

Looking Forward: A Response to the ASPA Task Force Report on Educating for Excellence in the MPA

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ABSTRACT

The authors of the ASPA report, “Understanding Excellence in Public Administration,” have contributed to a dialogue on the future of the MPA degree. They have raised issues about the distinctiveness of the MPA degree in the context of the many degree programs offered by NASPAA schools and programs, the core values of the MPA, the professional goals of MPA programs, and the nature of the positions MPA graduates will fill in the future. In this response, the ASPA report is analyzed on three levels: concerns about the past role of MPA degrees and what their future role could be, a philosophical discussion of the role and mission of the MPA degree, and a call to action for ASPA. Within the range of MPA, public policy, public affairs, and other degree programs, for three years the NASPAA accreditation standards revision process has been shaping action on many of the issues raised in the ASPA report, and has developed a set of standards to meet the needs of the next decade. The NASPAA Standards 2009 process looks forward by indicating that the distinctiveness of programs in public affairs, public administration, and public policy lie in their missions, governance, and curriculum. The process demonstrably emphasizes public values; reaffirms mission-based accreditation to ensure a wide range of approaches to preparing students for professional public service; defines competencies that students in the field should master, given changes in the public sector environment; and requires programs to measure the achievement of these competencies.

The authors of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) report, “Understanding Excellence in Public Administration,” have contributed to a dialogue on the future of the Master’s of Public Administration (MPA) degree. They have raised issues about the distinctiveness of the MPA degree in the context of the many degree programs offered by National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) schools and programs, the core values of the MPA, the professional goals of MPA programs, and the nature of

the positions MPA graduates will fill in the future. The foundation of NASPAA is the professional master's degree, and the MPA is the dominant NASPAA master's program. For example, responses to a spring 2008 NASPAA survey showed 81 percent of principal representatives reporting that their institutions offer an MPA degree, which represents 62 percent of the degree candidates at these institutions (NASPAA, 2009). Within the range of public administration, public policy, public affairs, and other degree programs, the NASPAA accreditation standards revision process was designed to shape action on many of the issues raised in the ASPA report, and it has developed a set of standards to meet the needs of the next decade.

The NASPAA Standards 2009 process looks forward by indicating that the distinctiveness of programs in public affairs, public administration, and public policy lie in their missions, governance, and curricula, each of which should demonstrably emphasize public values; in the reaffirmation of mission-based accreditation to ensure a wide range of approaches to preparing students for the public service; in defining competencies that students in the field should master, given changes in the public sector environment; and in requiring programs to measure the achievement of these competencies.

I will use my unique vantage point to respond to the ASPA report: I have served as chair of the NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee, which was initiated in Spring 2006 to oversee the NASPAA standards renewal process; I served for two years as chair of the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA), NASPAA's accreditation commission; I served six years as director of an MPA Program co-offered by a political science department and an urban affairs and public policy school; and I also served for two years as president of Delaware's ASPA chapter. While this response is my own, I do need to thank the scores of individuals who have participated in the standards process, and who have helped to shape my understanding of the issues discussed in the ASPA report and my responses to them. The latest proposed NASPAA accreditation standards, related documents, and presentations are available on the NASPAA Standards 2009 Web page at <http://naspaa.org/accreditation/standard2009/main.asp>.

I view the ASPA report on three levels: a lament about the 'good ole days' of MPA degrees, a philosophical discussion of the role of the MPA degree, and a call to action for ASPA. I will comment on each.

LOOKING FORWARD

The report clearly laments the days when MPA programs dominated the preparation of U.S. students for careers in local, state, and Federal governments. The authors note (1) that today there are a proliferation of degrees, including — most notably — programs in public policy analysis; (2) that MPA graduates do not necessarily enter careers in government, but

may instead work in the nonprofit sector; and (3) that the environment they face involves not just *government* but *governance* — which moves beyond the direct provision of government to the more complex world of third-party government, networks, and collaborations among various nonprofit, private, and public organizations. I would add even more changes in the public administration environment to the ASPA report analysis. Many U.S. programs host a high percentage of non-U.S. students (Apaza & McFarland, 2008) and, thanks to the work of Paul Light (1999) and others, we recognize that many MPA graduates will not have a single career working in government, but rather a series of careers that span all three sectors.

At times, the authors of the report seem ambivalent about these changes in the scope of the MPA degree. While quoting Harvey White's charge to them, which included his concern about MPA programs preparing "students for almost everything except careers in public administration," they reference the broader phrase "careers in public service" on their first page, and "professional education for public service" later in the report. While virtually everyone in our field is hoping that President Barack Obama will lead the nation toward a renewed commitment to public service and government, who among us would expect that in the next decade the internationalization of public administration; the accession of governance over government; and job variety would be replaced by a reassertion of long-term, U.S.-government-based careers for all of our graduates?

