

Three Principles of Competency-Based Learning: Mission, Mission, Mission

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ABSTRACT

NASPAA adopted new accreditation standards in October 2009, requiring Masters programs of public administration, public policy, and public affairs to adopt and implement competency-based learning. This learning approach, however, is not new to public administration. Scholars have been promoting competency-based education for more than 25 years (Greenhill, Metz, & Stander, 1982). This article expands on the previous work of competency-based education, presenting lessons learned from the experience of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC). A systematic competency-based learning system was adopted and implemented in support of its mission statement of *preparing public service leaders*. The purpose of these lessons is to help NASPPA-accredited programs, of all sizes, conceptualize and advance their approaches to competency-based learning, including the need for a shared understanding of the program's mission and the need for faculty flexibility when making curriculum changes.

KEYWORDS

curriculum, competency, accreditation

The current focus on competency-based learning in higher education remains true to the key elements of this learning technique introduced more than four decades ago. Spady (1977), using primarily a prescriptive approach to defining competency-based learning, maintained that specific learning outcomes are established, instructional pedagogy is aligned with the learning outcomes, student success is measured with a structured methodology, and curriculum adjustments are made after the outcomes are evaluated. Although competency-based learning historically has been associated with vocational learning, Voorhees (2001) found that this learning approach is finding its way into higher education and predicted that it

would expand nationally and internationally as more instructors of higher education embraced the advantages of tracking specific learning outcomes derived from program mission statements. The expansion of competency-based learning in higher education that has occurred over the past 10 years, however, is being driven beyond the voluntary adoption of this learning technique. External accreditation bodies are requiring units of higher education to document how they know that graduating students have obtained the necessary competencies that support their respective degrees.

NASPAA adopted new accreditation standards in October 2009 that included student learning

around five universal competencies, requiring Masters programs of public administration, public policy, and public affairs to adopt and implement competency-based learning. More specifically, the accreditation process moved from a course-based approach to a mission-based approach to ensure that a program being reviewed for accreditation can demonstrate how its overall curriculum and specific course content match the profile of the program's mission statement. A fundamental advantage of this change is the increase in transparency among Masters programs of public administration, public policy, and public affairs when recruiting and admitting students. Programs can no longer advertise mission statements and specializations without the ability to demonstrate how students obtain the competencies and learning outcomes that support them. A hurdle that programs currently face is the ability to create, adopt, and implement a competency-based learning system within the context of limited resources.

This article presents lessons learned from the experience of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill (UNC) in its response to the new accreditation standards through adopting and implementing a systematic competency-based learning system in support of its mission statement of *preparing public service leaders*. First, a brief review of the literature on competency-based education within the discipline of public administration is presented, followed by a description of the North Carolina case. Lessons learned from this experience are then presented to help NASPPA-accredited programs, of all sizes, conceptualize and advance their approaches to competency-based learning, including the need for a shared understanding of the program's mission, the need for faculty flexibility when making curriculum changes and requiring new course content, the value of using the performance management literature for guidance, the learning curve associated with competency evaluation, and the added value of the new accreditation standards. The paper concludes with a discussion of how to transi-

tion from designing and implementing a competency-based learning model to institutionalizing it for the advantage of advancing the program's mission.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Competency-based education within the discipline of public administration can be traced to the work of Greenhill, Metz, and Stander (1982), suggesting that students should be involved in developing major competencies for advancing a performance-based curriculum. The scholars were responding in part to the number of adult learners pursuing MPA degrees, concluding that competency-based education provides the cornerstone for articulating educational goals into explicit outcomes. Since that time, the literature on competency-based education within the discipline of public administration can be divided into three streams of research.

The first stream of research, as described by Tompkins, Laslovich, and Greene (1996), addresses how to implement competency-based outcomes that are balanced between conceptual knowledge (theory) and skill acquisition (practice), which continues to serve as a tension and ongoing debate in the field of public administration. The scholars concluded that well-designed competencies can increase the skills of public administration practitioners without sacrificing academic rigor. A potential fear of moving in the direction of competency-based education is overly emphasizing skill acquisition (practice), consistent with the vocational heritage of the learning technique.

