Implementing a Multi-method Competency Model: Experiences of the MPA Program at James Madison University

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ABSTRACT
The implementation of NASPAA's 2009 accreditation standards embodied a shift toward outcomes-based assessment. NASPAA-accredited programs must now identify, operationalize, and assess mission-related competencies within five competency domains with the goal of demonstrating that their programs lead to student learning. This move aligns with broader trends in governance as efforts to ascertain impact, value, and return on investment permeate the discussions of public sector actors. Public administration programs, like other services that deal in difficult-to-measure outcomes, have discovered the challenges inherent in such an effort. This paper considers the landscape of competency assessment strategies and then examines the experiences of designing a competency-based model at James Madison University.

KEYWORDS
competency model, portfolio, assessment, accreditation

Programs providing education in the areas of public policy, affairs, and administration face a number of challenges. Foremost among them is designing a curriculum that provides students the opportunity to combine theory and practical skills in a manner that will enhance their professional development. NASPAA's 2009 standard 5 calls on accredited programs to use competencies to achieve this goal; "as the basis for its curriculum, the program will adopt a set of required competencies related to its mission and public service values" (NASPAA, 2009). The use of competencies as a foundation for curriculum development is well supported in the literature, but challenges associated with real or perceived resource constraints and the selection and development of competency models confronts programs as they seek to meet the new standards (Getha-Taylor, Hummert, Nalbandian, & Silva, 2013).

While assessing a program's merit based on the competencies accrued by students is certainly appealing, the implementation of NASPAA's new standard has raised a number of questions and challenges. Additionally, the change has reignited a discussion on the efficacy of current public affairs and administration pedagogy and the various strategies that programs can apply to establish their impact on students and meet the demands of the new standards. Designing an assessment process and tools for measurement requires program instructors to look inward at the content they are offering while simultaneously turning outward to communities and employers who can assist in determining the skills and abilities students need to succeed in today's public sector, and to accomplish this in the context of the unique aspects of their program. Factors that need to be considered include the program's mission, the size of the core faculty and the student population, resource availability, and the makeup of the student population (in-service vs. pre-service). These considerations will necessarily create a diversity of approaches, straying from universality but providing flexibility to design models that build on individual program missions and strengths.

Designing a competency-based model involves a multistep process that involves faculty engagement and preferably incorporates a variety of stakeholders. Before developing or choosing an assessment strategy, educators must first identify competencies. The NASPAA standards help guide this effort by providing five competency domains, but it is ultimately up to the program to identify the individual competencies and align them to their mission. This step in the process provides the foundation for outcome-based evaluation of the program. Engaging stakeholders outside of the program can enhance this process (alumni, advisory boards, etc.). Additionally, the notion of identifying key skills, knowledge, and abilities falls short of the ideal of competency development. Competencies move beyond skills and abilities, capturing motives, traits, and self-concepts (Daley, 2002). Approaching competency identification with this in mind leads to a focus on attributes that increase the likelihood of future development and the potential for performance (Getha-Taylor et al., 2013). Once competencies are identified, an assessment plan must be put in place to gauge student learning. While a number of assessment models exist (Saint-Germain, 2008), the challenge is in linking a model to a program's unique mission-related competencies. Moreover, as Getha-Taylor (2008) states, an often forgotten step is the continual evaluation of competency models. Competencies—like the field of public service itself—are ever evolving, and a competency model must be adaptable to change. As Fitzpatrick and Stevens (2009) suggest, a multi-method approach may be the best way to truly measure student learning in relation to competencies.

