

Assessing Professional Competencies: The “Painstaking” Implementation Phase

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ABSTRACT

This paper describes the opportunities and challenges encountered in formulating and implementing strategies for assessing universally required competencies and mission-specific competencies in a large public affairs school with five MPA programs and one Master of International Affairs (MIA) program. The paper analyzes the building blocks in assessing competencies, from defining, identifying, and developing and revising evaluative tools, to the efforts in and approaches for engaging different stakeholders. This analysis identifies the significance of investing time in the developmental stage and highlights the difficulties encountered in reaching consensus, especially on when and how learning should be evaluated and from whose perspective. The paper proposes, however, that the field should continue to move toward agreement about methods for assessing program effectiveness within and beyond individual schools, in order to move away from this impasse and help promote results that are usable at diverse institutions and multiple levels.

KEYWORDS:

assessment plan, program evaluation, implementation

The main objective of this article is to provide a perspective on lessons learned in developing and implementing an assessment plan at a comprehensive school of public policy in New York City, and to relate this experience to program evaluation practices that can help in developing sustainable assessment activities. It is a case study outlining steps taken to develop and implement an academic assessment plan in a large school with several MPA programs and an MIA program. It is argued that building capacity in assessment requires fundamental ingredients: conversations with key constituencies, practical strategies and objectives, a

global perspective of how assessment will be usable and impactful, and a curriculum committee that can engage these efforts in academic decisions. This description takes into account the significance of arriving at a “comfortable” level of consensus to make the product of evaluation valid and less burdensome.

THE CONTEXT

The School of International and Public Affairs (SIPA), Columbia University has five Master of Public Administration programs, a Master in International Affairs (MIA), and a doctorate program in Sustainable Development. SIPA

enrolls over 1,300 students across programs; more than half are from outside the United States, and over half are female. SIPA also offers dual degrees with other units of Columbia University and with schools of public policy at universities abroad. All degree programs, except the Executive MPA (EMPA), are full-time. The MIA and three of the MPAs are four-semester programs, and one MPA is a three-semester program. The EMPA, which offers weekend and evening courses, can be completed in either two or three years. Seventy-two full-time faculty have appointments at the school, and more than 200 practitioners teach as adjuncts in any given year. The quantity of courses, students, and faculty match the scale of the school and its curriculum.

In developing an assessment plan for a large school, such as SIPA, a few decisive steps were necessary to conceive of evaluation procedures and activities. The development of a comprehensive assessment plan was set in motion by SIPA's application for accreditation (now achieved) by a professional accreditation association (NASPAA) and an upcoming review by Columbia University's regional accreditation association (Middle States Commission on Higher Education).

BUILDING BLOCKS

The building blocks for developing an assessment plan were based on finding practical ways to evaluate learning outcomes that support accreditation requirements and that are also suitable for examining and framing the professional impact of SIPA's MIA and MPA programs. Although the school had routinely administered surveys and feedback forms (e.g., in capstone workshops), these instruments were not assessing learning in general or systematically. These existing instruments and activities did serve as a springboard for developing learning outcomes assessments, but they required significant modifications and the creation of new tools. A focus group protocol and capstone-project rubrics were developed to supplement the assessment plan.

Development of the assessment plan was launched with strong support from the SIPA dean. The Office of Academic Affairs, which is led by the vice dean for Academic Affairs (a tenured faculty member), was given responsibility for identifying the basic elements for the assessment plan. Senior staff members in that office took the lead, including one who has a background in program/policy evaluation and the social sciences. From the beginning, the dean and Office of Academic Affairs consulted closely with relevant faculty governance bodies. Although faculty leadership and consultation have been a critical aspect of the project from the beginning, it is worth noting that at SIPA, as is likely to be the case at other schools, a few key individuals were delegated the responsibility of building the methods and capacity for assessing learning outcomes as well as the role of communicating strategies to diverse faculty and staff constituencies, of seeing the process through its final implementation, and of presenting results to faculty oversight bodies. It was decided that a practical approach would be taken, by determining what evaluative activities, small or large, were in place that could serve as a catalyst for change.

