectively addressing the imbalance between the supply of, and demand for, resources. Given this perspective, it follows that survey respondents perceived service as a distraction, rather than a central goal.

When queried about the challenges confronting them at work, the survey participants' responses reflect those of the focus groups. Table 2 reveals that human resources, planning, insufficient resources, and the management of people, time, and inter-organizational relations all generated mean survey scores exceeding 4.0, on a five-point scale. As is suggested by the focus group's primary themes, these results reflect a concern that there is insufficient task-completion time on a worker's agenda. (See Table 2.)

Human resources is the only challenge where there is a significant difference in the means for employers, on the one hand, and students/alumni on the other. Table 3 indicates that this distinction is replicated for diversity, conflict management, staffing, and, to a lesser extent, negotiation skills, consensus building, and group dynamics. Because diversity, by definition, introduces variations into the workforce, differences of opinion are prone to increase with greater diversity. These varying viewpoints enhance group performance, as well as the organization's capacity flexibly to react to a rapidly changing environment. Whenever each individual identifies with several, rather than one, of the subgroups defined by age, gender, ethnicity, values, culture, worldviews, etc.

(Thatcher, Jehn, & Zanutto 2003), (1) inclusion is promoted (Guillory, 2002); (2) the organization emphasizes the values of respect for individuals with a team-orientation (Chuang, Church, & Zikic, 2004); (3) organizations encourage members to view each other as sharing common interests, rather than

Table 2. Likert-Scale Scores for Focus-Group Themes

	Employers		Students/Alumni	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Challenges				
Human resources/managing people	4.5	0.80	4.2	0.81
Time-management	4.4	0.77	4.3	0.92
Planning	4.3	0.66	4.3	0.81
Project-management	4.1	0.62	4.2	0.82
Managing inter-organizational relations	4.1	0.91	4.0	0.90
Insufficient resources	4.1	1.10	4.1	0.83
Government relations	3.9	0.90	3.8	1.10
Program evaluation	3.9	0.88	3.8	0.98
Bureaucracy/organizational structure	3.8	0.94	4.0	0.83
Program design/implementation	3.8	0.89	3.8	1.03
Fund-raising	3.1	1.29	2.7	1.28
Knowledge & Skills				
Ethics	4.8	0.45	4.4	0.67
Writing clear, concise and grammatically correct documents	4.6	0.53	4.6	0.55
Presentations to various audiences	4.4	0.67	4.3	0.80
Strategic planning	4.4	0.82	4.3	0.76
Time-management	4.3	0.84	4.3	0.84
Project-management	4.2	0.70	4.2	0.78
Media relations	4.0	0.92	3.7	0.84
Grant-writing	3.7	0.89	3.6	1.01
Interpersonal Skills				
Conflict-management	4.6	0.58	4.4	0.63
Negotiation skills/consensus-building	4.5	0.60	4.4	0.65
Group dynamics	4.3	0.72	4.2	0.87
Facilitating small groups/teamwork	4.2	0.66	4.2	0.87

emphasizing individualism and distinctiveness (Chatman, Polzer, Barsade, & Neale, 1998); and (4) there are effective interventions such as conflict-management (Gilbert & Kvancevich, 1999).

The impact of a changing environment is also reflected in the scores for organization change, performance, and effectiveness. With the exception of developing a budget, these items garnered the highest mean scores in the curriculum section of the survey. Informal discussions with students suggest that these scores reflect the fact that organizations must be flexible and adaptable. The high scores for organization performance and effectiveness are likely a response to current trends in government, nonprofit organizations and health care, as well as being a common theme across disciplines. The results also conform to an analysis of occupational health and safety programs that highlights the importance of organization change and the need for greater emphasis on organizational behavior (Rosen, 2000).

An unexpected set of results emanated from questions concerning quantitative methods. The student and alumni average scores for the appropriate use and interpretation of statistics were significantly greater than the average scores on the employer survey. Even though the employers' average score for data sources was significantly greater than their response to the preceding two questions, it was similar to the mean score for students and alumni. The rationale for these outcomes is suggested by the responses in the "Challenges" section of the survey. Respondents to the employer survey viewed time-management as a bigger challenge than respondents to the student and alumni surveys did. The inverse relationship between time-management, and the interpretation and appropriate use of statistics is highlighted by Table 3. (See Table 3.)

IMPLICATIONS FOR THE MPA CURRICULUM

Although MPA course objectives encompass a number of skills from primary focus-group themes, and generate high mean scores, results show that several key skills were unintentionally addressed by the MPA program. Participants stated that the curriculum conveys knowledge and skills relating to human-resources and financial-management skills, methods of locating and interpreting information, and strategies for managing people and policy processes in a political environment. Due to the amount of work and writing required to develop knowledge and skills, completing the MPA program unintentionally enhanced skills for effectively managing sizeable workloads, processing large amounts of information, and writing quickly and effectively for various audiences. The relationship between the process of completing an MPA degree and honing these skills is summarized by one focus group participant: "Learning how to read or process large amounts of information ... to be able to sort through it quickly and to summarize it quickly and pick out what you have to have. The workload is just huge." (Mullins & Curtis, 2004, p. 12).