In this article, we examine the creation of a competency-based model at James Madison University. Building from the inside out, the faculty of the James Madison MPA program sought to design a model constructed on the program's strengths and geared toward the needs of its student population. We begin by reviewing the literature on the use of competencies in graduate education and then examine the various models available to programs in public affairs. Next, we examine a history of James Madison's experiences with the development of a multi-method assessment model. We conclude the article by discussing the challenges, accomplishments, lessons learned, and future directions envisioned for the program model.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Evaluating educational outcomes allows us to become the learning organizations we espouse to our students, improving the performance of our public service programs and the productivity of the organizations in which our alumni are working while serving the public interest (Boyle & Whitaker, 2001; Cleary, 1990; Mitchell, 1991; Newcomer, 2008). Kirkpatrick's framework (1959a, 1959b, 1960a, 1960b) for evaluating training outcomes is widely used in industrial organizational psychology and professional education (Alliger & Janak, 1989; Cascio, 1987). The model includes four progressive levels of assessment: reactions, learning, behavior, and results. More recently, Kaufman, Keller, and Watkins's Five Level Model (1995) takes into account the *societal outcome* of education, which can be easily applied to the public value of professional education in public service. A recent post to the JMU program's Facebook page indicates each of these levels of evaluation of educational outcomes:

> I've been applying what I learned in the program during this mobilization with the Army and have seen positive

outcomes as a result. I send a big thanks…to my professors and classmates that contributed to my experience in the MPA program.

For NASPAA-accredited programs, the difficulty lies in the multistep process of defining and articulating mission-related competencies and subsequently designing a vigorous assessment plan.

The first step in the process is to identify and define mission-related competencies. Competencies are the "expected skills, knowledge, aptitudes, and capacities" (NASPAA, n.d., par. 4) that produce results (in the public interest). Competency-based education is an institutional process that changes education from concentrating on curriculum content (teacher-focused) to developing and demonstrating competencies that will enable students to effectively apply their knowledge, skills, and abilities in varying and complex situations (student- and/or workplace-focused). The student learning outcomes articulated in competency-based education are connected to workforce needs, as defined by employers and the profession. As these outcomes become increasingly complex and multifaceted, competency-based education necessitates more complex assessment (Jones, Voorhees, & Paulson, 2002). Rather than originating from a compilation of simple objectives and curriculum content, the complex assessment of competency-based education can involve multiple measures such as portfolios, capstone courses, and experiential learning in the field through internships and applied experiences. Developing student assessment that supports students as they practice and apply these competencies in different contexts is a challenge that requires continuous reflection and evaluation by faculty, students, and stakeholders. These interactions highlight the process orientation of competency-based education and the efficacy of formative evaluation (Bloom, 1968; Bloom, Hasting, & Madaus, 1971) throughout matriculation.

Together, NASPAA and the ancillary Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA), manage the governance of the accreditation process for public affairs programs. Standards for public affairs education have evolved over time from developing the appropriate mix of inputs (faculty, staff, students, specific curriculum content) to the program's mission-specific mix of outputs and most recently to competency-based assessment that encourages programs to become more outcome oriented (Durant, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009; Raffel, Maser, & Calarusse, 2011). This evolution aligns with broader trends in governance as efforts to ascertain impact, value, and return on investment permeate the discussions of public sector actors.

With the new NASPAA standards and the shift toward focusing on student learning outcomes, all accredited programs must cultivate competencies in five domains: (a) leading and managing in public governance; (b) participating in and contributing to the policy process; (c) analyzing, synthesizing, thinking critically, solving problems, and making decisions; (d) articulating and applying a public service perspective; and (e) communicating and interacting productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry. By cultivating synergy between mission-specific objectives and for specializations and concentrations, the new standards provide flexibility for programs to develop additional competencies that lead to student learning outcomes. King, Britton, and Missik (1996) note that some of the defining questions that surround and divide our discipline are also reflected in the design of performance evaluation and competency assessment models: politics vs. administration, theory vs. practice—and we add quantitative vs. qualitative. Powell, Piskulich, and Saint-Germain (2011) maintain that there are "no proscriptions or panaceas when it comes to assessing student learning of competencies" (p. 3). Likewise, in assessing student learning, multiple normative perspectives are at play: *departmental* (comprehensive exams), *disciplinary* (standardized content), and *professional* and *employer* (competencies). These perspectives somewhat mirror the different models of assessment employed in MPA programs: comprehensive exams, capstone courses/experiences, and portfolios.