Another important factor in this initial phase was to designate the primary oversight to a school-wide committee whose membership includes the faculty directors of all master's degree programs, as well as all faculty leaders of all majors and minors within programs. The committee also includes senior staff from the offices of academic affairs and student affairs, as well as elected student representatives. This decision paid off in marshaling valuable discussions and support, and it will be significant in the future when lessons are woven into conversations about programs and the school. The expectation is that the lessons learned through evaluation will be shared on an annual basis with the school faculty as a whole and will permeate the school environment.

The assessment plan developed for SIPA's six master's degree programs uses NASPAA guide-

lines. The five universal competencies required by NASPAA served as a model for SIPA's professional competencies. These competencies include (a) to lead and manage in public governance; (b) to participate in and contribute to the policy process; (c) to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions; (d) to articulate and apply a public values perspective; and (e) to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry (NASPAA, 2013). These competencies are intentionally general and open-ended, but their underlying meanings (related to knowledge and skills) are an integral part of SIPA's core courses. They also cut across core requirements for the six master's degree programs. SIPA also established mission-specific competencies for each degree program; these competencies were based on program concentrations (majors) and specialty courses.

COLLABORATION

An important step in this early stage is collaborating¹ with faculty and staff who have a stake in surveys or other instruments or have a role in affecting student learning (Lincoln, 1990). This feedback process offers opportunities and challenges. Faculty and staff who work directly with students draw on different experiences that can help inform evaluation. Assessing student learning at SIPA was not an issue or a point of contention. The challenge was how to address the concern about when learning should be assessed, which also overlaps with the issue of how to assess.

The assessment committee supported the goal of evaluating student learning outcomes and concurred that these practices would offer a systematic and organized way of presenting this information. Valuable points surfaced about the optimal times to assess students' learning and evaluate the programs' impact. For instance, the notion of administering exit surveys was viewed as offering insights beyond the school experience—especially if issued shortly after graduation and in subsequent

years—to measure the programs' success through students' career choices, placements, and advancements. Exit surveys are not currently used, and jump-starting and sustaining this effort will require additional investments and staff time. Another challenge was in revising surveys or assessment activities that already exist or adding new ones. The previous student survey was administered centrally, but the results were used by different offices and programs in the school. (The new survey retained this structure.) Collaborating with these stakeholders was fundamental in eliciting feedback, learning how they use results, and determining what it would mean to them if questions were changed to acquire slightly different responses.

This survey developed an entire section on student learning outcomes (see "Instruments"). This process required the support of faculty (and program directors) to provide their thoughts on inquiries that were formulated to capture the foundational knowledge and skills students learn in concentrations, specializations, and specialty courses.

SIPA offers about 90 capstone workshops per year. About 60 of these are developed by the director of the capstone program, who is a member of the academic affairs staff. Working with the capstone director to develop capstone rubrics was indispensable, since the director oversees the entire enterprise of working with faculty program directors to organize a diverse range of workshops and recruit faculty advisors for each project. Changes made followed a similar trajectory. Surveys and rubrics were developed before meetings with SIPA constituents. SIPA constituents were given an opportunity to provide feedback and input on changes, which would help finalize tools, and instruments were "tested" with faculty and students. Because capstone-project rubrics were designed to assess universal competencies, a thorough review of the school's program curriculum (e.g., core, concentration and

specialization courses) was necessary to frame learning objectives and performance indicators.

ASSESSMENT PLAN

The assessment plan was designed to evaluate learning outcomes through five different approaches: (a) student surveys, (b) internship (supervisor) evaluation, (c) student progress reports, (d) capstone-project rubrics, and (e) focus groups. These tools will be administered at different times. For instance, the student survey will be completed by first- and second-year students in the spring semester each year, the internship evaluation form will be completed by internship supervisors after students have completed an internship, and the capstone rubrics will be completed for students who are completing their final semester. The focus groups will be led by faculty and engage students who are in their final semester. Data from these instruments will be collected annually, and they will be complemented by a student progress report that follows students contin-

uously from admissions decision through graduation and career placement. Each year, an in-depth analysis will be conducted of two master’s degree programs, beginning with the two-year MIA and MPA programs. Staggering program analyses is a viable choice at the moment, since this work is being completed with existing resources and staff. It is also important not to overburden SIPA’s constituencies with information overload. The ideal situation is that findings are digested and then used to mobilize actions that support and improve programming and assessments.

