

# Iterative Learning: Programmatic Lessons from a Course Embedded Approach to Program Mission Assessment

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## ABSTRACT

In this paper, we refer to *iterative learning* as a developmental approach toward assessment—a course-embedded program mission assessment—used by University of La Verne Master of Public Administration (MPA) program faculty. Iterative learning draws upon an understanding that informed assessment is a developmental process that evolves through deliberation, refinement, and discussion. The paper places this approach within the ongoing efforts in a field that is developing program assessment and competencies. We present lessons learned from our multiyear effort, including challenges and future directions.

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## KEYWORDS:

assessment, learning outcomes, NASPAA standards, program evaluation

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This paper draws from experiences of a Master of Public Administration (MPA) program that transitioned from NASPAA's tradition of relying on input assessment for accreditation to the new post-2009 mission-driven and national competencies standards. The program achieved accreditation and reaccreditation under pre-2009 standards and in 2012–13 underwent self-study in preparation for reaccreditation review under the post-2009 standards.

In managing the assessment transition, program faculty were guided by a college-wide assessment initiative that relied upon a mission-driven and course-embedded outcomes approach. This approach included a 10-step model through which faculty designed mission assessment activities in six areas central to the

mission. The initial design of the embedded outcomes assessment program was piloted in 2007 and refined in subsequent years. Starting in 2009, the program integrated the NASPAA national competencies with the six program mission elements.

Program reports on course-embedded outcomes assessment were, and continue to be, shared with program faculty, college dean, and the program advisory board. The embedded outcomes assessment is now a “scorecard” that assesses program achievement in terms of students meeting NASPAA and program competencies. The process of sharing reports with faculty, college, and advisory board has led to a number of programmatic adjustments to improve student competency achievement.

This paper reviews the iterative process for development of the program assessment model integrated with NASPAA competencies that includes mission-specific and program concentration learning outcomes. The paper also outlines evidence developed from learning outcomes and how these were used alongside more traditional program assessment strategies—exit interviews, student SWOT assessments, alumni surveys—for program improvement. The term *iterative learning* is used to refer to program learning in all areas of the assessment process: developing assessment strategies, reviewing assessment reports, refining assessment strategies, and overall program refinement and reflection. We describe this learning as iterative or repeated because assessment review is revisited at monthly faculty meetings, at the end of terms, and at faculty retreats. Assessment has been a continuous process rather than a one-time program evaluation.

What follows in this paper are sections that frame the La Verne assessment experience within the literature on assessment and MPA programs. The paper outlines the program setting and mission, followed by an outline of the current La Verne assessment model and outcomes used in guiding program performance. The paper closes with an evaluation of the challenges faced in assessment design and implementation. The central theme of this paper is that the La Verne program viewed assessment as an iterative learning opportunity for the program where experimentation in assignment design was both a functional necessity and valuable practice for informing program development.

### **FRAMING THE ASSESSMENT EXPERIENCE**

The iterative learning interpretation of the experience outlined in this case reflects the development approach in assessment that the faculty engaged in, along with an understanding that informed assessment would involve deliberation, refinement, and discussion. Much of our discipline's current understanding of assessment efforts comes from examples of new initiatives, often based on findings from pilot efforts or single courses (e.g., Dalehite, 2008;

Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009; Jones et al., 2013; Powell, 2009). In practice, though, these initiatives are part of more comprehensive MPA assessment programs.

Successful assessment programs are fundamentally iterative. The University of Delaware, for example, has used a process in which iterative and interactive consideration of its mission and goals, assessment measures, course experiences, and planning promote alignment across its MPA Program (Aristigueta & Gomes, 2006). California State University, Long Beach, has described its assessment system as “holistic rather than layered” and as fostering collaboration with “multiple participants who engage in assessment at multiple points of time during a student's academic career” (Powell, 2009, p. 271).

Key challenges, therefore, are how to develop an iterative process and to bring faculty into both assessment development and measurement. One option is to rotate the faculty members who teach the capstone class and to use collaboratively developed rubric measures (Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009). Reflective essays can serve a similar purpose in courses oriented around experiential learning (Koliba, 2004). However, we argue that embedding assessment into multiple courses is necessary to fully realize faculty collaboration and fulfill learning objectives, relying on previous studies that have demonstrated the value of using indicators and rubrics into such varied coursework as a literature review assignment and budgeting course (Dalehite, 2008; Peat, 2006).

This course-embedded approach can be developed in parallel with efforts to incorporate competency-based outcomes into curricula. One way to interpret the La Verne MPA Assessment approach is within a larger assessment framework of models of professionalism established in the work of Bowman, West, and Beck (2010) that lists technical, ethical, and leadership competencies. We agree that MPA programs should “add value” to the public interest (Newcomer & Allen, 2010, p. 208). We further have ascribed to the view that com-

petency outcome assessments are a vital part of program review, along with other assessment tools (Getha-Taylor, Hummert, Nalbandian, & Silvia, 2013, pp. 154–155).

