

Assessment of Universal Competencies Under the 2009 Standards

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“Would you tell me, please, which way I ought to go from here?”
“That depends a good deal on where you want to get to,” said the Cat.
“I don’t much care where—” said Alice.

—Lewis Carroll, Alice’s Adventures in Wonderland

Alice may not have cared much about direction, but faculty do care that students learn, and society cares that those engaged in public policy and in managing the public sector are capable and competent to do the jobs they are hired to do. From the beginning, accreditation has been one way we have attempted to demonstrate to the public that students graduating from public affairs programs have received a quality education. Initially this meant that we examined what was involved in offering our programs—the inputs and processes. Later we added a focus on a mission developed to reflect the program’s context while maintaining our examination of inputs and process. The shift to emphasize competencies, student learning outcomes, and overall program performance culminated with the adoption of Standards 2009. For programs engaged in public affairs

education, identifying a mission, explicitly stating public sector values, and identifying outcomes tells us where we “want to get to,” and assessing outcomes tells us which way we “ought to go from here.”

The forces driving the change in the philosophy underlying the NASPAA accreditation process were not entirely internal to the field. To be sure, we had been teaching these concepts to our students for more than two decades—but we are now focused on applying the concepts fully to ourselves and to our programs by practicing what we teach. It is not a surprise that our stakeholders would expect us to meet the same standards of accountability that they must satisfy. Higher education also has been pressured by accreditors, legislators, and others providing funding to demonstrate what

students learn and not just what we teach. In addition, NASPAA members and leadership wanted to define the field and to identify what distinguishes our programs from those of related disciplines, for example, in business (Raffel, Maser, & McFarland, 2007).

As with any change, the implementation of the 2009 Standards raised anxiety and uncertainty about the accreditation process. Program directors, many of them comfortable with the pre-2009 requirements for maintaining their program's accreditation, were required to rethink the mission, develop student learning outcomes, adjust assessment, and cope with a redesigned online self-study process. At the same time, they were required to bring their faculty and stakeholders along for the ride. The Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA), too, was comfortable with the pre-2009 standards and faced its own uncertainties about the ease and functionality of the new online CiviCore site, the clarity of the new Self-Study Instructions, how to best organize the Accreditation Institute training for site visitors and program directors, and how to organize the work of COPRA. In short, nearly everyone involved in the accreditation process knew that the changes were timely and responsive to the environment. But, like Alice, we were struggling with choosing the right direction.

In 2010, NASPAA President Nadia Rubaii established the Competencies Task Force (CTF) and charged it to assist NASPAA member programs in navigating the transition by collecting information on best practices in competency development and assessment and disseminating the information it gathered. Chronicling how different programs responded to competency development and assessment is one of several ways in which the CTF has attempted to help reduce uncertainty by providing guidance to programs.

The manuscripts selected for this symposium on Competencies include a diverse collection of case studies and methodology offering the reader a broad coverage of how the programs have assessed the universal competencies depicted

in the 2009 NASPAA Standards. The variety of program size, concentration areas, and data collection methods of the authors give the readers excellent information useful for discussions in planning their own assessment activities.

To explore the process programs are making in identifying and assessing student learning outcomes, Rubaii and Calarusse conducted an analysis of four years of the self-study reports. Specifically, the authors were interested in examining the diversity competency to show how comprehensively programs are approaching it when defining their student learning outcomes. Rubaii and Calarusse also examine the progress that programs report they have made and compared it to the site visitor reports on progress to see if there is a disconnect. The authors provide useful guidance to COPRA and NASPAA as they think about the pace of the transition to the 2009 Standards. They also discuss the need for more training. The authors also provide valuable guidance to program directors. Their typology for UC5 should be very helpful to programs as they consider this competency in relation to their mission. Rubaii and Calarusse also give food for thought to programs with generic missions. They suggest that program directors consider leading faculty in a discussion of the strengths and limitations of the generic mission approach. This article provides a broad context for the more specific topics discussed in the companion papers in the symposium.