Instruments

Student survey. The school has traditionally administered satisfaction surveys to students in all programs during the spring semester. By the end of the spring, survey results are reviewed internally and discussed in a town-hall forum with students. The satisfaction survey contained several sections regarding SIPA offices and services, and a section on academic

TABLE 1.
Core Courses and Universal Competencies

Based on the *core courses* I have taken, I **have learned skills that help me to...**

	Strongly Disagree	Dis-agree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know / Not Applicable
lead and manage in my post-SIPA career.						
engage in high level and/or policy-level decision-making process.						
analyze and make decisions regarding complex issues						
apply a social perspective in my critical thinking about complex issues						
communicate with a diverse and changing workforce & citizenry.						

TABLE 2.
Concentration Courses and Mission-Specific Competencies

Based on the *concentration courses* you have completed, please indicate if you agree or disagree that you have **learned to define, frame, and critically think about...**

If you have not taken any concentration courses that pertain to these study areas, please choose Not Applicable.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know / Not Applicable
Human rights law						
Human rights institutions						
Human rights advocacy						
Humanitarian policy						
Regional human rights issues						

experiences. Students rated their responses from “Very Satisfied” to “Very Dissatisfied” and responded to open-ended comments for each section. The revised student survey, which is still undergoing minor changes, reduced the items for each office and service, changed the scale to prioritizing importance of services and support, and has an entirely new section on learning outcomes.

Assessment questions were absent in the earlier edition. The new online survey contains five questions directly related to universally required competencies, which are tied to a 5-point scale from “Strongly Agree” to “Strongly Disagree” (and a “Not Applicable” column). The first part of the question, emphasized here, is the same for all five competencies: *I am learning or have learned skills that can help me lead and manage in public, nonprofit or private sectors.* Students will indicate the number of credits completed at the time they complete the survey, and this information will help correlate responses to students’ progress in their degree program.

(The survey will retain the demographic section for use in other analyses and comparisons.)

In the new questionnaire, the academic section focuses on core requirements, concentrations, specializations, or specialty courses (for programs not structured with a major/minor curriculum). All MPA programs require students to take required courses in policy, economics, statistics, management, and financial management. Based on the set of core courses they have taken, students are asked to agree or disagree with statements regarding professional competencies and skills generally learned through these courses (Table 1).

Students will also have an opportunity to select their concentration and will see only questions relating to their concentration, including credits completed. Students in programs with concentrations (majors) will be asked to either agree or disagree that they have learned “the major areas, themes, and knowledge” for their specific concentration. The principal concepts,

TABLE 3.
Concentration Courses and Mission-Specific Competencies II

Based on the *concentration courses* you have completed, please indicate if you agree or disagree that you have **learned to use different theories and approaches to analyze problem-solving alternatives with...**

If you have not taken any concentration courses that pertain to these study areas, please choose Not Applicable.

	Strongly Disagree	Disagree	Somewhat Agree	Agree	Strongly Agree	Don't Know / Not Applicable
Human rights law						
Human rights institutions						
Human rights advocacy						
Humanitarian policy						
Regional human rights issues						

themes, and contexts for each concentration have been identified through an analysis of concentration required and elective courses. For instance, in the Human Rights and Humanitarian Policy concentration, students will be asked to evaluate whether they have “learned to define, frame, and critically think about Human Rights Law” (Table 2).

The other concentrations use a similar format. The second part of this portion of the survey focuses on application. Students are asked to rate whether they “learned to use different theories and approaches to analyze problem-solving alternatives.” Again, the same major concentration areas appear in this question (Table 3). The final structured question in this section asks if the concentration has fostered new ways of thinking about and potentially participating in international and public affairs, and they are able to rate their responses using a similar scale. The final open-ended questions

ask: What are the most valuable skills and knowledge you obtained from your concentration? How has your concentration prepared you for your career goals?

Students in the MIA and two-year MPA programs are required to complete five courses in their concentrations, and they can choose from six concentrations. These courses provide a substantive knowledge base and practical skills in specific areas, and students identify closely with this portion of the curriculum, in part because it tracks with their career interests. MIA and MPA students also must complete three courses in a specialization (minor). There are a dozen specializations, including minors that focus on regional (area) knowledge, as well as advanced skills in management or advanced quantitative and economic analysis. Students will identify their specialization, and they will be asked to indicate the most valuable skills/knowledge they have obtained from it. They

also will be asked if their specialization helped them to prepare for their career goals, and if the courses in their specialization help them learn what they want to know in their area of interest. Although these are currently open-ended questions, they are likely to be changed to a mix of structured and open-ended inquiries.

