

## Directing Public Affairs Programs

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This issue of the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* focuses on directing Master of Public Administration (MPA), Master of Public Policy (MPP), doctoral, and other public affairs programs. It is an attempt to bring more attention to the role of program director, those who occupy it, and what they spend their time doing, pondering, and worrying about. We intend this issue, at least in part, to help program directors by making them aware of what other program directors do, why they do it, and how they fare. We also seek to inform those who interact with program directors on a daily basis, including faculty (from whom program directors seek help), staff (with whom program directors work closely), and chairs and deans (who can influence not only the program director role but the context in which directors operate). Those considering taking on the role will learn about what it entails.

Over the past several years, I have observed a growing need for more information on and insight into directing programs. The Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) has been both the conduit through which this need has been expressed and also the institutional focus for efforts to meet that need. There have been several panels on directing programs at NASPAA annual conferences. Some of these panels were standing-room only, with attendees spilling out into the corridors. NASPAA has also organized gatherings of

program directors, such as a coffee hour at the 2016 conference. Program directors themselves have arranged other informal gatherings. In 2015 NASPAA hosted, and I facilitated, a New Director's Institute, a half-day workshop for new program directors and those considering becoming program directors.

MPA, MPP, and doctoral programs have always had faculty administrators. Why does the need for more information about this appear to be so strong now? I can only speculate, but based on what I have seen and heard at the events just noted, I believe it stems from changes in the context in which program directors operate: the corporatization of universities, increasing admissions pressure, competition for decreasing resources, the struggle for promotion and tenure, and a new focus on health and wellness in academe. Below, I detail some of these contextual factors and then describe their impact on the role of program director and the people who occupy it.

Over the past several decades, American universities have experienced increasing corporatization (Donoghue, 2009; Gerber, 2014; Ginsburg, 2011; Lewis, 2005; Readings, 1996), hiring professional administrators—often at the levels of dean, associate dean, and vice president—such as admissions experts, specialists on global initiatives (e.g., establishing campuses outside of the United States), and outcomes

and learning assessment experts. Universities have also been adopting, revising, and running on strategic plans, often developed and guided by external consultants and covering everything from curriculum design and delivery to image management. Economic justifications have become dominant in decision making, and students have become our customers. The ecosystem in which program directors thus exist is now hyper-professionalized, populated with management experts, and driven by commercial and corporate needs.

Admissions pressures have become significant as well. Survey results published in 2016 by *Inside Higher Ed* (Jaschik, 2016) show that only 37% of admissions directors expected to make their admissions target, while 42% reported meeting their target in 2015 (Jaschik, 2015). The pressure to meet admissions goals may be especially pronounced in professional programs, such as MPA and MPP programs, which are often considered potential revenue generators for their colleges and universities. The focus on admissions has been especially pronounced in an era of decreasing resources. Admissions pressure flows downstream, from boards of trustees, through the admission consultants and administrators, and all the way to the program director.

In addition, promotion and tenure expectations are constantly increasing (Paglia, 1991). While universities seek to increase their research funding and visibility (as part of their corporatization), faculty strive to keep up with increased expectations for publishing. Faculty are expected to publish more than ever, in better than ever journals—as measured numerically via impact factors (Liu, Gai, & Zhou, 2016). This pressure necessarily creates a time crunch in which program directors struggle to research, teach, and perform university and professional service.

There is also increasing awareness of the health and wellness toll in academe. In 2014, the *Guardian* published articles on mental illness among academics and on academic overwork and isolation (Shaw, 2014; Shaw & Ward, 2014). Similarly, scholars are now publishing

on the topic, with two books published within months of each other. One (Zavattaro & Orr, 2017) is a collection of essays about surviving academe. One of seven sections is on health and wellness. Some essays focus on physical health (Brainard, 2017) while others focus on mental health (Briones, 2017). A second book (Berg & Seeber, 2016) urges academics to situate their work within the “slow” movement (Honore, 2005), which tries to find ways to fight back against the culture of speed and busyness in which we find ourselves. Program directors share these concerns.

It is in this context that the many formal and informal gatherings of program directors have taken place over the past few years. In panel discussions and over coffee, the anxiety about surviving and thriving in the context created by the above factors has been palpable. Program directors fear that spending too much time on administrative issues and not enough on research and teaching will endanger their efforts toward promotion and tenure. A major topic that emerged at the 2015 half-day NASPAA workshop for program directors was how to create time and space for the professional activities (research and teaching) on which we are actually evaluated and promoted. In this new corporatized ecosystem, program directors must learn and adopt new vocabularies, new metrics, and new techniques to manage, evaluate, and advocate for their programs. In short, program directors have to become more management oriented, yet they generally lack management training and experience.

Most program directors at the gatherings noted above said that their training has been on the job, sometimes with advice from the person who previously occupied the role. Program directors must become admissions experts, of sorts, reading applications and making admissions decisions, recruiting students—often hosting them on campus—and making decisions about financial aid. The admissions focus has come to center on reaching enrollment targets—another aspect of university corporatization. Program directors must learn, on the job and in real time, the specialized skill of

recruiting, anticipating yield, and enrolling more students while maintaining the quality of students and of the program.