### PROGRAM SETTING AND FOUNDATION

Geographically, the Los Angeles area includes wealthy residential enclaves, growing edge cities, aging suburbs, immigrant communities, and urban areas in transition. Overlaid in this environment are a myriad of formal government agencies, quasi-governmental agencies, nonprofit organizations, and volunteer organizations. Few areas in the world have the wide variety of cities, counties, and special water, flood control, air quality, and other districts found in Southern California. This region has also been a leader in the development of public-private partnerships, formal and informal inter-local agreements, nonprofit organizations and other alternative institutional forms. *Therefore, the MPA Program broadly defines public service, and our course offerings reflect our approach to addressing these areas of study within our metropolitan region.*

The university's mission statement embodies a concern for the development of students as individuals who appreciate other cultures and points of view, understand the merits of life-long learning, and engage in community service. The mission statement was updated in 2012–13 as part of a university-wide strategic planning initiative. The university is designated as a Hispanic Serving Institution (HSI). The university is further extending its mission through development of the La Verne Experience programs for both undergraduate and graduate students that emphasize civic engagement, experiential learning, cross-course, and interdisciplinary learning.

The MPA faculty seek to incorporate these and other public service values into their approach to teaching and in the personal attention to student development offered in our program. The fostering of ethical responsibility is a major part of the faculty discussions on the mission statement and the orientation of our program. As a department, we are developing

*civic professionalism* as a guiding theme to highlight the importance of developing a public service orientation, encouraging public service as a vocation, and improving public participation in decision making.

### MISSION DEVELOPMENT AND PROGRAM OBJECTIVES

The MPA Program mission has been a constant since its inception in 1974. The current refined mission is as follows:

The mission of the University of La Verne's Master of Public Administration program is to offer an innovative and practical curriculum that stresses intellectual and theoretical foundations for professionals preparing to take on socially responsible roles in public leadership and service.

The faculty established that the La Verne mission would be achieved through a curriculum that emphasizes:

1. The effective use of public resources
2. The changing context (contextual nature) of public administration
3. Analytic and decision-making capacity
4. Practice of public administration in diverse public organizations
5. Ethical dimensions of public service

In 2007–08, the program faculty relied on a college-wide effort to develop an assessment program that reflected the mission of the program. This multistep process—defining core elements of the program mission, identifying goals and learning objectives, identifying courses for assessment, developing instruments to measure learning outcomes, developing rubrics for assessment of learning outcomes, setting targets for student learning—provided the foundation for an assessment process that was based on an accumulation of faculty-developed designs over several years.

With the advancement of universal competencies required of NASPAA-accredited programs in 2009, the program faculty sought to integrate NASPAA universal competencies with program mission learning objectives where possible. The NSAPAA universal competencies include the following:

1. To lead and manage in public governance;
2. To participate in and contribute to the public policy process;
3. To analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions;
4. To articulate and apply a public service perspective; and
5. To communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry.

The NASPAA universal competencies are framed within the La Verne MPA mission and the areas of emphasis.

### MISSION PROCESS

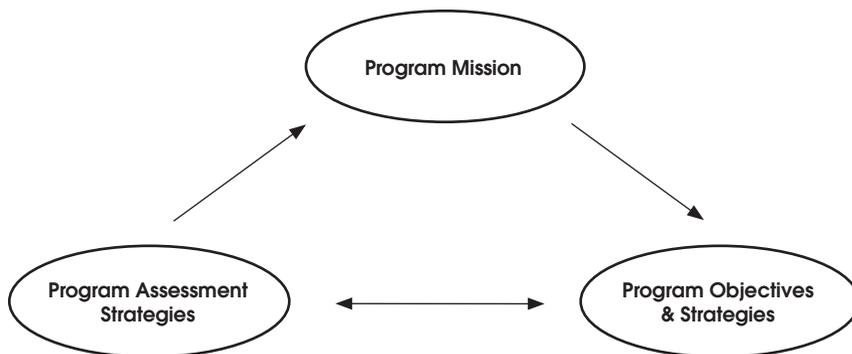
The current mission of the MPA Program dates back to an initial spring and summer 1999 process that began with a review of the then existing mission. The review process included current students, alumni, administration

officials, and local public agency stakeholders. The review led to the development of a new mission statement—and our current mission statement—adopted during the 1999–2000 self-study process. After a substantial review process, the mission statement was reaffirmed by the faculty as part of this review in preparation for the 2006 program self-study. Since 2007, members of the MPA advisory board have reviewed the mission statement of the La Verne MPA Program each year. The MPA faculty regularly engage in discussions about program issues in monthly meetings and through informal dialogue because we have a small core faculty and our area of offices is exclusively for public administration faculty and support staff.