The MPA programs in Development Practice, Environmental Science and Policy, Economic Policy Management, and the Executive MPA each have special foci or tracks in their curriculum. For these programs, the assessment section will use a framework similar to the one described earlier, but the specific themes, concepts, and practices or applications will be directly linked to the curricula of these programs. To a large extent, these programs have identified a set of professional competencies relevant to their requirements. For instance, the MPA in Development Practice has identified practical skills students gain in courses and the program. The student survey will provide an avenue for assessing the program's success—from students' perspectives—in delivering these skills and knowledge.

The survey also contains open-ended and comments sections that will enable students to express their opinions about services, support, and academic experiences. These changes are a move in the right direction. Students' opinions about their learning have not been elicited in this broad sense. It will be invaluable to draw on students' perception of their learning, and it will be possible to correlate students' responses with where they are in the program. The time invested in mapping and identifying specific course objectives, program curriculum, and professional competencies (universal and mission-specific competencies) paid off significantly in helping to develop and structure survey questions before obtaining feedback from SIPA constituents. The final step was to test the survey with a handful of MPA and MIA students, which was achieved successfully.

Internship evaluation form. MIA and MPA students gain practical skills and relevant knowledge through internships. SIPA internships are meant to complement students' graduate studies and career interests. Students are required to intern with a credit or non-credit option. SIPA internships are established with an exceptional network of local and global entities, and internship opportunities match programs' areas of studies. Through a web-based system called *SIPA Link*, current students and alumni connect to World Bank, UNICEF, Global Health Strategies, and other prominent organizations. Students make their selections based on program tracks and interests as well as the experiences they will have. The internship experience concludes with an evaluation of students' performance by the internship supervisor.

The previous internship supervisor's evaluation form was entirely focused on students' behavior—their level of maturity, responsiveness to assigned tasks, and social/professional interactions. All of these traits are typically rated in internship supervisor evaluations. In the revised version, a section was added to assess students' demonstration of relevant knowledge and skills. The universal competencies served as a metric for measuring learning and performance, since they are associated with students' learning in programs. This new section asks about students' ability to potentially “lead and manage in public affairs,” “participate in and contribute to policy processes,” and “analyze, synthesize, think critically” to enable them to solve problems and make decisions. Supervisors are also asked if students had an opportunity to demonstrate these abilities. The final iteration will also include general skills that stem from the core curriculum, such as applied research, statistical analysis, and critical reasoning. This section would balance the scale of assessing behaviors and higher-level learning. The revised internship evaluation form was shared with SIPA Link organizations to help determine if inquiries relating to professional competencies were rele-

vant to SIPA students’ internship experiences. Internship supervisors were able to evaluate students’ practical skills and knowledge. However, one organization found the universal competency “students’ ability to participate in and contribute to policy processes” intangible and difficult to assess. The questions relating to students’ ability to potentially “lead and manage in public affairs” (leadership skills), and “to analyze, synthesize, think critically” (research and analytical skills), were applicable to different internship experiences. Based on this

feedback, the internship supervisor evaluation form will be revised.

Student progress reports. The school has developed statistical reports² that compare students’ academic performance and programs/majors with students’ admissions data, such as their undergraduate GPA, GRE scores, undergraduate school, and length of professional experience before enrollment at SIPA. Cohorts from a previous academic year are compared with a current cohort of enrolled students. By

TABLE 4.
Competency I: To Lead and Manage in Public Governance

Objective: Demonstrate an understanding of challenges and constraints relevant to governance and external factors