McSwite (2001) responded to the previous research by focusing on what MPA theory means from a competency-based perspective. McSwite argued that competencies focused on theory provide MPA-educated practitioners with the enhanced ability to act effectively in public administration settings, identifying and discussing the benefits of richness of perspective, flexibility of attention, and modesty. Therefore, competency-based education, as suggested by McSwite, enhances the ability to provide a balanced approach between theory and

practice. This approach moves beyond an abstract discussion of this balance, requiring Masters programs of public administration, public policy, and public affairs to document this balance through well-designed competencies and how each competency is measured and evaluated.

The second stream of research on competency-based education is directed toward the measurement of competencies within specific areas of public administration. Grizzle (1985) argued that public administration students were receiving about a third of the financial management competencies that practitioners surveyed deemed essential. Grizzle (1985) found that MPA programs provided significant coverage on the mechanics of budget preparation, for example, while few programs provided significant coverage of governmental accounting. The scholar concluded that instructors must commit themselves to designing financial management curricula that provide the financial competencies needed to be competitive in the job market.

Rivenbark (2001), on the other hand, focused on the performance management competencies offered by programs affiliated with NASPAA. Rivenbark found that approximately 88% of the programs introduced their students to performance measurement and productivity improvement concepts. Accreditation and faculty size played a role in the amount of curricular coverage of these concepts. This finding is significant from the viewpoint of competency-based education. Given that resources are limited, a mission-based approach to accreditation requires programs to make strategic decisions about what selected competencies will be covered in their curricula.

Mirabella and Wish (2000) explored the curricular elements of nonprofit management degree programs in the colleges of business, public administration, and social work, focusing on the required courses in order to evaluate essential competencies. The authors concluded that social work was more likely to place significant emphasis on advocacy and

community organizing and that more emphasis needs to be placed on the future of nonprofit management education. An important outcome of these findings regarding the new (2009) accreditation standards is that Masters programs of public administration, public policy, and public affairs are now required to define their objectives and competencies for operationalizing concentrations and specializations, preventing programs from the possibility of advertising beyond their means of delivery.

Jaeger's (2003) research went beyond a subfield of public administration and focused exclusively on competency-based education from the perspective of emotional intelligence. Based on the survey of NASPAA programs, Jaeger found that emotional intelligence such as interpersonal skills can be improved through instruction in a classroom setting and that emotional intelligence is positively correlated with academic performance. Jaeger concluded that competency-based education has the potential of advancing emotional intelligence among graduate students, which has evolved over the past 15 years to become a major player of ongoing leadership development among practitioners (Berman & West, 2008). This transformation has major ramifications on Masters programs of public administration, public policy, and public affairs given the number of programs with leadership in their mission statements.

The third stream of research explores the mechanics of actually designing and implementing a competency-based curriculum for MPA programs, including the integration of public service values. Roberts and Pavlak (2002a) provided an excellent overview of how Fairleigh Dickinson University transitioned to a competency-based MPA curriculum specifically oriented to the education needs of practitioners. Although their research did not address the specific mechanics of measuring identified competencies, they provided an outstanding overview of how to identify competencies and make curriculum adjustments based on the program's mission.

They then discussed the critical role of identifying public service values and the need to integrate them across the curriculum. Roberts and Pavlak (2002a) concluded by focusing on the role of faculty in long-term success, including faculty champions, faculty with expertise in curriculum development, faculty who are open to change, and faculty committed to institutionalizing the new system. Roberts and Pavlak (2002b) also explored how to design a structured but flexible approach to MPA capstone courses, including the role of outcome assessments.

Aristigueta and Gomes (2006) presented a case study on how the MPA program at the University of Delaware embraced strategic planning in order to identify its mission and goals for moving toward competency-based learning. A critical part of the case is how each goal was assessed primarily through an alumni survey. The case focused on program performance—enhance the excellence of diversity, maintain a set of core courses, provide students with experiential learning, and develop a nationally recognized internship program—rather than on the assessment of learning competencies within the curriculum. A major finding of the case was the need to adjust the program's curriculum, including the need to change course requirements and the need to change course content. This finding highlights the critical role of faculty discussed by Roberts and Pavlak (2002a).

Saint-Germain (2008) explored different models for assessment of MPA student learning, including capstone courses, comprehensive exams, standardized tests, portfolios, and course-based assessments. The author did not promote one methodology over another, responding to the reality that MPA programs must select the model or models that work best for them. Saint-Germain introduced the possibility of using a grading rubric for structuring evaluation criteria and for student assessment. The rigor of a grading rubric provides a systematic approach to collecting and evaluating data over time. Powell, Piskulich, and Saint-Germain (2011) also relied on the

strengths of a grading rubric in their research on expectations for outcome-based assessments. The authors discussed how a grading rubric can be used to evaluate a specific competency from a course-based assignment, including the various ways in which the data are used to advance the curriculum content.