Table 3. Likert-Scale Scores for MPA Curricular Components

	Employers		Students/Alumni	
	Mean	Standard Deviation	Mean	Standard Deviation
Human Resources/Supervision				
Diversity	4.2	0.73	3.9	1.03
Staffing	4.2	0.63	4.0	0.78
Employee performance-evaluation	4.1	0.69	4.1	0.82
Budgeting				
Budget-development	4.6	0.65	4.4	0.75
Risk-management	4.1	0.79	4.1	0.79
Contract-management	4.1	0.75	4.1	0.79
Research Methods and Statistics				
Information sources/best practices	4.0	0.74	4.0	0.88
Interpreting research results/statistics	3.6	0.89	3.9	0.90
Appropriate use of statistical tests	3.4	0.94	3.8	1.00
Preparing research designs	3.2	0.86	3.3	1.16
Law				
Processes to create and change regulations	3.7	0.80	3.9	0.97
Legal research	3.3	0.87	3.7	1.02
Interpreting court decisions	3.2	0.83	3.6	1.02
Organization Theory				
Organization change	4.4	0.67		
Organizational performance & effectiveness	4.4	0.58		
Managing a diverse workforce	4.3	0.71		
Group dynamics	4.1	0.70		
Political Environment				
Administrators' roles in organization, capacity-building	4.2	0.92	4.1	0.91
Politics of administrative and organizational performance	4.2	0.92	4.2	0.85
Political barriers to policy-making and implementation	4.1	1.03	4.3	0.72
Use/abuse of bureaucratic power	3.9	0.98	4.1	0.79
Economics				
Globalization's impact on state and local organizations	3.8	0.88	4.0	0.90
Interactions of politics and economics in policy-making	3.7	0.89	3.7	0.99
Macroeconomic model	3.6	0.84	3.5	0.96
Theory of the firm (microeconomics)	3.5	0.89	3.5	0.98
Foundations/Historical Issues				
Accountability in a political system	4.1	0.88	4.2	0.90
Role of public administration in a political framework	4.0	0.88	4.1	0.85
Impact of historical trends on social, political, and management theories	3.7	0.88	3.9	0.88
U.S. Constitutional framework	3.6	0.93	3.7	0.99

The focus-group and survey results also reinforce the importance of written and oral presentation skills. In response to this outcome, several MPA courses have been designated as writing-intensive courses. In each instance, one-fourth of writing-assignment grades are determined by criteria such as grammar, organization, and clarity. Because an assessment of prior written assignments indicated that students experience considerable difficulty in condensing 10- to 20-page papers into one- or two-page executive summaries, the ability to write concise executive summaries was added to the writing criteria.

Oral presentation skills encompass public speaking and the ability effectively to present information to a variety of audiences. As is the case with writing, there are several designated courses that require oral presentation as a major component of the grade. Evaluation criteria include elements such as voice modulation, effective use of visual materials, nonverbal communication, and adapting presentations to the audience. With respect to the final element, public administrators, like public works managers, “must be able to communicate at a layperson level with elected officials and the public as well as with a depth of understanding credible to [other professionals]” (Bernhardt & McNeil, 2001, pp. 321-322). Prior assessment of oral presentations indicates that students are able to articulate how the audience’s characteristics (e.g., knowledge of statistics) should impact the content of a presentation, but this understanding typically is not reflected in their actual presentations.

The frequent inability to adapt presentations to various audiences has generated two changes in the MPA curriculum. First, the public budgeting course dedicates additional time to defining the characteristics of each audience (citizens’ groups, city councils, and finance departments) and the requisite adjustments for the presentation’s content. Second, the data analysis course incorporates strategies for presenting statistics to audiences that have forgotten most of the material from their statistics courses, or have never completed a statistics course. Third, an oral presentation requirement has been added to the quantitative methods course. The latter revision not only enhances the students’ capacities to adapt their presentations to the audience, but also strengthens their understanding of quantitative methods. In order to explain statistical results in a manner that statistical novices can comprehend, a mere understanding of the process for completing calculations and interpreting results is no longer sufficient. It is necessary to develop a more in-depth knowledge of statistics. By strengthening written- and oral communication requirements, the MPA program improves these skills and the students’ understanding of the issues (Sanford Bernhardt & McNeil, 2001).

A third curricular change emanates from the desire to reduce the discrepancy between the empirical methods taught by the MPA program, and methods practiced by administrators. The research methods course has followed the traditional academic model of defining the research question, developing a lit-

erature review that is primarily or solely based on academic journals and books, defining the hypotheses and methodology, and completing the data analysis. Although this approach is appropriate for public administration students who want to pursue a doctoral degree, the focus group and survey results indicate that it is not appropriate for agency employees. In most instances, these individuals do not have sufficient time to follow the traditional academic approach. They need to find the data, analyze it, and develop their recommendations within a limited amount of time.