The proposed NASPAA standards are based on changes in the world of public administration and public affairs that appear inexorable, and I therefore argue that we need to look forward, not backward, as we discuss the significant points raised in the remainder of the ASPA report. Society would be better served by moving beyond a traditional MPA to one that is framed to meet the challenges of the 21st century.

MISSION OF THE MPA

The report's authors see two sources of problems with the state of MPA education: first, "a proliferation of degree programs" that tend to "obscure the richness of public administration as a career commitment and intellectual enterprise," and second, a failure to recognize the mission of providing "professional education for public service, not to provide education and socialization in an academic discipline." The second point, and its accompanying recommendation, is relatively easy to accept. "Public administration education must offer students opportunities to enhance their reflective, critical, and reflexive capacities, and to share and debate views with one another and their faculty, through discussion and reflection on classic and contemporary writings, and case studies as well as current issues."

In my view, the authors have described an ongoing problem that has been addressed by the current NASPAA standards. Indeed, my own program changed

its governance structure and curriculum in the 1980s, in part to meet the challenge of moving from a disciplinary-based degree to a professional platform. While this issue is not unique to programs in political science departments, in my experience it is the major venue where this problem arises. The proposed NASPAA standards, as appropriate for a professional degree, are built on the knowledge of employers as well as academics. The proposed standards have been developed with much employer input, including active membership on the Standards Steering Committee by the chief administrative and financial officer of the Governmental Accountability Office and other practitioners; several surveys conducted with local and Federal managers, plus students in the field; a presentation by a private-sector practitioner with an MPA who leads a major governmental contracting company at an initial retreat; and reviews of the literature that describe changes in the public sector. The proposed standards, which focus on competencies and their measurement, will continue to push programs (and faculties) toward professionalization, as the authors propose. I salute the authors for challenging their colleagues to address this issue.

The first issue noted by the authors — that the proliferation of degree programs is obscuring the public administration degree's mission — is critical, but needs to be subdivided. The field of professional public-service education includes many alternative-degree programs, ranging from MPAs to public affairs, public policy, health policy and management, and even planning and urban affairs degrees. One could view this as a positive — students are offered a wide variety of alternatives, and the diversity of programs leads to innovation and responsiveness for both student and employer needs. Alternatively, the great variety of degree programs works against defining and marketing the broader field, which can confuse potential students and employers about the “brand,” and make it more difficult to communicate the meaning and distinctiveness of the field. The problem this poses for professional public service education is obvious when we compare our degrees to the MBA or the JD, both of which bring to mind clear images, at least to those outside these fields. This is certainly an issue for consideration by NASPAA, the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM), ASPA, the Nonprofit Academic Centers Council (NACC), the Association for Research on Nonprofit Organizations and Voluntary Action (ARNOVA), and the Urban Affairs Association. Indeed, the list of relevant organizations itself suggests the magnitude of the problem. This is a concern going back many decades. The mission of MPA programs falls within this larger question of professional degree programs in public service education, and it is this question that deserves our immediate attention.

The true mission of MPA programs within the context of professional public-service degree programs requires more thought and attention, but NASPAA has encouraged a dialogue for three years on the issue. In March, 2006, NASPAA began what is now called “NASPAA Standards 2009: Defining Quality in Public

Affairs Education,” when then-NASPAA President Dan Mazmanian appointed a committee to lead the process of reconsidering accreditation standards, now the NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee. The core of the committee met with the NASPAA Executive Council in a retreat at the University of Arizona in Tucson to discuss “The Future of the Public Sector.” John Bryson led the group in a strategic planning effort to better understand the changes taking place in our field, and the implications for professional public-service education. By October, 2006, at the NASPAA conference in Minneapolis, the Steering Committee was fully formed and the process was well underway. The 2006 conference theme was “The Future of the Public Service,” and the committee offered two panel sessions on “Visions of the Public Sector.” In Seattle, the October, 2007, NASPAA Conference theme was “Embracing the Certainty of Uncertainty: Creating the Future of Public Affairs Education,” and the NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee held a plenary session to report on its work and discuss the principles it planned to use for building new standards.

A most significant question was raised at our very first Steering Committee meeting: What makes public administration and related programs unique from programs in other fields such as business, health management, and planning? In my role as chair of the Steering Committee, my most dramatic and frequent request has been to “show how our degree is unique.”

Our quest for a new set of standards began with establishing a set of principles that were discussed at the October, 2007, NASPAA conference. These principles included one aimed at showing the uniqueness of our degree programs:

Public Service Mission: The mission of every program should include having a positive impact on public service and public policy, in a way that is demonstrable to prospective students, peers, and external audiences (NASPAA, 2007, n.p.).