While it is more important than ever to learn more about program directors, the education literature generally, and the public affairs education literature specifically, does not have much to offer about directing programs. The literature provides a good deal of scholarship on *teaching*, including symposia on using technology for teaching (Sandfort, 2016; Ganapati & Reddick, 2016). We also have scholarship on teaching with various kinds of students in mind (Klawitter & Schultz, 2015b; Schlossberg, Lynch, & Chickering, 1989). The literature additionally gives insights into different aspects of program *delivery*, including on offering student orientations (Klawitter & Schultz, 2016) and on curriculum design, including integrating nonprofit organizations (Klawitter & Schultz, 2015a).

Nevertheless, we lack a specific literature on managing and directing programs, and this special issue is a first attempt at filling that gap. This issue addresses the contextual factors described above and seeks to establish a baseline of what we know, empirically, about directing public affairs programs in the United States. The articles discuss the multiple roles of the program director; motivations, rewards, and challenges of program directors; the constraints and opportunities associated with directing small MPA programs; and the role of gender—both the differences and similarities between what men and women do and how they lead. In addition, the authors use various methods, including survey, interview, case study, and narrative approaches.

We lead off with Thomas J. Vicino's "Navigating the Multiple Roles of the MPA Director: Perspectives and Lessons." Through a case study of the various structural, contextual, other changes in the MPA program at Northeastern University, Vicino explores the dominant business model of higher education in the United States and how it affects the role of program director. The new business model

he describes generates the multiple roles a program director must play, including those of manager, advocate, liaison, and entrepreneur.

Next, Jerri Killian and Mary Wenning, in "Are We Having Fun Yet? Exploring the Motivations, Challenges, and Rewards of MPA and MPP Program Directors in the United States," explore why program directors serve. They find that the key motivator is to promote the program's mission and values. Killian and Wenning are surprised to find that their survey respondents are more positive than expected about their role. Where expectations are not met are in the areas of working with the central university administration and in remuneration and compensation (both financial and course releases).

Donna Lind Infeld and I, in "The Challenges and Rewards of Service: Job Satisfaction among Public Affairs Program Directors," next explore what program directors do day-to-day. The role is multifaceted: program directors typically make admissions and financial aid decisions, work on student recruitment, participate in school leadership, work with advisory boards, participate with career services, and engage with alumni. Program directors seem satisfied with most aspects of their job, though there are differences by gender and program size. Challenges program directors face are balancing their workload and stress and pursuing their research.

In "Gender and the Role of Directors of Public Administration and Policy Programs," Bonnie Stabile, Jessica Terman, and Catherine Kuerbitz ask whether women are more likely than men to serve as program directors and whether women and men report different experiences. Through a survey and interviews, Stabile and colleagues finds some differences in what men and women experience as program directors. Yet they also finds that women serve proportional to their faculty representation and that both men and women report similar struggles, including the balancing of research, teaching, and service.

Michelle Pautz and Grant Neeley, in "Beyond the Usual Complaints: The Front-Line Challenges and Opportunities of Small MPA Pro-

grams,” use the narrative method to help us understand the program director role in small MPA programs. Such programs make up the majority of NASPAA-accredited programs. Helpfully, rather than belabor factors beyond our control—including the contextual factors described above—the authors focus on aspects of the job that program directors can influence. Pautz and Neely also identify several larger challenges, including being the program’s only advocate and existing as a graduate program in a primarily undergraduate environment.

William Hatcher, Wesley L. Meares, and Victoria Gordon continue the theme of small programs in “The Capacity and Constraints of Small MPA Programs: A Survey of Program Directors” and draw on their survey of directors of such programs. Surprisingly, the authors find that directors of small programs report having manageable teaching loads and enough travel money. Yet they face unique challenges, including creating, maintaining, and working with advisory boards. The authors’ respondents also report needing more budget autonomy in order to be effective in their jobs and, importantly, the need to work on maintaining NASPAA accreditation.

Finally, Meghna Sabharwal, Helisse Levine, and Maria J. D’Agostino present “Gender Differences in the Leadership Styles of MPA Directors.” Using both qualitative and quantitative methods, the authors find that though women and men share many similar styles of leadership, women program directors are more likely than men to perform in ways that reflect a transformational leadership style.

Together, these seven articles cover significant aspects of the program director role. The authors explore both large and small programs and differences and similarities between men and women program directors. We gain a greater understanding of the various facets of the role—that is, what program directors do each day and why they do it. We get a strong sense of the rewards and challenges they face: university corporatization, admissions pressures, maintaining a research agenda, and well-being.

While there remains much to learn about directing public affairs programs, these seven articles constitute both a first step and an invitation to continue the pursuit.

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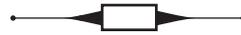
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