Assessment Tool: Capstone Project

Indicators	Unacceptable Proficiency Scoring Range (1-3)	Proficient Scoring Range (4-7)	Exemplary Proficiency Scoring Range (8-10)	Score
Identifies useful recommendations that are actionable and can be implemented.	Fails to identify useful recommendations that are actionable and can be implemented.	Identifies some useful recommendations that are actionable and can be implemented.	Identifies significant and very useful recommendations that are actionable and can be implemented.	
Utilizes well-researched approaches and methods that are consistent with internal or external factors relevant to project.	Fails to utilize well-researched approaches and methods that are consistent with internal or external factors relevant to project.	Utilizes some well-researched approaches and methods that are consistent with internal or external factors relevant to project.	Utilizes significant well-researched approaches and methods that are consistent with internal or external factors relevant to project.	
Identifies challenges and constraints associated with external factors relevant to project.	Fails to identify challenges and constraints associated with external factors relevant to project.	Identifies some challenges and constraints associated with external factors relevant to project.	Identifies significant challenges and constraints associated with external factors relevant to project.	
Makes recommendations for future action.	Fails to make recommendations for future action.	Makes some recommendations for future action.	Makes significant recommendations for future action.	
Overall Proficiency	Scoring Range (4-12)	Scoring Range (16-28)	Scoring Range (32-40)	

TABLE 5.

Competency II: To participate in and contribute to the policy process

Objective: Demonstrate an ability to participate in the policy process, communicate policy alternatives, and work effectively with government, nonprofit institutions, corporations, and community stakeholders

Assessment Tool: Capstone Project

Indicators	Unacceptable Proficiency Scoring Range (1-3)	Proficient Scoring Range (4-7)	Exemplary Proficiency Scoring Range (8-10)	Score
Identifies important stakeholders involved in addressing a problem and a knowledge of the governance arrangement.	Fails to identify multiple stakeholders that are an important part of addressing a problem. Demonstrates little knowledge of the governance arrangement.	Identifies most of the important stakeholders involved in addressing a problem. Demonstrates an ability to understand the governance problem. Demonstrates an ability to understand the governance arrangement.	Identifies all of the important stakeholders involved in addressing a problem. Demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the governance arrangement.	
Understanding of the legal and institutional environment associated with public policy making.	Fails to identify the important legal or institutional factors associated with public policy making.	Demonstrates some understanding of the legal and institutional environment associated with public policy making.	Demonstrates a sophisticated understanding of the legal and institutional environment associated with public policy making.	
Communicate policy alternatives and recommendations to decision makers	Fails to identify alternatives or make recommendations to the appropriate decision makers. Recommendation is not supported by data or a logical argument.	Identifies alternatives and makes recommendations that are oriented towards a specific decision maker. Recommendation is supported by some data or a logical argument.	Identifies alternatives and recommendations targets at the decision maker that has the most influence on the problem given the legal and institutional setting. Recommendation is supported with a sound argument grounded in data.	
Overall Proficiency	Scoring Range (3-9)	Scoring Range (12-21)	Scoring Range (24-30)	

comparing admissions data (information collected on the application, including GRE and ESL scores) and academic data (majors and GPA), the objective is to determine if there is a relationship between previous performance and current program choices and academic performance (i.e., GPA). In addition, information about students' careers after graduation from SIPA will be added, as available, to explore possible correlations between students' characteristics and performance at and after SIPA.

This report will serve as an important base for assessing learning outcomes and will afford perspective on students' characteristics in the different programs and majors. It can be used as a baseline for students' performance. The reports being produced this year will include statistics on students' employment to render a full scope of their motivations from their previous college to their graduate studies and placement in their careers. The final report is expected in the Spring semester of 2014.

TABLE 6.**Competency III.A: To analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions****Objective: Demonstrate an ability to define, frame, think critically about and analyze important problems**

Assessment Tool: Capstone Project

Indicators	Unacceptable Proficiency Scoring Range (1-3)	Proficient Scoring Range (4-7)	Exemplary Proficiency Scoring Range (8-10)	Score
Identifies and summarizes important components of problems (e.g., assumptions, trends, relationship to other problems, cause and effect relationships, etc.)	Inability to clearly and concisely define the problem. No discussion of important components of the problem.	Defines the problem and provides some discussion of its important components.	Concise, clear definition of the problem and its important dimensions using examples or drawing on outside information sources.	
Draws on high quality information and different sources to support arguments.	Demonstrates no ability to discern high from low quality information. Fails to use appropriate sources to support arguments.	Demonstrates some ability to discern high from low quality information. Uses some data to support analysis. Uses some sources to support arguments.	Uses a variety of different data and high quality information to support analysis. Builds arguments using a variety of sources.	
Identify a clear rationale for proposing a recommendation or selecting a course of action.	Fails to identify a clear rationale for deciding on a course of action. No attempt to link rationale to theories or concepts from coursework	There is some rationale for the recommendation or proposed course of action. There is some effort to support the rationale using either data or theories and concepts from coursework to support.	The rationale for the recommendation or proposed course of action is clear and supported with data and/or theories and concepts from coursework.	
Support arguments with facts and data rather than relying on opinion and value judgments.	Superficial analysis that is supported primarily by opinions and value judgments.	Uses some data/or theories and concepts from coursework to build arguments that are supported by more than opinion and value judgments.	Persuasive use of facts, data, and theories and concepts from coursework to build logical argument that does not rely on personal opinions or value judgments.	
Provide clear recommendations for a course of action to address the problem.	Fails to make recommendations to appropriate decision makers. Recommendations not supported by data or a logical argument. Unclear how recommendation addresses problem.	Makes general recommendations to a decision maker. Recommendation is supported by some data and/or a logical argument.	Makes specific recommendations to a decision maker. Recommendation is supported by data and a logical argument. Recommendation clearly would address the problem given the discussion of its components.	
Overall Proficiency	Scoring Range (5-15)	Scoring Range (20-35)	Scoring Range (40-50)	