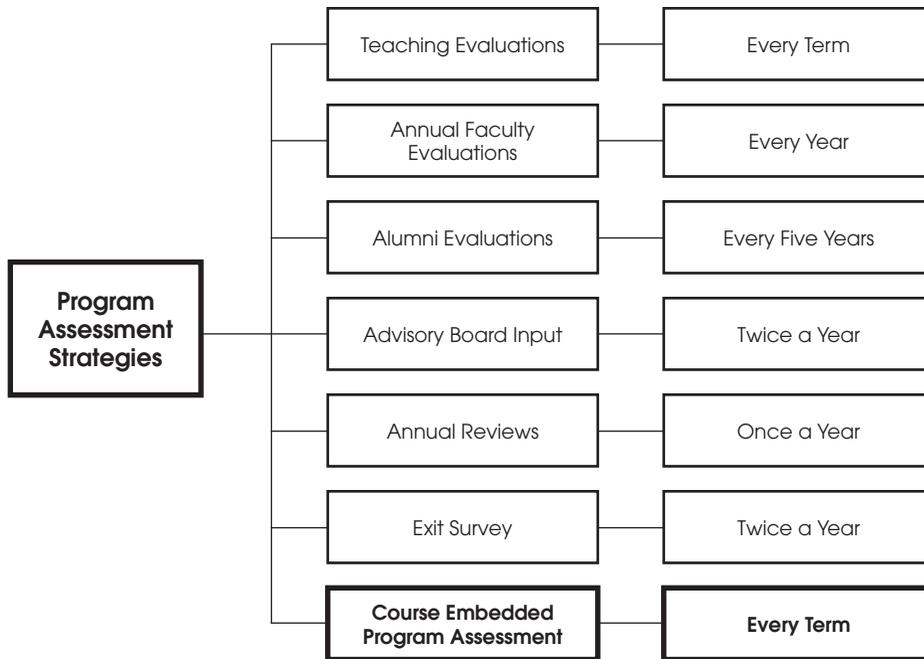
### MISSION ASSESSMENT

The mission of the MPA Program is assessed through a variety of formal and informal processes that encompass the primary stakeholders: students, faculty, alumni, and advisory board. Our program assessment informs the overall relationship between our program mission and program strategies, as well as how successfully our mission has been achieved and the continued relevancy of our mission. Figure 1 is a graphic representation of how we view the role of our assessment system.

**FIGURE 1.**  
The Role of the Assessment System



**FIGURE 2.**  
Assessment Strategies and Frequency



The following assessment strategies and activities are undertaken to assess components of program performance—faculty, students, alumni—and ensure that the program carries out its mission (Figure 2). Course-embedded assessment is noted in bold, to emphasize its central role in the assessment process and as the most recent addition to our assessment efforts.

In the following subsections, we discuss each of the evaluation strategies.

**Teaching Evaluations**

Formal evaluations are governed by university procedures through the Institutional Research Office. Formal evaluations of teaching serve to advance the department’s mission by assessing student evaluations of faculty performance. These evaluations have both numerical and narrative comments that are provided to the professor after final grades have been submitted. The MPA Program director and the department

chair are given course evaluation forms for each course. De-identified evaluation summaries are shared with the MPA advisory board and are compared to overall college averages. Our evaluation is similar to other universities in that the department chair reviews instances of low performance with both full-time and adjunct faculty. However, assessment strategies and outcomes are now available as supplements to student evaluations.

**Annual Faculty Evaluations**

The university conducts formal faculty evaluations on nontenured faculty on an annual basis. Faculty meet with their respective department chairs near the end of each school year to discuss each member’s development, review course evaluations, and develop a written report that outlines current strengths and weaknesses as well as the professional development plan for the upcoming school year. These annual reports and evaluations are a

critical element in each faculty member's promotion and tenure review process. As with many universities, ours has an increased emphasis on faculty research. However, our university also recognizes service and participation in curriculum development. Therefore, a benefit of our assessment model is that it provides opportunities for tenure-track faculty to be more directly involved in curriculum design and sharing of best practices.

### **Alumni Evaluations**

The MPA program surveys its alumni approximately every five years. Two alumni surveys were used in the most recent accreditation review; one was implemented by the university institutional research in 2011 and one was carried out by the college in 2012. The 2011 and 2012 reports indicate a strong faculty and strong support of the program mission components and curriculum. In addition, alumni report that the program was successful in preparing them for their positions in public affairs. The 2011 report indicates that students seek: (a) classes offered on Saturday or some fully online; (b) stronger career services office; (c) stronger feedback from faculty, and (d) more opportunities to work with faculty. Our assessment program has led to improvements in faculty feedback to students, especially when assessment outcomes are included in grading rubrics. The increased communication among faculty through the assessment model has also facilitated dialogue about the links between student performance, career development, and lifelong learning.

### **MPA Advisory Board**

The MPA advisory board meets semiannually to review MPA Program updates, admissions profiles, graduating student profiles, course evaluations, program learning assessment outcomes, graduate exit interviews, internship reports, and faculty productivity as well as to entertain program development initiatives. The board is also a source for potential internships, and members have served as mentors through an annual city-manager-in-residence program and periodic networking programs. The latter program was a direct response to student

interest in career advice and service that was evident in alumni surveys and graduate exit surveys (discussed in the next subsection).

The board has been instrumental in curriculum changes that are aimed at meeting the needs of the marketplace that these students work within. For example, the board identified the need for a course in strategic planning, and in 2006, the board recommended merging the Statistics and Research Methods courses.