There are several outcomes from this brief literature review. One is that competency-based education is not new to public administration. Scholars have been promoting a competency-based approach for more than 25 years (Greenhill, Metz, & Stander, 1982). Another outcome is that recommendations and examples do exist on how Masters programs of public administration, public policy, and public affairs can develop, adopt, and implement competency-based learning models. The goal of this article is to add value to this reservoir of knowledge now that programs are required by accreditation standards to adopt a set of competencies within the context of mission and public service values, including specifically how they are evaluated and used to advance the program's mission.

NORTH CAROLINA CASE

NASPAA adopted the accreditation standards, which include competency-based learning, on October 16, 2009. As a first step to respond to the changing standards during the academic year 2010–2011, a curriculum committee of six MPA faculty members began work on adopting and implementing a competency-based learning model. The goal was to start early given the complexities of the revised accreditation standards and to use a transparent and open process given the number of changes that were expected to occur. A fundamental strategy with any organizational change is to consider internal communication, buy-in, and engagement. With this in mind, the committee presented revised accreditation standards to the MPA faculty at large, discussed its role as an advisory body rather than a decision-making body, and presented a timeline for bringing a draft competency-based model to the MPA faculty for review and approval. The MPA director continued to update the MPA faculty

at the monthly MPA faculty meetings to ensure a transparent and open process.

The curriculum committee met weekly over a course of three months during academic year 2010–2011 to develop competencies and revise the curriculum. The committee began by reviewing research conducted on practices from peer institutions and to reconfirm the program’s mission statement of *preparing public service leaders*. Next, the committee drafted public service values consistent with the mission and program philosophy to serve as additional guidance and for eventual approval by the MPA faculty, including *accountability and transparency, efficiency and effectiveness, respect and equity, and professionalism and ethical behavior*.

With these foundational elements in place and support from the broader faculty, the committee worked on developing competencies. The committee identified 40 competencies critical to achieving the program’s mission of becoming effective public service leaders that were consistent with the identified public services values and that provided balance between theory and practice (Tompkins, Laslovich, & Greene, 1996). The 40 competencies, which were labeled as intermediary competencies, were grouped into eight major competency

areas that reflected both UNC specific competency areas as well as the universal required competencies contained in the accreditation standards:

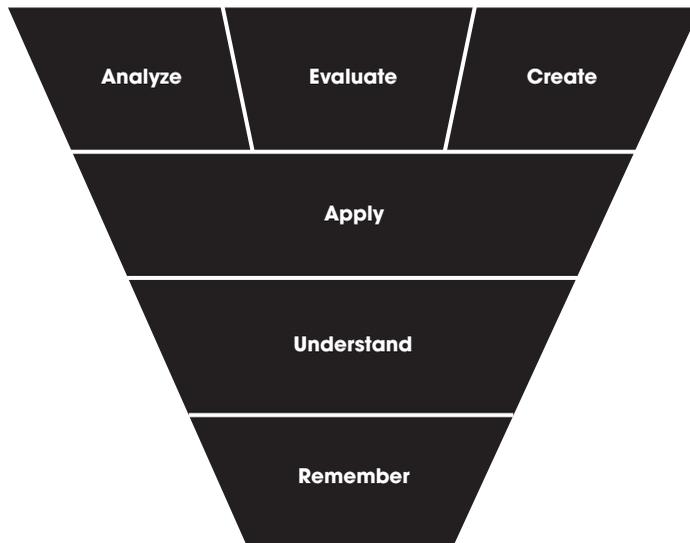
- To lead, manage, and engage others in public service
- To apply public service values and ethics
- To understand social, economic, and political context
- To effectively communicate
- To analyze information for decision making
- To understand law and legal process
- To manage financial resources
- To manage human capital

Table 1 provides an example of the initial work on the competency area of financial management, following the performance measurement literature for guidance (Kelly & Rivenbark, 2011). It contains the program’s mission statement, the public service values, the major competency area (goal), and the intermediary competencies (objectives). In other words, objectives rather than goals are measured as prescribed by performance measurement scholars (Ammons, 2012).