Comprehensive examinations represent the curriculum content that faculty believes students should know. These, alone, cannot measure the students' ability to put theory into action. Their utility lies in measuring the level of theoretical knowledge retained by the student and serving as an indication of readiness for further academic study. Reid and Miller (1997) suggest that the use of comprehensive examinations is best suited for programs producing students entering doctoral studies. Capstone courses offer the opportunity to explore the reciprocal relationships between theory and praxis (Roberts, 2001) and between citizen and administrator, the capstone course provides an "integrative experience" that hones the knowledge and skills students learned in the program and commences their professional socialization (Reid & Miller, 1997). Reid and Miller (1997) propose four ideal types of capstone courses: (a) an integrative or synthesizing experience, (b) a skill demonstration, (c) a thesis or paper, and (d) a current topics course. Each type of capstone depends on the intended purpose of the capstone course, student characteristics, and program size. Smaller MPA programs, where core faculty number five or fewer, may have a difficult time regularly staffing a capstone course. Student characteristics affect the relative success of capstone courses, because pre-service and mid-career students have different academic and professional needs. Case study or praxis-oriented capstones are more beneficial to pre-service students, helping them apply their theoretical knowledge and build professional validation and confidence (Reid & Miller, 1997). Many programs use the capstone course as an opportunity to engage in applied research and consultation projects, which are integral to bridging the theory-praxis dichotomy (Denhardt, Lewis, Raffel, & Rich, 1997) and aligning the demonstration of acquired knowledge and skills (Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009; Schacter & Schwartz, 2009). However, when situated at the end of a graduate degree program, the reflexive nature of the capstone cannot be overlooked and can encourage and spur "strategic thinking" about the program as a whole (Durant, 2002).

More recently, graduate programs have begun integrating portfolios as a method of evaluating institutional and student outcomes (Barret, 2007) and are seen as a viable alternative to comprehensive exams (Ahn, 2004). By using portfolios as an assessment model, "the responsibility of learning is transferred to the students. It allows them to be involved and engaged in the learning process and therefore keeps the focus on the learner-centered environment" (Wickersham & Chambers, 2006, p. 736). The portfolio development process has several benefits: transforming the student (Barrett, 2004; McMullan et al., 2003; Stansberry & Kymes, 2007), developing a professional identity (Hallman, Gaitlin, & Jacob, 2007), applying theory to praxis (Gaitlin & Jacob, 2002; McMullan et al., 2003; Tiwari & Tang, 2003), and increasing student learning (Barrett, 2004; McMullan et al., 2003; McNamara & Bailey, 2006). Implementing the portfolio process requires faculty cooperation and support, the development of a program culture that supports the emphasis on a learner-centered environment, the articulation of the purpose and expectations of the student in the production of the portfolio, and the careful balance of both individualized products and standardized competencies (Kesterson, 2008).

The type of portfolio crafted is decided by understanding the two dimensions: the purpose of the portfolio and the process implemented to create it, while taking into consideration whether the portfolio creation is a mandated requirement, self-directed, or voluntarily initiated (Smith & Tilemma, 2001). Smith and Tilemma (2003, p. 627) review four types of portfolios differentiated by the aforementioned dimensions:

1. A *dossier* is "a record of achievement or a mandated collection of work for selection or promotional purposes required for entry to a profession or program;…a detailed coverage of attainments."

2. A *training portfolio* is comprised of “a required or mandated exhibit of efforts collected during learning or in a curriculum program,” highlighting the professional competencies acquired in the learning process in a “fixed format.”

3. The *reflective portfolio* is “a purposeful and personally collected array of work providing evidence of growth and accomplishments to be brought forward for promotion and admission;” in which key competencies, self-evaluation, and the annotation of the evidence is highlighted.

4. A *personal development portfolio* is “a personal evaluation and reflective account of professional growth” over an extended period of time.

Used in appraising student learning outcomes, the assessment of portfolio construction is an interpretative process by both faculty evaluators and the students who choose what to include, what to write, and what to produce (Griffin, 1998).