In addition, Principle #8, Competencies for Public Service Education, included the requirement that programs “ensure students will be capable of acting ethically and effectively in pursuit of the public interest” (ibid.). These principles were discussed in a session on March 25, 2007, at the ASPA Conference, and have been shared with all NASPAA members. The ASPA session presented the background to the NASPAA Standards 2009 effort, the results of surveys and other input up to that date, and a call for input from ASPA members. The principles were posted on the NASPAA Web site a few days later.¹

In September, 2007, Steve Maser, chair of NASPAA’s Standards Committee, which is responsible for drafting new standards; Laurel McFarland, NASPAA’s Executive Director and former Academic Director; and I provided the rationale for the uniqueness of NASPAA accreditation, which would form the basis of the new standards. We outlined the essence of “Public Service Values, Mission-

Based Accreditation” and stated, “We cannot and should not ignore that public administration and public policy programs, whatever the differences among them, share a distinctive mission: promoting values in community governance such as accountability, responsibility, justice, transparency, and improving welfare” (Raffel, Maser, & McFarland, 2007, p. 2).

In February, 2009, the proposed standards included a requirement that, to be eligible for accreditation, programs needed to emphasize “public values,” or as fully stated, “The mission, governance, and curriculum of eligible programs shall demonstrably emphasize public values”(NASPAA, 2008a, p. 2). In the new glossary for the proposed Standards, public values are defined as:

Public Values: (includes but not limited to) responsiveness and accountability; transparency and ethical behavior; civic virtue and social equity; fiscal and environmental sustainability; delimited legal governance and participatory processes; due process, respect for human rights and diversity” (NASPAA, 2008b, pp. 27-28).

The proposed standards require that programs “incorporate public values into decisions.” Thus, as called for in the ASPA report, the Standards Steering Committee and Standards Committee have recognized the need to incorporate the basic values of our field, including topics noted in the ASPA report — such as “the special constitutional nature of public sector administration and organization and public sector ethics,” as well as “the core values that lie at the heart of public service ... [and] the public interest” — to show the uniqueness of our profession, and to require that programs develop their educational programs accordingly. NASPAA has not only engaged the issue here, it also has developed a specific means of addressing it.²

What about the uniqueness of MPA programs in the context of multiple types of public affairs programs? That is, to quote the report, “these overlapping, related — but different — degrees are an agglomeration of different paradigms, biases, foci, perspectives, and favored theories and methodologies.” NASPAA adopted mission-based accreditation in the 1990s to reflect the different programs that address different demands in the pool of students seeking professional public-service degrees, and this will be continued in the proposed standards. The first principle in the September, 2007, document, “Transforming Education for Public Service Provisional Guiding Principles,” states the following: “Mission-Based Accreditation: To recognize the great variety of programs, missions, constituencies, and processes among NASPAA programs educating public affairs leaders, mission-based accreditation should be maintained.” The proposed standards therefore remain mission-based.

The ASPA report argues, “NASPAA’s accreditation process and the *U.S. News & World Report’s* rating systems ... tend to cluster and synthesize assessments of

sometimes profoundly different programs, making it difficult for any one degree-type to maintain a distinctive profile.” Its authors also view marketing pressures as a reason for homogenization. Any accreditation process could move programs to homogeneity, but the process is and will remain mission-based for two reasons. First, history has shown that giving programs the flexibility to innovate is good for the programs, good for students, and good for the profession. Second, programs should practice what they teach. Having a clear mission and managing to it is implicit, if not explicit, in the ASPA report’s call, and is a requisite of good administration.

Thus, a question within the overall mission-based context of NASPAA accreditation: should MPA programs per se have a specialized mission and character? The ASPA report authors are in favor of such distinctiveness, and offer a means to reach it. They state, “Thus, the core mission of those offering the MPA degree must be to develop the capacity of graduates to exercise delegated public authority wisely, effectively, and lawfully.” This is an excellent contribution, consistent with the tone and intent of the commitment to “public values” that is required in the proposed NASPAA standards. However, the authors go on to limit this to the U.S., using terms such as “in a republic such as ours,” and “anchor of American public administration.” If MPA programs target primarily those who serve or who will serve in U.S. governmental administrative functions that are “centered in administrative agencies,” then they should focus on the topics noted in the report, such as U.S. constitutionalism and the separation of powers.