In 2009–10, the board reaffirmed the program commitment to face-to-face over online course delivery due to the program mission of developing among students the ability to undertake socially responsible roles in public leadership and service. In 2011 and 2012, the board indicated that the program should consider adding curriculum emphasis areas (such as economic development) and developing certificates for public service employees. These examples illustrate the important role of the advisory board in reflecting stakeholder needs from graduates of the MPA Program.

### **Annual Program Reviews**

Annual program reviews are required for accreditation by NASPAA. These program reviews are useful assessments of program strengths and weaknesses. The reports are used to gather annual data—such as graduation rates and graduate profiles—that are shared with the MPA faculty and MPA advisory board. In our experience, the assessment program has led to increased evaluation of other program data as well. For example, we examined whether some assessment outcomes were tied to a possible mismatch in student interests in public administration rather than academic ability. This review led to refinement and clarity in program recruitment and program admission requirements. The annual reviews also report on mission development, program diversity, program resource adequacy, and other areas required by NASPAA for national accreditation.

### **Graduate Exit Survey**

The MPA Program offers the Graduate Seminar course for those students who are at or nearing

**TABLE 1.**  
**MPA Assessment Matrix**

| <b>University Learning Goals</b>  | <b>Universal Competencies (NASPAA)</b>          | <b>Defined Learning Objectives</b>   | <b>Assigned Course</b>  | <b>Assigned Elective Courses</b>   | <b>Public Service Values</b>  |
|---|---|--|---|--|---|
| <b>The effective use of public resources</b>  |   | Objective 1: Utilize public resources in efficient and effective ways.<br>Objective 2: Evaluate the effectiveness of planning, procurement, and implementation of IT in a public sector organization.  | PADM 534 Management of Public Funds<br><br>PADM 584 Managing IT in Public Organizations |  | Serving professionally with competence, efficiency, and objectivity                             |
| <b>Understand the intra- and inter-organizational aspects of public administration</b>              | Lead and Manage in Public Governance            | Objective 3: Appraise the organizational environment, both internal and external, as well as the culture, politics, and institutional setting.   | PADM 531 Org. Theory  |  |   |
| <b>Understand the inherent social role and ethos for the public, private, and nonprofit sectors</b> | Articulate and Apply Public Service Perspective | Objective 4A: Articulate the unique nature of public administration, the role of the public administrator, and the contextual elements that differentiate the public from the non-profit and private sectors.<br>Objective 4B Articulate the unique mission of a non-profit organization and its programs, organizational structure, and governance. | PADM 501 Public Administration and Society  | PADM 538 Collaborative PA<br><br>MGMT 533 Accounting and Compliance for Nonprofits | Demonstrating respect, equity, and fairness in dealing with citizens and fellow public servants |
| <b>Understand the role quantitative analysis plays in public administrative decision making</b>     | Analyze, Synthesize and Make Decisions          | Objective 5: Employ analytical tools for collecting, analyzing, presenting, and interpreting data, including appropriate statistical concepts and techniques.  | PADM 582 Quantitative Analysis for Public Administration                                |  |   |
| <b>Understand the implications of diversity in public organizations</b>                             | Communicate with a Diverse Workforce            | Objective 6: Identify and discuss the significant strategic human resources management implications for managing diversity.  | PADM 530 Human Resource Management  |  | Acting ethically so as to uphold the public trust   |
| <b>Understand the concepts of fairness and justice in public service</b>                            |   | Objective 7: To demonstrate comprehensive understanding of and skill in applying the Ethical Problem-Solving Model   | PADM 555 Ethics   |  | Pursuing the public interest with accountability and transparency                               |
|   | Participate in the Public Policy Process        | Objective 8: Describe and work within the institutional, structural, and political contexts of policy making   | PADM 533 Policy Formation and Analysis  |  |   |

completion of the program. This course is intended to be a culminating event that synthesizes and integrates the various other courses in the MPA curriculum. The course includes a graduate student exit survey that offers a chance for graduating students to assess the program and program mission. These assessments are summarized for review by the faculty and advisory board. Periodically, the course also includes a SWOT analysis aimed at assisting the MPA Program. With these assessments, the MPA program director can identify possible curriculum and assignment changes for consideration of the faculty and advisory board.

Based on multiple assessments, areas of program improvement reflected the need for assistance with career development and more opportunities for professional networking. The program response to these assessments led to the initiation—and now regularly scheduled fall and spring conference/dinner sessions jointly sponsored by our regional section of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and our college.

### **Course-Embedded Assessment**

In 2007–08, faculty of the MPA Program developed a mission-driven program in which mission assessment was embedded in courses. The result of this effort led to a curriculum map of program learning outcomes; universal competencies were embedded in selected courses. Public service values were viewed as central to the program mission and were later added to the curriculum map. Table 1 provides the resultant curriculum map or matrix.