Meek and Godwin focus on how iterative learning was used as an approach to assessment. They examine direct and indirect measures used for a multi-method protocol for assessment. They also discuss challenges in assessment design and implementation that were encountered in the MPA Program at the University of La Verne. The authors explain how assessment results were used to inform program development and how to involve faculty in the process. Meek and Godwin detail the process used in reviewing the mission statement and the involvement of various stakeholders in the review. They go on to discuss a course-embedded strategy newly developed as an

addition to their long-established assessment protocol. Also included is a discussion of how input from the advisory board was used in making curriculum changes. Readers are likely to appreciate the inclusion of a model that depicts the various assessment strategies included, the frequency with which they are conducted, an assessment matrix, and a rubric used to develop a scorecard summarizing the assessment of outcomes. These elements, along with other tables and charts, give readers a clear representation of the iterative learning process used in the planning and implementation of the assessment protocol used at La Verne.

Mayhew, Swartz, and Taylor also discuss the development of a multi-method assessment model in the MPA Program at James Madison University. The authors detail the use of a capstone portfolio developed to replace the written comprehensive exam in 2009. In pointing out the benefits of such a model, the authors highlight the importance of the student's role in selecting the artifacts to be included in the portfolio to provide the reviewers with evidence of the student's proficiency in each of the program's 17 competency areas. Examples are included in the article, providing readers with a better understanding of how such a model may be adapted to their own programs. The authors discuss how exit focus groups were conducted with students in the capstone course to gain their input on the usefulness of the professional portfolio development. The authors also provide detailed information from alumni in response to questions pertaining to the impact of the capstone portfolio on their ability to secure employment and on their careers. In addition, the authors discuss what other programs may want to consider if adopting a similar model—which includes taking student goals and aspirations into account during the development phase.

Rissi and Gelmon discuss the assessment model used in a graduate health administration program and the process used to develop a protocol that meets the requirements of multiple accrediting bodies. The authors detail the similarities in core competency expectations

and explain how the 10 competencies of the program are mapped to the curriculum. They go on to describe how various stakeholders—including the advisory council, alumni, field preceptors, faculty, and students—were involved in validating the assessment model. Rissi and Gelmon explain how the model used in their program emphasizes critical thinking, collaboration, communication, and community engagement. The explanation of how the model focuses on assessing both the intensity of coverage within a course and the expected level of student competency is especially useful. The authors include the results of the alumni survey along with information about job placement and their self-assessment of competency. Also of note is the authors' discussion of how the assessment results were used for program improvements and of some of the issues that programs thinking of applying for accreditation may wish to consider.

Diaz describes the assessment protocol used in a large public affairs school with five MPA programs and one Master of International Affairs program and 72 full-time faculty. The author provides in-depth information on the steps taken to include capstone-project rubrics and a focus group protocol in the assessment model. Diaz explains how the self-study process assisted in making revisions to existing documents. Student surveys and internship supervisor evaluations were changed to tie in the five universal competencies. For example, the student survey was altered to include questions about the five competencies as well as mission-specific elective competencies. In this case study analysis, the author explains the use of a quantitative and qualitative approach to assessment including both individual and group-level input. Readers are likely to find the surveys and capstone-project rubric particularly helpful in better understanding the assessment model used.

Individually, these articles provide in-depth information about a competency or a particular program's approach to the decisions that must be made in the course of implementing the 2009 Standards. Collectively, these articles are more valuable because together they highlight

several important lessons for programs to remember as they continue along the path of implementation.

First, learning organizations seek continuous quality improvements. Therefore, assessment results are one part of a larger process. Without a doubt the results should guide adjustments to curriculum. The results may also lead to changes to the student learning outcomes, the assessment tools themselves, and the program mission. When programs implement these changes, the cycle begins again, always with the goal of improving program quality. If we are learning, we are evolving, and our students and stakeholders benefit from our focus on meaningful changes.

Second, there is not currently, and indeed may never be, one best way to define the student learning outcomes for a competency. Programs serve different stakeholders and therefore have different missions and emphasize different public service values. Consequently, there will be variation in how the competencies are operationalized. This diversity was expected and desired when the principles underlying the 2009 Standards were being developed (Standards Steering Committee, 2007).

Third, sustainability is aided when programs engage stakeholders and seek ways to streamline processes. This can be accomplished by embedding assessment in course assignments; by using stakeholders to assist in assessment; or by aligning NASPAA competencies with those imposed by other institutional actors such as departments, schools/colleges, or universities as well as with requirements of other accrediting bodies.

Finally, regardless of size, all programs face uncertainty about how to develop competencies and sustainable assessment processes that do not tax their available resources. Discussions of how some programs have adapted to the changes that came with the 2009 Standards is one way to aid others in these critical discussions used to plan and implement meaningful assessment of student learning outcomes that are focused on discipline-specific competencies.

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