Given the time constraints under which public administrators conduct research, an adaptation of the scientific method will be incorporated into WMU's quantitative methods courses. The courses will focus on (1) defining research questions; (2) reviewing professional and academic literature, on-line information, and the resources provided by professional organizations, interest groups, foundations, and agencies; (3) delineating the methodology; (4) collecting and analyzing data; (5) deriving recommendations and conclusions; and (6) presenting the findings to internal and external stakeholders. Changes in course content for steps one, five and six are not necessary, but there will be revisions in the material addressed by steps two through four. More specifically, the literature-review component will increase the emphasis on professional literature, listservs, and sources of information that summarize the initiatives and experiences of other agencies, as well as the best practices developed by professional organizations. Step three will focus on translating the supervisor's directives into methodologies for analyzing data, while step four will encourage students to think more creatively about sources of secondary data. The latter outcome will be facilitated by discussing a wider range of statistical indexes and strategies for finding secondary data. Because these changes reflect the environment in which public administrators operate, it is expected that students will grasp the relevance of the scientific method to their jobs, and thereby enhance the likelihood that this approach will be used to enhance the quality of the decision-making process.

As is suggested by Aronowitz and Giroux (2000) and the preceding revisions of quantitative courses, there are limits on the extent to which MPA courses should be revised to reflect the preferences of students, alumni and employers. Even though focus groups and curriculum survey respondents emphasized skill-development over theory, the MPA program will continue to incorporate theory and practice into each course. This decision is based on the premise that the MPA is an academic degree and, more importantly, that theory provides a framework for understanding a situation and confidence for formulating action. Theory also sensitizes administrators to a variety of perspectives and actions, thereby evoking a willingness to engage others in the discussion of potential actions, and alter one's own understanding and actions (McSwite, 2001).

There also are essential objectives that must be included in the curriculum. Even though some of the lowest mean scores were produced by survey items

such as the constitutional framework for government, the interactions of politics and economics in the policymaking process, and globalization's impact on state and local organizations, these items are keystones for effective administration, and the former components are "part of the discipline's original framework" (Hoffman, 2002, p. 21). These elements, therefore, will continue to be included in the curriculum.

The focus groups and surveys generated two benefits for the MPA program. First, they highlighted areas in which a change in orientation (e.g., research methods) would enhance the usefulness of the material for practitioners, while maintaining core academic foundations. The feedback also revealed elements that should be accorded greater emphasis (e.g., writing and oral presentation), as well as some that should be deemphasized. Second, the information reduced opposition to making significant programmatic changes. Although the 2003 NASPAA Conference identified written and oral communication skills as essential competencies for all public administration specializations, several faculty members contended that the skills should be developed in K-12 and undergraduate programs, rather than in graduate programs. Consequently, there was concern that the goals of enhancing written and oral presentation skills may create the perception that the MPA is a remedial program. However, the faculty's reservations largely evaporated when these competencies ranked among the highest on mean survey scores. Due to these factors, the focus groups and surveys fostered an environment of open discussion concerning the essential elements of an MPA curriculum.

CONCLUSIONS

Although curriculum-revision processes at the University of Baltimore and at Western Michigan University were based on different sources of information, external forces minimized the impact of turf and the constraint imposed by faculty skills. In the former case, the state's emphasis on outcomes-assessment focused the faculty's attention on what students should know, and the curricular components that addressed these elements. Each iteration of Western Michigan University's curriculum-review process also concentrated on the question of competencies and course content. However, the internal constraints of turf, faculty skills, and retooling were not trumped until the necessity of maintaining and expanding student enrollments was introduced into the equation. At this point, there was a significant realignment of course content, alterations in the focus of quantitative-methods courses, and a greater emphasis on written and oral presentation skills.

The evidence therefore suggests that there is not one clearly preferred method in the curriculum-review process. The recommendations of faculty, professional organizations, advisory groups, focus groups, and surveys of students, alumni, and employers are all useful.

Using Focus Groups and Stakeholder Surveys to Revise the MPA Curriculum

The MPA-curriculum-review process at Western Michigan University is ongoing and relies on multiple evaluative sources. The process began with informal student comments and capstone course feedback, which indicated that a realignment of the curriculum was necessary. The curricular redesign that in fact transpired was further guided by the recommendations of professional organizations. Subsequent informal discussions suggested that additional revisions were needed in order more fully to meet the needs of students; this in turn led to the establishment of focus groups and the distribution of surveys. When the resulting curricular changes were presented to a section of the capstone course, several student comments supported Lee's (1998) observation that public relations should be reintroduced into the curriculum. Therefore, largely consistent with the literature, the case reported here indicates that refining the curriculum is a continuous process that relies on a variety of sources for guidance and is affected by various interacting factors.

NOTES

- ¹ The process of comparing curriculum components to a professional organization's recommendations is similar to the process Texas Tech University Health Sciences Center utilized to revise the geriatric core of their baccalaureate nursing program.

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