TABLE 1.
Original Intermediary Competencies for the Area “To Manage Financial Resources”

Mission	To prepare public service leaders
Public service values	Accountability and transparency Efficiency and effectiveness Respect and equity Professionalism and ethical behavior
Major competency area	To manage financial resources
Intermediary competencies	Understand relevant public finance principles. Understand revenue sources. Apply values and processes for the allocation of resources. Apply values and processes for managing financial liabilities. Evaluate the financial condition of an organization.

FIGURE 1.
Bloom's Taxonomy Model



Source. Athanassiou, McNett, and Harvey (2003); Halawi, McCarthy, and Pires (2009).

With the competencies identified, the committee turned its attention to the curriculum. The committee intentionally did not start with the current curriculum but agreed to consider all past and future curriculum choices up for debate. In other words, the committee did not want to backfill what was currently in place. MPA faculty members were updated about next steps and, fortunately, embraced the possibility of a new curriculum based on the competencies.

The committee crafted a new curriculum based on the program's mission statement, the public service values, and the major and intermediary competency areas. Major changes were reflected in the new curriculum design, including the elimination or substantial revision of several core courses that would become electives. For example, the standing core course on government accounting was moved to an elective, while the previous core course on

budgeting was replaced with a core course on financial management. Along with revisions to the core curriculum, another significant change was the move from a capstone paper to a portfolio and oral exam. The capstone process, while extremely popular among faculty members, focused more on competencies related to research methods and evaluation. A portfolio and an oral exam provide the program with a more flexible framework to further develop and measure a variety of competencies across multiple dimensions (Saint-Germain, 2008).

The new competency-based learning model and the new curriculum were formally presented to the MPA faculty at the end of academic year 2010–2011 for review and approval. The MPA faculty approved the new competency-based learning model and the new curriculum after a spirited discussion and charged the curriculum committee with operationalizing these changes during academic

year 2011–2012. The committee met during academic year 2011–2012, on average, twice per month to identify the contents of the portfolio, create a process for the oral exam, and determine where the intermediary competencies would be measured (core courses, the program’s required internship, the portfolio, and the oral exam). The committee presented its work at the annual retreat for academic year 2011–2012. The good news was that the MPA faculty embraced the new information. They also decided to create an assessment committee to determine how each intermediary competency would be measured.

The assessment committee, which was composed of two faculty members, met several times per week during the summer of 2012 to determine how and where to measure competencies. The committee turned to the higher education literature on learning outcomes and applied Bloom’s taxonomy model, as shown in Figure 1, to each intermediary competency to determine higher order achievement. Returning to the performance measurement literature of focusing on outcome measures rather than output measures, the committee wanted to focus primarily on the intermediary competencies of apply, analyze, evaluate, and create.

The committee also recognized that students who could demonstrate these types of competencies would inherently possess

knowledge involving the competencies of remember and understand. As part of this process, the committee reduced the overall number of intermediate competencies from 40 to 20. As an example, the competency associated with financial management is used. Originally this major competency area had five intermediary competencies:

- Understand relevant public finance principles
- Understand revenue sources
- Apply values and processes for the allocation of resources
- Apply values and processes for managing financial liabilities
- Evaluate the financial condition of an organization

These were reduced to two intermediate competencies, as shown in Table 2, that the committee believed captured the core learning represented by the original five. First, the two competencies of “understand relevant public finance principles” and “understand revenue sources” were eliminated because they focused on a lower order dimension of Bloom’s taxonomy model. The committee also eliminated the competency of “evaluate the financial condition of an organization” even though it focused on a higher order dimension.

TABLE 2.
Final Intermediary Competencies for the Area “To Manage Financial Resources”

Mission	To prepare public service leaders
Public service values	Accountability and transparency Efficiency and effectiveness Respect and equity Professionalism and ethical behavior
Major competency area	To manage financial resources
Intermediary competencies	Apply values and processes for the allocation of resources Apply values and processes for managing financial liabilities

This competency was identified as being part of the intermediary competency of “apply values and processes for managing financial liabilities,” responding to the reality that financial condition analysis is a major part of managing long-term financial liabilities on governmental balance sheets. The program also offers an elective that covers this specific subject in detail.

This process was repeated for all intermediary competencies. It produced a more manageable number of competencies both cognitively and for measurement, while remaining true to the mission statement, the public service values, and the eight major competency areas.