Fitzpatrick and Miller-Stevens (2009) advocate for the use of a multi-method approach, highlighting the evolution of MPA student learning outcome assessment at the University of Colorado at Denver (UCD). Early on, UCD used comprehensive exams, but later abandoned them in pursuit of a more comprehensive appraisal of student learning. In addition to surveys conducted with stakeholders, alumni, and students, UCD also developed a capstone course experience as an assessment model. However, the faculty caution that at least one approach must be a “systematic examination of the actual knowledge and skills” acquired during the program (p. 21) and thus pursued the creation of a rubric for use in the capstone, aligning “the criteria for the rubric and survey items with program objectives regarding student performance” (p. 24). Lastly, Fitzpatrick and Miller-Stevens used the survey data and capstone course experiences to involve faculty strategically in a dialogue about student outcomes, achievements, and improvement of the program. We argue something can be learned from Fitzpatrick and Miller-Stevens’ (2009) advocacy of a multi-method approach, one that is driven by the program mission and grounded in a plurality of perspectives and values, reflective of the challenges our aspiring public administrators will face in practice (King et al., 1996). Next, we highlight the model recently implemented at James Madison University, examining the challenges and lessons learned.

JAMES MADISON UNIVERSITY MPA PROGRAM

James Madison University is a public, comprehensive university located in Harrisonburg, Virginia. The university has a little more than 20,000 undergraduate and graduate students. Though the university has traditionally focused on undergraduate education, over the last several years it has committed to increasing its graduate offerings. As of December 2013, the university offers over 60 graduate degrees including the Master of Public Administration Program. Proposed to the Virginia State Council of Higher Education (SCHEV) as a program of study in 1979, JMU’s MPA Program began accepting students in the fall of 1982. In the mid-1980s, the new MPA Program proved attractive to many local public administration practitioners and students recently graduated from universities in Virginia and other states. The number of students in the program during this early period exceeded 30, and more than half of those involved were practitioners in local governments and taking courses part-time.

The beginning of the 1990s, however, witnessed a decline in practitioner involvement, leading the program to serve mostly pre-service students. During the 2000s, the program grew, steadily exceeding the participation levels of its early years with annual average enrollments of 45–50 students from 2007 through 2012. In summer 2008, the program began to offer courses at the Roanoke Higher Education Center (RHEC) located in Roanoke, Virginia, approximately an hour and a half from Harrisonburg. RHEC serves as a physical space for over 200 educational and training programs offered by 15 regional and national colleges and universities. JMU is the only school offering an

TABLE 1.
James Madison University MPA Program

Core Course	Course Title	List of Concentrations
PUAD 605	Research Design for Policy Evaluation	Management of International Nongovernmental Organizations
PUAD 606	Program Evaluation in Public Administration	
PUAD 607	Policy Analysis	Public Management
PUAD 620	Foundations of Public Administration	Nonprofit Management
PUAD 625	Public Organizational Behavior	International Stabilization and Recovery Operations
PUAD 630	Seminar in Public Personnel Administration	
PUAD 641	Public Budgeting	Individualized
PUAD 692	Public Administration Capstone	

MPA at RHEC, which serves the greater Roanoke Valley and its population of nearly 250,000. Total student enrollment between the main and satellite programs were close to 60 students when the fall 2013 census was taken.

In 2009, the program adopted the following mission statement: "The MPA program promotes engaged citizenship and responsible public service. The curriculum cultivates effective and ethical analysts, managers, and leaders for work in local, national, and global contexts." The curriculum, in congruence with the program's mission statement, combines an in-depth immersion in the essential core classes with additional coursework and real-life experiences in the student's primary interest area. Pre-service students are required to complete 42 credit hours (including a six-hour internship), whereas in-service students are required to complete 36 credit hours. All students are required to complete eight core courses (24 credit hours) and a concentration of 12 credit hours (Table 1).