TABLE 7.
Competency III.B: To analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions

Objective: Demonstrates an ability to utilize analytical tools to analyze, present, and interpret data, including appropriate design, statistical, and evaluative techniques for both organization decision making and policy decisions

Assessment Tool: Capstone Project

Indicators	Unacceptable Proficiency Scoring Range (1-3)	Proficient Scoring Range (4-7)	Exemplary Proficiency Scoring Range (8-10)	Score
Interprets quantitative data and measures, understand its limits, and use these data to frame problems and identify possible cause and effect relationships	Unable to interpret quantitative data. Unable to use data to help define a problem. Fails to understand causality.	Interprets quantitative data and uses them to describe and frame problems. Demonstrates some understanding of the difference between correlation and causality.	Expertly demonstrates an ability to interpret quantitative data and use it persuasively to build arguments. Demonstrates a clear understanding of the correlation and causality.	
Employs tools for analyzing, presenting, and interpreting data, including appropriate statistical techniques and concepts.	Unable to display and interpret data. Unable to use appropriate statistical techniques or manipulate quantitative data.	Demonstrates an ability to utilize tools for analyzing, presenting, and interpreting data to define and analyze problems and justify decisions.	Expertly utilizes tools for analyzing, presenting, and interpreting data to define and analyze problems and justify decisions..	
Distinguishes between fact and opinion, and acknowledges the value judgments associated with their analysis.	No distinction is made between facts, data, opinion, and value judgments in analysis. Decisions are based on opinions and values.	Relies on data to make decisions informed primarily by the data.	Uses data from different sources to make informed decisions and recognized competing value judgments.	
Recommends a course of action supported by data and analysis rather than personal opinions.	Fails to make recommendations to appropriate decision makers. Recommendation is not supported by data or a logical argument. Unclear how recommendation addresses problem.	Makes general recommendations to a decision maker. Recommendation is supported by some data and/or a logical argument.	Makes specific recommendations to a decision maker. Recommendation is supported by data and a logical argument. Recommendation clearly would address the problem given the discussion of its components.	
Overall Proficiency	Scoring Range (4-12)	Scoring Range (16-28)	Scoring Range (32-40)	

TABLE 8.
Competency IV: To articulate and apply a public values perspective

Objective: Demonstrates an ability to identify public service values and to then systematically apply these values to identify appropriate course of action

Assessment Tool: Capstone Project

Indicators	Unacceptable Proficiency Scoring Range (1-3)	Proficient Scoring Range (4-7)	Exemplary Proficiency Scoring Range (8-10)	Score
Identifies public service values in the practice of policy development and decision making.	Vague idea what the public service value is. Is uncertain what must be decided.	Identifies the public service value including pertinent facts. Demonstrates some understanding of what must be decided and the possible implications.	Describes the public service value in great details and has gathered the pertinent facts. A clear understanding of the choices and potential consequences of these actions.	
Consider the views of appropriate stakeholders when considering the public service value.	Is unsure who should be involved in decision making.	Accurately identifies the affected stakeholders who should be involved in decision making.	Understands the full range of affected stakeholders and reflects on their viewpoints to make a decision.	
Demonstrates public service values when choosing an appropriate course of action.	Choses actions that are incongruent with their professed public service values.	Lives and expresses beliefs and values in a mostly congruent fashion.	Lives and expresses beliefs and values in a congruent fashion (e.g., walks the talk)	
Overall Proficiency	Scoring Range (3-9)	Scoring Range (12-21)	Scoring Range (24-30)	

Capstone-project rubrics. The capstone requirement for MIA and MPA students consists of a consulting project for an external client in students’ final semester under supervision of a faculty advisor. Consulting teams typically consist of six students. Clients run the gamut of organizations that hire SIPA graduates, and they work in the public, private, and non-profit sectors.