The matrix serves as both a planning tool and the heart of the course-embedded assessment program. As can be seen, the NASPAA Competencies and University of La Verne Learning Goals are synthesized and matched with core courses in the MPA curriculum. More specific learning objectives go with each course and are assessed; efforts are made to have a minimum of two assessments for each objective.

Program mission assessments are assigned to selected courses that are part of the curriculum

map. These assignments are initiated by faculty and reported to program faculty in meetings. Each faculty member develops assignments that allow for the assessment of student performance by faculty. Each faculty member then scores students on the assignment and submits scores at the end of each term. The assessment strategies vary by course, but the evaluations are reported by each faculty member according to a standardized four-point scale.

All program assessments are managed through the dean's office. That office—through an assessment coordinator—sends out program assessments to assigned classes at the beginning of the term. The assessments are returned to the coordinator, who summarizes course assessments and develops a report for each term. The summary interpretation of the data is reported in a “scorecard” that is distributed to program faculty as well as the program advisory board and posted on the MPA website. Table 2 is an example of the scorecard. Although the embedded assessment process may appear to be quite time-consuming, it usually requires less work than assessments outside regular coursework. Embedded assessments have been found to “match up well with local learning goals” and “yield information that faculty and staff value and are likely to use for teaching and learning” (Suskie, 2009, p. 27).

The program faculty initially set a performance goal of 80% for student achievement for each of the program mission objectives. The scorecard indicates that 80% or more of the students accomplish each of the mission objectives and NASPAA universal competencies. Areas where the program performance is weakest are objective 3 (organizational appraisal), for which 13% of students are at minimally satisfactory or unsatisfactory levels, and objective 4 (unique nature of public administration), where 9% of the students are at only satisfactory levels.

As an example of how the scorecard has been used in curricula review, it was found that student performance on case assignments in a course designed to orient students to the La Verne MPA Program—PADM 501, Public

**TABLE 2.**  
MPA Program Scorecard—Outcome Assessment Summary Report: 2008–2012

| Course  | Objective  | On Campus      |        |                   |                     | Sum     |
|---------|--|----------------|--------|-------------------|---------------------|---------|
|         |  | Excel-<br>lent | Good   | Satis-<br>factory | Unsatis-<br>factory |         |
| PADM501 | <b>Objective 4:</b> Articulate the unique nature of public administration, the role of the public administrator, and the contextual elements that differentiate the public from the nonprofit and private sectors. | N = 30         | N = 33 | N = 6             | N = 0               | N = 69  |
|         |  | 43%            | 48%    | 9%                | 0%                  | 100%    |
| PADM530 | <b>Objective 6:</b> Identify and discuss the significant Strategic Human Resources Management Implications for Managing Diversity.   | N = 50         | N = 28 | N = 0             | N = 1               | N = 79  |
|         |  | 63%            | 35%    | 0%                | 1%                  | 100%    |
| PADM531 | <b>Objective 3:</b> Appraise the organizational environment, both internal and external, as well as the culture, politics, and institutional setting.  | N = 33         | N = 13 | N = 6             | N = 1               | N = 53  |
|         |  | 62%            | 25%    | 11%               | 2%                  | 100%    |
| PADM533 | <b>Objective 8:</b> Describe and work within the institutional, structural, and political contexts of policy making.   | N = 75         | N = 12 | N = 3             | N = 1               | N = 91  |
|         |  | 82%            | 13%    | 3%                | 1%                  | 100%    |
| PADM534 | <b>Objective 1:</b> Utilize organizational resources in efficient and effective ways.  | N = 25         | N = 14 | N = 0             | N = 0               | N = 39  |
|         |  | 64%            | 36%    | 0%                | 0%                  | 100%    |
| PADM555 | <b>Objective 7:</b> Demonstrate comprehensive understanding of and skill in applying the Ethical Problem-Solving Model.  | N = 26         | N = 8  | N = 0             | N = 0               | N = 34  |
|         |  | 76%            | 24%    | 0%                | 0%                  | 100%    |
| PADM582 | <b>Objective 5:</b> Employ analytical tools for collecting, analyzing, presenting, and interpreting data, including appropriate statistical concepts and techniques.   | N = 87         | N = 41 | N = 6             | N = 3               | N = 137 |
|         |  | 64%            | 30%    | 4%                | 2%                  | 100%    |
| PADM584 | <b>Objective 2:</b> Evaluate the effectiveness of planning, procurement, and implementation of IT in a public sector organization.   | N = 7          | N = 5  | N = 0             | N = 0               | N = 12  |
|         |  | 58%            | 42%    | 0%                | 0%                  | 100%    |

Administration and Society—was not as strong as faculty desired. The focus on the public administrator role was identified as needing further development, especially given the focus on the NASPAA-required program competency “to lead and manage in public governance.” This area of program competency is being addressed by the addition of a leadership course in the core curriculum. As another example, program faculty, in review of the program emphasis on “the effective use of public resources,” found that an existing course, Management of Public Funds, needed to be renamed and focused more on budgeting and public finance from a fiscal sustainability perspective.