The core courses combine theory essentials, practitioner skills, and tools for research. Theory courses introduce students to the legal, political, and organizational environments of public administration, whereas skills and tools courses lay the foundations for expertise in financial and personnel management, budgeting, and program evaluation. Concentration courses enable students to further explore concepts and techniques acquired from the core courses to specific aspects of public and nonprofit management, management in international nongovernmental organizations (NGOs), strategic planning for international stabilization and recovery, and/or a self-designed concentration using the broader resources of the university. Finally, the internship practicum required of pre-service students enables students to apply their combined knowledge in a real-world setting with the benefit of facilitated learning from the MPA faculty. Many of the MPA classes (both core and concentration) incorporate one or more semester-long, community-based, applied projects.

Through these immersions in the scholarly literature, topical case study, and practical applications, the JMU MPA curriculum aims to produce graduates with a deep understanding of the complexities of the administrative environment, strong interpersonal communication skills, practiced decision-making abilities, and a sense of personal and professional purpose necessary for ethical public administration.

THE JMU CAPSTONE PORTFOLIO

The MPA faculty adopted the capstone portfolio as a replacement for the written comprehensive exam in spring 2009. The capstone portfolio is a document comprised of professional and scholarly documents produced during the course of a student's term in the MPA program. The portfolio structure is designed to demonstrate 17 competencies corresponding to key areas identified in the MPA program's strategic plan, and students must demonstrate competency in each of these areas. As well, the portfolio requires students to participate in self-assessment, professional planning, and reflective writing. The portfolio guidelines were developed using available examples from other MPA programs, NASPAA, and the existing literature on professional portfolios at the time.

TABLE 2.
Example of a Caption as Part of Professional Portfolio

Caption Number	2
Title	Benefit-Cost Analysis for Harrisonburg Sewer Project Analysis
Origination	PUAD 641 (Public Budgeting—Required core course)
Origination Date	March 12, 2013
Summary (descriptive)	This memo was the product of a group assignment that required the development of a full benefit cost analysis comparing three proposed sewage projects. The general parameters of the assignment describe the system, but the group was responsible for framing the issue, identifying all benefits and costs, monetizing and discounting each item, and preparing the ratios for each option. The final report included an executive summary with recommended actions, spreadsheets that took readers step-by-step through the calculations, and a description of assumptions made in the calculations.
Rationale (persuasive)	*Public budgeting:* I was primarily responsible for the calculations associated with Scenario 1. Our group learned a lot about capital project planning in a limited amount of time. The analysis really drove home the importance interest rates and bond ratings in evaluating capital proposals. And, while the concept of benefit-cost analysis is very appealing on a rational level, it became clear that the results are heavily influenced by assumptions of the analyst. In particular, the benefit-cost analysis proved difficult in terms of monetization of non-market externalities (e.g., the effect of sewer odors on quality of life) and the determination of an appropriate discount rate.
	Written communication: I was responsible for drafting the initial memorandum. This memorandum was difficult because the target audience was the lay public and elected officials, so the memo had to minimize the use of technical language. Given that BCA is a technical process there was considerable effort to write clearly and effectively. This project was especially challenging because I was not previously familiar with infrastructure vocabulary, but by the end I became quite adept at interpreting the regulations that governed the projects.
	Group participation: This project gave me the opportunity to work in a diverse group of in-service professionals and pre-service students. This created a wide range of perspectives in the group, and I think it led to a more creative final product. There were some problems along the way, but I was able to bridge the gap between the two factions in the group.
	Leadership: I provided informal leadership for the group by keeping us on task and facilitating agreements when there were differing opinions among my colleagues. In my peer review, all participants agreed that I had taken a leadership role and gave me significant credit for the group's success.

The portfolios provide useful information not only about individual student performance but also about curricular strengths and weaknesses. They are used as part of the MPA program's annual assessment plan. The portfolio is prepared, presented, and evaluated during the program's capstone course (PUAD 692). All MPA students are required to take PUAD 692 during their final semester in the program.

The purposes of the portfolio are

- To document student competencies in established academic and professional areas;
- To document student development over the course of study;
- To encourage conscious public service through reflexivity and self-assessment;
- To demonstrate knowledge, skills, and abilities to prospective employers;
- To provide students an opportunity to develop and refine personal and professional development goals; and
- To provide students and faculty an opportunity to assess the JMU MPA program.