Capstone workshop feedback forms are completed early in the semester and at the end by students (individually and as a team). Teams identify their objectives, discuss potential challenges in achieving objectives, and assign responsibilities to the group. These process-

oriented forms are essential in team building and in making adjustments before the project ends. At the end of the semester, clients complete a summative evaluation in which they indicate their satisfaction with final project and with the capstone workshop (i.e., performance and responsiveness of the team and faculty advisor). Students also complete an evaluation of the faculty advisor at the conclusion of the semester.

Capstone rubrics were developed to help identify how students’ learning was demonstrated through difficult projects and to assess professional competencies (universally required competencies). In the examples provided

TABLE 9.

Competency V: To communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry

Objective: Demonstrates an ability to communicate effectively and professionally to diverse audience

Assessment Tool: Capstone Project

Indicators	Unacceptable Proficiency Scoring Range (1-3)	Proficient Scoring Range (4-7)	Exemplary Proficiency Scoring Range (8-10)	Score
Logic and organization of ideas and arguments (i.e. structure of argument).	Does not develop cogent arguments. Uneven and ineffective organization. Unfocused introduction and conclusion.	Develops unified and coherent ideas within paragraphs with adequate transitions. Clear overall organization that relates and links ideas and arguments together. Good introduction and conclusion.	Develops ideas and organizes the discussion and arguments logically with effective transitions. Excellent introduction and conclusion that adds to organization.	
An ability to clearly and accurately describe problems, concepts, analysis, and recommended actions.	Uses words that are unclear, sentence structures that lack clarity, and have other errors that distract the reader.	Word forms are correct and sentence structure is effective. Presence of a few errors does not distract the reader.	Develops concise standard English sentences and balances a wide variety of sentence structures effectively.	
An ability to present arguments in a persuasive manner (i.e., rhetorically).	Arguments are not presented in a persuasive manner.	Arguments are generally persuasive with some use of supporting facts, data, and examples.	Arguments highly persuasive and it makes effective use of support facts, data, and examples.	
Proper use of spelling and grammar.	Writing contains frequent spelling and grammatical errors that interfere with comprehension. The document does not look like it has been proofread.	There are minor errors, but the writing follows normal conventions of spelling and grammar. The document looks like it has been proofread.	The writing has been carefully edited and is essentially error free.	
Writing style and use of language is appropriate for the audience.	Purpose and focus of the writing are not clear to the reader or are ill suited to the audience. Uses language and jargon that are inappropriate or unprofessional.	The purpose and focus of the writing are mostly consistent with the intended audience. Generally uses appropriate language and jargon.	The purpose and focus are clear and well suited to the intended audience. Language and jargon are used in a persuasive manner to demonstrate master of the subject.	
An ability to cite sources and refer to data in a proper manner.	Limited citation of sources. Incorrect use of citation methods.	Citations are used appropriately and generally follow accepted style and guidelines.	Uses citation methods consistently and appropriately and follows the conventions of a specific style manual.	
An ability to prepare documents (e.g. memo, reports, papers, etc.) that are formatted correctly and professionally.	The document is formatted incorrectly and is highly unprofessional in appearance.	The document is formatted in a professional manner and follows normal conventions but there is room for improvement.	The document appears to be formatted professionally and would make an excellent addition to a portfolio.	
Overall Proficiency	Scoring Range (3-9)	Scoring Range (12-21)	Scoring Range (24-30)	

(Tables 4 through 9), universal competencies were used for each rubric, and objectives were attached to them. For instance, the universal competency (Competency I, Table 4) *to lead and manage in public governance* has as its objective “demonstrate an understanding of challenges and constraints relevant to governance and external factors.” The objective is related to students’ projects, and the indicators are valid measures of this objective. An unreliable tool and measures will provide unreliable and useless results. Scoring rubrics will require a careful review and reading of final projects by a small group of faculty and staff to determine what student teams were able to accomplish based on project objectives and client expectations. This process takes time. Therefore, only a sample will be reviewed by a few faculty and staff members, who will read the same final projects and score them individually. The scores will be compared to see if there is inter-rater reliability.