## GUIDING PERFORMANCE

As previously stated, faculty, students, alumni, and advisory board members provide information used to guide the program. The assessments outlined earlier have led to changes in the MPA curriculum, assignments, and general orientation. These changes have been derived directly from our iterative efforts with course-embedded assessment to align the curriculum with learning goals and competencies. We present here two kinds of changes based on assessments that guide the performance of the MPA Program: (a) ongoing program changes from the previous Self-Study Report, 2007–2012; and (b) proposed program changes based on the 2012 Program Report and 2013 SSR.

### Program Changes from 2007 Through 2012

The geographic location of the University of La Verne places the MPA Program in a very diverse, dynamic metropolitan environment. The program has attempted to keep pace with its environment. The curriculum has begun to focus on the management of public-serving organizations in a highly fragmented, disarticulated metropolitan area. A summary of selected program changes from 2007 through 2012 is presented in Table 3.

### Proposed Changes for 2014–15

The 2012 Program Report and the 2013 Self-Study Report relied on evidence developed through the assessment process. Based on the information provided in this report, the following areas indicate that the mission of the program is in good order and that the program should take on some added dimensions in the coming years to that will take advantage of La Verne program niche and positively impact the region. The following are three recommendations and corresponding activities:

**Enhance curriculum and career support for students.** Based on evidence from faculty review of student competencies, the following curricular enhancements have been adopted for implementation in Fall 2014:

- Revised the ‘governance’ concentration focus to be more reflective of our regional orientation, such as ‘urban affairs and management’
- Created a program concentration option in the area of ‘policy’ that enhances the analytic competencies for a *civic professional*
- Developed courses dedicated to leadership, public budgeting and legal foundations to enhance the core competencies of a *civic professional*

As expressed in the Program Setting and Foundation section, *civic professionalism* refers to a public service orientation, encouraging public service as a vocation, and improving public participation in decision making. Our department has adopted a statement on civic

professionalism that emphasizes providing our students with the theories, tools, and techniques to actively engage in improving the general welfare of all citizens as well as to be agents of change in organizational settings, activists in their community, and/or advocates in the legislative process.

### Develop networks for students and stakeholders.

Based on alumni and graduate exit surveys, career development and professional networks are highly desired and recommended. To address this concern, the following program strategies are under consideration:

- Developing an Honors Society chapter
- Developing professional links with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA)—become a Cal-ICMA chapter
- Finding a systematic and ongoing way to incorporate practitioners into the curriculum and co-curricular work of the program. Options include guest lectures, mentorship, symposium, city-manager-in-residence program, and an ICMA student-led organization.
- Providing graduate financial assistance in the form of tuition discounts (assistantships) and scholarships should be part of attracting, assisting, and maintaining graduate students in the MPA Program
- Developing a student mentoring program with the guidance and participation of the advisory board
- Developing a stronger alumni relations program

Each of these strategies has received attention in the 2013–14 academic year. We are moving forward with establishment of the ICMA chapter and developing student leadership. The La Verne MPA Program celebrated its 40th anniversary in Winter 2014. The event reestablished personal and career connections among students and alumni. Finally, the program is bringing in its sixth manager-in residence to assist students with career preparation.

**TABLE 3.**  
Selected Changes to the MPA Program: 2007–2012

| Change   | Guiding Source(s)                         | Link to Mission Objectives and Strategies  |
|--|---|--|
| <b>Curriculum</b><br><i>Added:</i> PADM 501, Intro to Public Administration  | Faculty                                   | Intellectual and Theoretical Foundations of PA   |
| <b>Curriculum</b><br><i>Added:</i> PADM 584, Managing IT in Public Organizations   | Faculty<br>NASPAA, Advisory Board, Alumni | Management of Organizational Resources   |
| <b>Curriculum</b><br><i>Added:</i> PADM 581, Comparative PA  | Faculty                                   |  |
| <b>Curriculum</b><br><i>Changed Title:</i> PADM 583, Managing Groups and Coalitions to PADM 538, Collaborative Public Management | Advisory Board<br>Faculty                 | Context of PA  |
| <b>Curriculum</b><br><i>Changed Title:</i> PADM 555, Ethics and Decision Making to Ethics and Leadership                         | Faculty<br>NASPAA Site Visit              | Intellectual and Theoretical Foundations of PA<br>Ethical Dimensions of Public Service |
| <b>Staff Support</b><br>Reorganization of Program Coordinator Position   | Faculty                                   | Program Support  |
| <b>Program Development &amp; Expansion</b><br>Concentrations in Governance, Nonprofit Management                                 | Students                                  | Further Develop the MPA Program  |
| <b>Program Development &amp; Expansion</b><br>Dual Degree Program with Law School  | Students                                  | Context of PA  |

**EXPERIMENTATION AND ITERATIVE LEARNING: CHALLENGES IN THE DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION OF MISSION ASSESSMENT**

Although faculty, students, and stakeholders are supportive of our assessment efforts, designing and implementing course-embedded mission assessment over the last several years has not been easy. We encountered a number of challenges that can serve as lessons for other MPA programs considering similar efforts.