Students are expected to produce a high-quality professional portfolio requiring thorough planning, meticulous attention to detail, and openness to constructive criticism and feedback. The process is meant to be rewarding, and students are expected to spend a great deal of time preparing their portfolio outside of normal class time. All students are required to pass each of the program's 17 competency areas. This work is equivalent to passing the comprehensive examination requirement of the JMU Graduate School. It is up to each student, not the program faculty or instructor of record, to identify which papers, reports, document of presentations, projects, instructional materials, and/or professional activities they use to document their proficiency in each competency area. The competencies are grouped around core content, a student's concentration, analytical skills, interpersonal communication, professional skills, and administrative profession. Students are assessed by the instructor of record.

According to the JMU MPA Portfolio Requirements and Guidelines (last revised August 2011), the portfolio must contain the following components.

1. *Cover Sheet.* Provides basic identifying information including student name, submission date, program and degree information, concentration area, and student contact information.
2. *Table of Contents.*
3. *Resume.*
4. *Statement of Professional Practice.* This one-page statement includes the student's primary motivation for public service, a discussion of the philosophical or theoretical perspectives that have influenced her or his managerial and professional orientation, and a statement of guiding principles for public service and managerial decision making.
5. *Statement of Professional Goals.* This 1–2 page statement of career and professional goals includes a description of any past and present work experience and how that experience influenced future goals. It also includes a set of short-term goals (2–3 years out) and long-term goals (5–10 years out).
6. *Artifacts, Productions, and Captions.* This section includes 10–20 captioned documents. An artifact is a paper, report, documentation of a presentation, project, instructional material, in print or in other media forms, from work experience, military service, or other professional activities. Artifacts may have been designed by the student as an individual or as a team member. A production, similar to an artifact in that it can be in any number of formats, is an activity designed to demonstrate particular competencies for the portfolio. Students typically will have some competencies that are either undocumented or poorly documented via available artifacts. Productions allow an opportunity for purposeful planning of activities that will shore up the weakest area of a student's portfolio. All

productions must be approved by the instructor before beginning work. A caption is a standardized introduction to each artifact or production. They are typically one page in length and include the document number and title, the source of the document and its origination date, a summary of the document, a rationale for its inclusion in the portfolio, and a list of illustrated competencies. Table 2 provides an example of a caption, including a description of an artifact.

STUDENT EXPERIENCE AND IMPACT

The MPA students at James Madison University have been required to complete the professional portfolio since spring 2009. Since that time, no major modification or revision has been made to the portfolio requirements. The program conducts an exit focus group of all graduating MPA students as part of their capstone class. This focus group is conducted by a faculty member not involved in the MPA Program. Traditionally, the assistant chair of the Political Science Department has conducted these sessions. Feedback from students, as part of the focus group, remains positive regarding the use of the professional portfolio as a way to document proficiency in the 17 competency areas. There had not been a prior assessment of alumni regarding the usefulness of the portfolio until fall 2013. Fifty alumni of the JMU MPA Program (from spring 2009 to spring 2013) were contacted via e-mail and asked the following two questions:

1. What impact do you think the capstone portfolio has had/is having on your career or your success in landing your first job?

2. Should the MPA program keep the capstone portfolio as part of the degree requirement?

Of the 34 alumni responding to the survey, all felt the capstone portfolio had an immediate impact on their overall personal and managerial growth while in the program. Various themes began to emerge upon reviewing the responses to the open-ended question: practicality, usefulness, self-assessment/reflection, and confidence. We provide a few of the most noteworthy responses below. All respondents to the survey were assured their confidentially. The names of respondents are fictitious, to ensure confidentiality.

> Sally discussed there being “great value in reviewing and reflecting upon all of the work I had done over the past two years. It is nice to see the development of work from early in the program to graduation.”

> Ethan responded that “when completing the portfolio, I was forced to self-assess my work and think about how my projects and presentations fit into multiple subject areas.”