In my view, the authors of the report are too narrowly focused on U.S. government service and programs. Limiting the missions of accredited MPA programs to such efforts would greatly limit the market for and the utility of the MPA degree. Indeed, this would be a long way from education for “public service”; rather, in this respect, the report proposes education for *American* government. The world seeks leadership in public administration education, and NASPAA has the experience and wisdom to lead. The world also has far more democracies — constitutional or otherwise — today than it had when the MPA was the only credible degree for students of public administration. And, even within the U.S., less than half of the respondents to a recent survey of students in NASPAA programs — two-thirds of whom were in MPA programs — reported that their ideal career after obtaining their degrees would be in American local, state, or Federal governments. A slight majority sought careers in nonprofits, international governments or NGOs, the private sector, or planned to seek a further degree (NASPAA, 2008). But, I fully accept that this is a significant question for ASPA to consider, given that it is the *American Society for Public Administration*, and most of its members presumably work in government.

Regardless of ASPA’s opinion on the appropriate mission for MPA degrees, it could play a significant and constructive role in accreditation reform. The

proposed NASPAA standards will require programs to measure the achievement of mission-based competencies by students/graduates of MPA programs. Can ASPA assist in defining such specific competencies, how they can be achieved, and how they can be measured? NASPAA is now working with ICMA on a similar task at the local-government level, and it would be most positive for ASPA members to add their expertise in ongoing efforts to define competencies and measure learning outcomes.

ASPA ACTIONS

The authors make seven explicit action recommendations, two of which warrant responses beyond my comments above. The report recommends that “master’s programs, under prompting and guidance from NASPAA, should be clearly labeled, described and advertised in all publications and advertisements . . .” This is the so-called “Truth in Advertising” standard, which has been reflected by NASPAA standards for many years, and has been reasserted in the proposed standards. In my experience on COPRA, identifying each program’s advertised claims and matching them with its delivery has been a central part of the review process.

I admit to being greatly concerned with the authors’ recommendation #6 as stated: “While NASPAA rather than ASPA conducts accreditation for the MPA, if NASPAA feels it cannot or will not participate in this discussion — or change its accreditation requirements — then ASPA should consider a means of providing recognition for programs that meet its requirements in MPA program structure, perhaps by publishing a list of approved programs. Clearly, this is not the most desirable course of action, and should be considered only if NASPAA cannot or will not help in this endeavor.”

I have a simple response: Yes we can and Yes we have! As I noted above, for several years we have been asking for discussion on basic questions of accreditation, foundation principles, and proposed standards through focus groups, conference sessions, webinars, and Web postings. The NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee has held meetings on standards across the nation, including (as noted above), an ASPA session at the March, 2007, national conference, and 14 focus groups held in cities ranging from Boston to San Francisco, on April 16-17, 2008. For more than two years, NASPAA has proposed changes in accreditation standards that will maintain mission-based accreditation and specifically recognize public values and public service as the heart of the process. This leaves a most significant (but difficult!) task for ASPA: helping to define relevant competencies within the mission of MPA programs and the measurement of success. It is entirely unnecessary, and would be a mistake for ASPA to duplicate NASPAA’s accreditation efforts by generating a list of approved programs. And, as my comments suggest, it is too late for ASPA “to take the lead for a field-wide discussion,” but very timely for it to lead a

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discussion on what the core competencies in MPA programs are, and to define what student-learning outcome measures could operationalize them.

PATH AHEAD

ASPA and NASPAA members need to be aware of the timeline for standards review. Specifically, webinars on the proposed standards were held in March, 2009. We hoped these inspired discussion in program faculty meetings about the proposed standards. The deadline for submitting changes and suggestions to the proposed standards is May 15, 2009. The final proposed standards will be submitted by June 30, 2009, and formal amendments to those standards are due by September 15, 2009. The vote on the new standards will take place in October, 2009, at the NASPAA meetings in Crystal City, VA. Of course, the process will not end there, as the implementation of the new standards will require further work to define program missions, student competencies, and measures of student learning.

The proposed NASPAA standards will accentuate the unique commitment to public service that our diverse set of master's programs has developed. It will position NASPAA schools, in the increasingly crowded landscape of professional graduate programs, as distinctive institutions committed to public policy and administration. The proposed standards address the future — the future needs of government and governance, the future job market, our future society — and position our schools, our graduates, and our profession for the 21st century.

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FOOTNOTES

¹ Interestingly, APPAM focused its June 15-17, 2006, Park City, Utah conference on "Charting the Next 20 Years of Public Policy and Management Education."

² I need to note that we have not focused on "constitutionalism" per se, as the ASPA report suggests. Because NASPAA recognizes that many students in our programs are not from the U.S. (Apaza & McFarland, 2008), and because one of our principles is to allow for non-U.S. programs to attain accreditation, we have attempted to include as public values some specific concepts that incorporate the core notions of constitutionalism (e.g., due process, shared powers, rule of laws), without requiring accreditable programs to be located in nations with constitutions like ours.

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