First, not all of the program assessment proposals and initial features are part of the current assessment program. There was considerable experimentation with assessment strategies. Generally, we have found it best to use course-embedded outcomes primarily in core concentration classes and to keep assess-

ments distinct for each course. For example, we had originally intended for students to address three central questions of public administration in the first course and then reflect upon those in the final course of the program (pre- and post-test assessment). However, we had problems with file management, due to university archiving policies, and the final course changed to a more project-based format. In addressing this challenge, the program is considering a different kind of assessment tool, such as an online portfolio program that would allow for developmental assessment to take place.

A second challenge in design and implementation is that each faculty member connects uniquely to the program assessment process. Initially, some saw assessment as an additional

burden on course faculty and a separate process that does not yield meaningful benefits. Others embraced assessing students' competency acquisition in a way that offers meaningful feedback to the program. This range of connection with the value of assessment influences the depth of program assessment quality.

One lesson of the iterative approach to assessment is that with an experimenting approach to assessment—or a culture of experimentation—faculty dialogue and discourse can lead to a more meaningful discourse on and faculty support for the benefits of assessment strategies. We have a relatively small department and have worked to build consensus on the assessment program rather than following a top-down approach through faculty evaluations.

The faculty dialogue concerning the breadth and depth of statistical preparation and competency of our students is a good example how the value of assessment can be demonstrated. Assessment outcome reports created a common framework for informed consideration of the need to orient the quantitative methods course more around building competencies related to statistical analysis and professional presentation of findings.

Third, the shift from the traditional “input” assessment to “outcomes” assessment has not been easy. Faculty and staff have traditionally relied on standard university-driven reports assessing input standards for quality program management: number of students, student-faculty ratios, size of classes, admission standards, graduation rates, facilities, faculty qualifications. The move to embrace outcome measures—measures based on program mission—is a marked shift in program management and measurement.

This shift requires program resources to address new kinds of measurement. Beyond the challenge of operationalizing program mission elements, program managers and faculty are now asked to measure new kinds of program *mission-related* information related to program admissions, faculty research, student research,

graduate service placement, student competency achievement, and transparency in program outputs. Some of these measures are new to the university setting and call upon different information support systems. One lesson we learned in overcoming this challenge was to clearly define the administrative roles in data gathering and to distinguish which parts are to be administered by the university, the college, and the program. This advancement takes management time and resources, but improving the clarity of administrative responsibility along with establishing the significance of the information is an important task. If data is not gathered regularly and in routine ways, it will be difficult to determine patterns that would be useful for the program to consider.

Fourth, it was a significant shift for all faculty, including adjunct or part-time faculty, to incorporate the values of assessment into their course management. In our experience, adjunct faculty initially did not embrace or treat the assessment process equally. Part of this challenge is related to expectations at the hiring stage of adjunct faculty, where program assessment either was not part of the orientation process or adjunct faculty saw their role as being limited to teaching classes and grading student assignments. In addition, some adjunct faculty, like some of the full-time faculty, feel there is an additional burden in carrying out the program assessment. We have eased this burden somewhat as our dean added an additional administrative support position within his office to act as a liaison to faculty on assessment. With the changes to our curriculum taking place in Fall 2014, we are currently reexamining whether learning outcomes and related assessment ought to be different for the selected courses taught by adjunct practitioners.

Fifth, based on our iterative learning approach to assessment, we came to the realization that variation needed to be accepted—or even promoted—on the assessment assignments, but not on assessment criteria or assessment elements. It has been our view that each faculty member brings unique academic and professional experience to courses they are assigned

and that these experiences should be honored. We expect faculty to address mission-based competencies, but individual faculty decide which assignments can be used in determining the assessment outcome; one feature of successful assessment programs is to foster an environment of “reasonable risk taking” in developing assessment activities (Suskie, 2009, pp. 79–83). Students benefit from the unique contributions of the faculty as well, which further offsets what the program assessment loses in assignment consistency.

A final challenge faced by our program and others is the need to balance faculty discretion with matching outcome assessment to pedagogical frameworks. Donald Kirkpatrick and James Kirkpatrick’s four levels of learning outcomes (reaction, learning, transfer, results) is one of the most cited (e.g., Newcomer & Allen, 2010, p. 214; Suskie, 2009). A number of other outcome frameworks are available, including some that trace student development or recognize different types of learning (affective, social, ethical, and cognitive; Nilson, 2010, pp. 17–31). Newcomer and Allen’s (2010) logic model for MPA programs was informed by these frameworks and includes short-term, intermediate, and long-term outcomes. In addition, some emerging approaches to assessment are more student driven (Kimoto, Mulder, Jackson, & Frasco, 2012). Other programs have used assessment surveys or scales that break down competencies into multiple dimensions (Jones et al., 2013; Getha-Taylor et al., 2013; Levesque-Bristol & Cornelius-White, 2012).