> Samantha stated that her “lack of confidence when entering the program was no longer there after seeing how much stuff I actually accomplished and knew as a result of putting everything together as part of my portfolio. I used this personal reflection to boost my confidence when applying for managerial level jobs after graduation.”

Many of the program’s graduates during this time frame were pre-service students with little to no work experience beyond part-time positions or a professional internship(s). Students oftentimes find it intimidating to apply for a position that asks for 2–5 years of professional work experience. Pre-service alumni noted the importance of the portfolio in showing potential employers their true ability.

> Ben secured a job immediately upon graduating, as a community development director. The position called for five years of managerial experience. Ben noted, “Because I was a pre-service student that attended graduate school right after college, I had little work experience aside from my internships. The portfolio really helped show my employer what kind of work I was completing during graduate school, and also showed that many of the school projects incorporated assessment and evaluation of community partners.”

> Alex, who applied for a job as an emergency services director, stated, "I had no work experience beyond my internship prior to graduating with my master's degree. I felt I did not have the resume to apply for managerial level positions but felt I had what it took to be a good manager after putting my portfolio together. The portfolio boosted my confidence and I went for my dream job. I was surprised when I was asked to come in for an interview. I took my portfolio with me and my now employer told me after she hired me that it was what I was able to document in the portfolio during the interview that set me apart from the other finalists."

A few alumni discussed the differences, in their mind, between having to produce a capstone paper or thesis to that of a capstone portfolio. Several alumni discussed practicality as a useful aspect of the portfolio.

> Jessica felt that "the capstone portfolio really helped me in the interview process because I was able to show my employer that my knowledge of the subject is widespread. My boss was really looking for creativity, and the portfolio allowed me to show a variety of my work, not just one paper focused on one specific topic."

> Tom, whose spouse was in a doctoral program, stated that "I like the practical aspect of the portfolio. Thesis papers demonstrate ability to write well, conduct research, etc. but I think for those going into the PA field as practitioners, it's nice to be able to say 'I know how to do stuff that this job requires…here's some of my work to back that up.'"

> Michele stated, "It is a useful tool for students seeking employment. Not necessarily just giving a copy to potential employers, but more in being able to frame and sell the practical skills and toolset that we have acquired."

It is worth noting that all but two of these alumni felt the program should keep the portfolio requirement. The two individuals who did not agree with the others immediately began a doctorate program and noted they wish the program had a thesis option for students continuing their education beyond the master's level.

CONCLUSION AND DISCUSSION

The experience of building a competency-based model at James Madison University is far from over. Gaining NASPAA accreditation and revising an evolving and growing program have given the faculty an opportunity to think strategically about how to best align mission-based competencies with the core strengths of the program. We developed competencies to align with key programmatic goals identified in the strategic plan and framed them by the five required competency domains identified in NASPAA's 2009 standard 5. We attended first to the curriculum, determining what competencies students were being exposed to, and where (in what courses, projects, experiences). Next, we linked these competencies to the broader domains identified by NASPAA. Ultimately, we identified 17 competencies in which all students must show proficiency. The 17 competency areas currently included in the JMU portfolio requirements are being reviewed as part of the continued evaluation of the model.

While those involved with this process feel the program is headed in the right direction, and students are benefiting, we still have much to do. Individual course objectives must be linked to programmatic competencies, and gaps must be identified and filled. The time and resources required to accomplish these tasks can be overly burdensome, no matter the size of the program or number of faculty. The program at JMU has found that for these efforts to truly bear fruit, it is best to look first at the program and its curriculum and then turn our attention to the NASPAA-required competency domains. Public affairs programs that either have NASPAA accreditation or are at the point of seeking it are high-quality programs to begin with. By using the curriculum rather than the competency domains as a starting point, programs can strategically approach the fundamental questions of what we provide, what our students need/want, and what is the best way to assess whether we are achieving our goals. This inside-out process at JMU has been focused on designing a system that can truly measure student learning while keeping in mind the needs of a diverse student population and the always-changing nature of the public service landscape.