The assessment committee then met with each faculty member responsible for a core course, the internship, the portfolio, and the oral exam to determine what vehicle (exam, paper, or case for example) would be used to measure the respective intermediary competency and how the assessment would actually occur, following the work of Powell, Piskulich, and Saint-Germain (2011). It quickly became evident that some form of consistent evaluation standards, or grading rubrics, would be needed for assessment as described by Saint-Germain (2008). A staff member with expertise on creating rubrics worked with faculty members on creating rubrics specifically designed for their respective intermediary competencies. Although in this case a staff member had the necessary training and experience to assist in designing rubrics across the competency areas, the critical component was the creation of standardized measurement instruments and agreement among faculty of having a consistent evaluation plan across courses and competencies.

Table 3 contains an example of the information created for each intermediary competency. It shows the intermediary competency of “apply values and processes for managing financial liabilities,” the location of measurement (core course on financial management), the measurement vehicle (case on using long-term debt to finance capital projects), and the assessment tool of a grading rubric. It also shows the grading rubric—which is based on

the Likert Scale of 1 to 5—that is completed by the respective faculty member for each student. Faculty members who are responsible for intermediary competencies have access to a central database to enter the data. A staff member was identified to manage and monitor this process, recognizing that this process involves a great deal of administrative attention to be successful.

The focus of the reported competencies is not individual student assessment, which is provided through grades to the students, but rather to provide higher order program-based information. The MPA director reviews the data after each semester, meeting with faculty members to discuss data distribution and possible outliers. The MPA director also is responsible for presenting the aggregated data to the MPA faculty at the annual retreat. Information beyond competency metrics also are reviewed at this annual meeting, including admission and acceptance rates, course evaluations, student surveys, internship placements, graduation rate, job placement rate, and alumni statistics. The goal is to review this information within the context of our mission statement and to develop a work plan for the following academic year.

Lessons Learned

Five lessons were identified from this case. Although these lessons were developed based on a single case study, which can present limitations, they serve as observations, suggestions, and directions for other programs interested in applying a competency-based model. These lessons inform programs of all sizes because they focus on managing the change from a course-based to competency-based model, including faculty engagement and support, process and design elements, and program direction and evaluation.

The first lesson from this experience relates to the importance of having a shared understanding of the program’s mission among all stakeholders to guide the process. Again, the mission statement is *preparing public service leaders*. The shared understanding of this mission statement

TABLE 3.
Grading Rubric for Intermediary Competency

To manage financial resources				
Intermediary Competency	Location of measurement	Measurement vehicle	Assessment tool	Responsibility
Apply values and processes for managing financial liabilities	PUBA 731	Case	Rubric	Faculty member
Grading rubric				
Entry level	Evolving		Accomplished	
Beginning	Developing	Intermediate	Proficient	Distinguished
Acknowledges the need to limit risk and foster financial sustainability.	Is able to identify key elements for sustainable investment, tax and debt policies.	Understands risk assessment processes and reserve building.	Demonstrates the ability to effectively maintain financial reserves, minimize risks and fund priorities. Prioritizations are politically, legally and economically feasible.	Ensures that resources are effectively acquired, organized and maintained. Is able to justify and defend choices in light of political, legal and economic consequences. Develops innovative strategies to sustain or create reserves for current and future needs.

goes beyond the actual words. It is not the mission to prepare individuals for careers in public service; rather, it is the mission to prepare individuals for obtaining leadership positions in public service, which places alumni in positions like city and county managers and nonprofit executive directors and gives them the ability to have direct impact on the communities in which they serve. This shared understanding was fundamental to the curriculum and assessment committees, providing the focus necessary throughout the process of developing the competencies and adjusting the curriculum. Making these changes within the context of a shared mission statement also streamlined the process of presenting them to the program’s stakeholders for review and approval.

The second lesson learned is the importance of faculty flexibility for adopting and implementing a competency-based learning model, which is consistent with the work of Roberts and Pavlak (2002a). The overarching dimension, as demonstrated by the case, is the amount of time needed for developing the infrastructure for competency-based learning, which required numerous meetings over three academic years. Another dimension of faculty flexibility is openness of faculty to make major adjustments to the curriculum and to change specific course content to accommodate the competencies, which includes teaching new materials and using the grading rubrics for data collection. The goal is to embrace being a learning organization. Again, a shared understanding of the program’s mission can help

with this process, where faculty can see how these changes are critical to the broader system of competency-based learning. A final dimension of faculty flexibility is empowering the committees to make decisions, where the MPA faculty collectively focused on philosophical and pedagogical issues (Roberts and Pavlak, 2002a) and the committees focused on details.