An aspect of this concern is the multitude of competency models. So far, our assessment program has incorporated both NASPAA competencies and elements of our MPA Program mission. As we refine the MPA mission, we are more directly examining competencies associated with *civic professionalism*. We may need to further adapt our list of competencies around our university’s mission statement and forthcoming graduate student competencies. We are fortunate that our experience parallels that of Missouri State University; our univer-

sity’s increasing emphasis on civic engagement and experiential learning also aligns well with our MPA Program approach (Levesque-Bristol & Cornelius-White, 2012).

Nevertheless, bringing together multiple mission statements and competency models adds complexity to assessment design. It also provides little opportunity to explore external competency models, as the University of Kansas has done with its use of the Canadian Public Service model for assessing the development of pre-service students (Getha-Taylor et al., 2013).

### THE VALUE OF ASSESSMENT AND RECOMMENDATIONS

Overall, the La Verne experience with the design and implementation of course-embedded mission assessment has been positive. The value of assessment is evident in the program changes from 2007 to 2012 and in those proposed for 2014–15. The iterative learning approach, very much a reflection of the experimenting culture of the program, has offered opportunities to explore assessment alternatives that are more meaningful to program faculty. As an added value, iterative learning has opened up avenues to involve new faculty in course design and to more purposefully consider our mission and desired competencies.

The following discussion includes suggested activities for programs considering how to more fully integrate the NASPAA competencies into their assessment programs. Table 4 is a summary of these activities.

We suggest that programs can save effort by more purposefully selecting the courses that will be regularly assessed. We believe there is value in extending assessment beyond the introductory and capstone courses, but not necessarily for every course. One way of keeping the process manageable is to start with the five NASPAA competencies and try to match each with a single core course. This does not mean that the NASPAA competency is the only objective of a course; each course generally would have additional competencies or learning objectives. It also does not exclude the NASPAA

**TABLE 4.**  
**Recommended Activities to Design and Implement Course-Embedded Assessment**

| Activities   | Guidelines   |
|--|--|
| Match NASPAA competencies to core courses.                 | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Select one course per competency.</li> <li>• Consider whether to include assessment on university/program competencies or add later.</li> <li>• Continue any existing assessments with introductory and capstone courses.</li> </ul>  |
| Establish working groups to develop assessment strategies. | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use course “depth charts” of the faculty who teach a course or may teach in the future.</li> <li>• Involve new faculty and practitioner adjuncts.</li> </ul>  |
| Design assessment strategies.                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Keep assessments simple.</li> <li>• Create a menu of assessment options, to give flexibility.</li> <li>• Embed assessment into assignment rubrics.</li> <li>• Consider peer review and outside evaluators (advisory board members or alumni).</li> </ul>  |
| Pilot and then implement assessment strategies.            | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Start with full-time faculty before expanding to adjuncts.</li> <li>• Be willing to adapt and change strategies.</li> </ul>   |
| Engage in iterative learning.                              | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Restructure faculty meetings to allow for constructive dialogue on assessment.</li> <li>• Consider periodic evening or Saturday workshops with practitioner adjuncts.</li> <li>• Solicit student feedback.</li> </ul>   |
| Compile results.   | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use support staff, if possible, to compile results into a scorecard.</li> <li>• Routinize, so that assessment is compiled as soon as possible at the end of semesters or terms.</li> </ul>  |
| Evaluate and redesign.                                     | <ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>• Use in conjunction with other assessment strategies and ways of evaluating student performance; avoid reading too much into a score.</li> <li>• Revisit regularly, not just with periodic program reviews.</li> <li>• Give credit to faculty for assisting in course and assessment development.</li> </ul> |

competencies from being valued across a curriculum, nor does it exclude a program from deciding to revisit the competencies in a capstone course. If possible, we would suggest piloting course-embedded assessment first with courses taught by core full-time faculty, but involving adjunct faculty in the assessment design from the beginning.

We recommend limiting the number of assessments within each course and keeping the effort required to compile assessment data to a minimum. For example, having a competency item within an assignment rubric is both simple and transparent to students. Having peers and/or outside evaluators (such as members of advisory boards) complete simple forms or electronic surveys on final projects can be effective. This stra-

tegy has the added benefit of providing broader and more objective feedback. These efforts have been successfully used in our own classes.

Regardless of program size, we further recommend that small work groups be established for each course included in the assessment program. The memberships would consist of the “depth charts” for each course—the faculty who regularly teach a course or may be called upon to teach a class in the future. These work groups would then develop the assessment strategies for each course; in some cases, the groups may develop a menu of options for faculty. Although this work initially may be more time-consuming, it is preferred to either a top-down or a trial-and-error approach. We have taken this depth-chart approach to updating course outlines and are now using the same process to update our assessment program.

It bears repeating that dedicating time to the assessment process is difficult. Our experience with iterative learning has prompted a reexamination of how we spend our time at faculty meetings. We are currently experimenting with expediting informational items and setting aside more time for dialogue on program development, course design, mission, and assessment.

As the program assessment program matures, program goals and student performance can be shared among the faculty, who can then make program improvements that reflect the goals they wish to achieve. Programs will then be well positioned to refine their assessment programs and to more purposefully incorporate emerging models and frameworks into future efforts.

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