While it is clear that not all public affairs programs are the same, and that the approaches taken by small programs and those taken by larger programs will necessarily diverge, we hope that sharing the experiences of James Madison's efforts may help other programs as they undergo the demanding development of competency-based assessment models. In the following discussion, we focus on a few key issues that that have been identified during this process.

1. One area of difficulty that stands out is the identification (and more important, the definition) of mission-based competencies. A primary goal of the competency model at James Madison was to design a portfolio that would entail the student's entire experience in the program, culminating in the capstone course. Rather than a compilation of papers and assignments put together by the student, the idea was to introduce competencies at the beginning of students' educational experience and get them thinking about how each assignment or project they worked on was developing one or more of these competencies. The competencies have been introduced at the initial student orientation, but there is an understanding that more reinforcement throughout the curriculum is necessary if the goal of having students continually reflect on and develop competencies is to be achieved. This will require a more comprehensive effort to go beyond identifying competencies and move toward defining them more concretely, thus alleviating the confusion some students have had in understanding exactly what certain competencies entail.

2. Understanding student goals and aspirations is essential to designing a competency-based model, specifically the assessment of student achievement. While faculty expertise is crucial in identifying and developing mission-related competencies, it is also important to keep in mind the ultimate goals of students when considering measurement. Programs that seek to groom future doctoral candidates will need to develop different instruments than programs that cater mainly to students interested in joining the public sector workforce. As we found from the alumni survey, there is a distinction between the goals of students. Those interested in academic careers may value research and thesis writing, whereas students interested in entering the public service workforce will value applied projects and assessment models like the portfolio. For a small program, providing students an option of measurement tools or assessment instruments would cater to the varying interests of the student population. Additionally, a program with a student population similar to James Madison's could offer more intensive advising and mentorship for those who wish to pursue further educational options.

3. Building on the idea of student-centered competencies is the notion of bringing outside actors into the process. At James Madison, the effort has begun to truly engage an advisory board of alumni and local public service professionals who can bring their practical expertise and experience to the process. This goal can also be achieved through course-related practical applications. Again, program size greatly influences how realistic these efforts may be. At James Madison class sizes are relatively small, enabling faculty to work with local organizations on projects that enable students to see firsthand the application of the theories they are introduced to in the classroom and develop the skills they will be using in the workforce. However, programs of all sizes can engage alumni and local practitioners in developing and revising

competency lists and even in assessing work products. After all, these are the practitioners who will be hiring and mentoring students once they leave the program.

4. An area where the experiences at James Madison reflect one of the benefits of competency-based assessment identified in the literature is communication between faculty members. In an effort to improve competency coverage and lessen redundancies in the curriculum, small working groups of faculty have begun to meet and review their course syllabi and objectives. This effort has led to a greater understanding among faculty as to material covered in other courses and how course objectives can be aligned to heighten student learning. An insight that has emerged from these groups is that redundancy and reinforcement are not the same. While this view may seem basic, the process of identifying concepts, theories, and skills that should be reinforced throughout the curriculum has greatly aided the development of a curriculum that focuses throughout on identified mission-related competencies. Another benefit arising from increased faculty communication is a greater knowledge of what connections exist with local public sector organizations. When discussing how competencies link to particular courses, faculty members have shared potential guest speakers and contacts that have led to applied projects. In one case, a discussion about strategic planning and the competencies involved led one faculty member who had never led a planning process to join with a skilled facilitator to see the process firsthand.

The idea that competency-based models in programs of public affairs can be implemented uniformly is not practical. Contextual factors will greatly influence how programs design, implement, and assess the development of competencies in their students. In working through an inside-out process, the program at James Madison has created a model that fits with the mission of its MPA Program, the strengths and goals of faculty, and the needs of the student population. The model seeks to introduce competencies to students at the beginning of the program of study and develop a robust understanding of the competencies in the students throughout their time in the program. By incorporating a portfolio project and a reflective capstone course, the university's goal is to graduate public service professionals who have the knowledge of public service competencies and values as well as the efficacy to bring them to the workforce and become leaders in their chosen fields.

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