A third lesson learned is the value of using the performance management literature to help guide the process. Faculty members often struggled with using terms such as *competency*, *outcome*, and *rubric*. Therefore, as described in the case, explaining these terms in the context of performance management helps faculty members conceptualize the process. The process begins with a performance measurement system, which includes a mission, goals (major competencies), objectives (intermediary competencies), and performance measures (rubrics). The broader concept of performance management was embraced and the data are now being gathered and formatted in a manner that allows for making decisions during the annual evaluation process. The outcome of this finding is that programs cannot wait until the accreditation process to gather and use the data needed to demonstrate progress toward their missions. Bloom's taxonomy model added even more value, where the focus was on the higher levels of cognitive development. This decision parallels the performance management literature of focusing on the higher order measures of efficiency and effectiveness rather than on inputs and outputs.

A fourth lesson learned is that faculty members have a learning curve in working with the new competency metrics, which follows the difference between collecting performance measures in public organizations and actually using them for decision making (de Lancer Jules & Holzer, 2001). Data were collected for intermediary competencies during academic year 2012–2013 and were a focus of the MPA faculty retreat. One part of the discussion focused on possible changes to the respective courses, including more information on public

service values. Another part of this discussion focused on the few students who were placed in the evolving range of the grading rubric. The reality is that not all students will be placed in the accomplished range of the grading rubric for every intermediary competency. Returning to a question within the performance management literature, how valuable is the performance measure if the result is 100% every time? However, it became very clear during these discussions that faculty members had very different views regarding these data and that program leadership is needed for helping them interpret and use the competencies to advance the program's mission.

A final lesson learned is the added value of the competency-based accreditation standards, requiring a true alignment between the program's mission, curriculum, and competencies and preventing the possibility of mission drift. In previous years, the faculty has focused primarily on incremental problem areas during the annual retreats and identified solutions for implementation during the following academic year. Now the program is in the position to focus on incremental problem areas and the overall progress toward our mission statement given the addition on the new metrics derived from competency-based learning.

CONCLUSION

The primary goal of this article is to present how the MPA program at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill responded to the new accreditation standards by adopting and implementing a systematic competency-based learning system in support of its mission statement of *preparing public service leaders* in the hope that other programs accredited by NASSPA can use this information to advance their mission statements. These lessons include the need for a shared understanding of the program's mission, the need for faculty flexibility when making curriculum changes and requiring new course content, the value of using the performance management literature for guidance, the learning curve associated with competency evaluation, and the added value of the new accreditation standards.

The authors believe that this case provides experiences applicable to other schools, regardless of program size, in relation to curriculum design and teaching practices. Competency-based education is predicated upon having a clear and agreed-upon mission. This requires that a program have a distinct mission and collective understanding of what the program strives to achieve, extending beyond previous curriculum choices and individual courses. This collective direction serves as the basis for competency development and in turn curriculum design. This approach ensures that the curriculum responds to the needed competency attainment rather than retroactively assigning competencies to an existing curriculum. In other words, mission drives competencies and competencies drive curriculum. With clear curriculum choices in place, instructors design their courses to ensure coverage and evaluation of applicable competencies. The authors also want to note that this process raised faculty concerns that competencies would limit scope of instruction because courses cover much more than any one or two competencies—even when measured at the higher order achievement on Bloom's taxonomy. Faculty realized that measuring and evaluating selected competencies within their courses did not restrict their autonomy, pedagogical choices, or content design.

Initial competency data are demonstrating that not all students are obtaining the intermediary competencies to become a public service leader as defined by the program. These data have created concern and excitement among the faculty members to make changes to course content for increasing the probability that all students will obtain the immediately competencies, while realizing that 100% will never be achieved and underscoring a commitment to always ensuring a high level of rigor of the curriculum. But the program now has data to balance competency obtainment with curriculum rigor to advance the mission. The outcome is that these natural tensions are helping to institutionalize competency-based learning from use of the data rather than the requirement of accreditation.

The next step is the creation of a dashboard that would have a collection of metrics to help govern the program. These metrics could include program resources, admission statistics, competency outcomes, job placement rates, and alumni career data, for example. In other words, the intent is to embrace the same types of techniques that we teach our students for leading and monitoring public service organizations. The ultimate goal of this work is to develop a performance management culture. Therefore, organizations with limited capacity should remain true to making decisions with an eye on the mission, a focus on faculty engagement, and commitment to data use and program evaluation.

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