Some online resources helped to jump-start SIPA’s capstone-project rubrics. NASPAA’s website connects to members who have assessment plans and performance-based rubrics available online (<http://www.naspaa.org/accreditation/NS/Competency.asp>). The University of North Carolina Wilmington’s online assessment report contains scores of rubrics designed to assess NASPAA’s professional competencies³ (http://uncw.edu/mpa/about/.../MPA_Assessment_Plan_Final_7_31_2012.pdf). These resources were valuable in mapping ideas for SIPA’s capstone-project rubrics. In addition, the literature on scoring rubrics helped in obtaining insights to the many challenges in measuring performance and professional competencies, the subjective nature of scoring, and the importance of achieving consensus and consistency in scoring (Johnson, Penny, & Gordon, 2000; Jonnson & Svingby, 2007; Stemler, 2004). SIPA’s capstone-project rubrics are in a trial phase. An inter-rater reliability test has been completed with

several scorers (faculty, capstone program director, and senior staff). The analysis will determine if the rubrics demonstrate compatibility in scores, and if performance objectives and indicators are appropriate and applicable to SIPA’s capstone projects.

Focus groups. In the works is a focus group protocol that will include key probing questions. Focus groups will be led by faculty, who will encourage students to reflect on their expectations and what they have learned through their experiences. The group composition is a decision that will be made when the protocol is finalized. Separate focus groups will be formed for each of the six master’s programs, and possibly separate focus groups for each concentration. The objective is that, through a combination of guided and open-ended questions, it will be possible to delve into meaningful information about the programs and students’ experiences. This approach will provide the flexibility of changing questions and can help uncover issues that a survey could measure later on.

CONCLUSION

This article outlined the fundamental steps taken by SIPA to help conceptualize and implement a school-wide assessment plan. This comprehensive plan has five components that were modified significantly or developed to help evaluate universal competencies (NASPAA’s five competencies) and mission-specific competencies (based on concentrations/majors/specialty courses).

A major component of the assessment plan is the student survey, which is administered annually to first- and second-year students, and will, in its modified version, elicit students’ perspectives on learning, specifically about professional competencies. The internship evaluation survey, which is completed by the internship supervisor, will help determine students’ application of professional compe-

tencies. The faculty-led focus groups will help explore student learning through a general set of questions designed to focus on students' knowledge and outlook at entry and exit. The student progress report serves as an important base for assessing learning outcomes and offers perspectives on students' characteristics in the different programs and majors. Information about students' careers after graduation from SIPA will be added, as available, to explore possible correlations between student characteristics and performance at and after SIPA. The capstone-project rubrics will help identify students' learning and their application of professional competencies, as demonstrated through difficult projects.

The assessment plan contains a mixed-method design (Greene, Benjamin, & Goodyear, 2001) that uses independent data collection approaches (quantitative/qualitative, individual/group level) with an understanding that these individual methods are sequential and iterative instead of concurrent (Greene & McClintock, 1985). These independent evaluative activities will occur at different points in students' experiences in the programs. These activities will also be repeated annually. Valuable information will be obtained from individual evaluative sources (the five components), and their results will serve to answer if students have learned and demonstrated universal and mission-specific competencies (Greene & McClintock, 1985; Madey, 1982; Sieber, 1973).

NOTES

- 1 Collaboration theory consists of varying frameworks that explain the collaborative process, and in management, the benefits of cultivating strategic alliances and inter-organizational efforts (Gajda, 2004). The emphasis on the "human elements of

the process" of collaboration (Gajda, 2004), is, in this case, applicable and also informative. Gajda explains that "Collaboration depends upon positive personal relations and effective emotional connections between partners. Trust is developed between partners only when there is time, effort, and energy put into the development of an accessible and functioning system for communication. Interpersonal conflict needs to be recognized as normal and even expected as the level of integration and personal involvement increases" (2004, p. 69).

- 2 The data are anonymous and in conformance with human subjects' research guidelines.
- 3 The best way to access this article is through <http://www.google.com> and then copy the pdf link in the search window.

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