

What We Have Learned from the NASPAA Standards Review Process

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Editor's Note: Here, JPAE is pleased to provide the text of the presidential address delivered on October 16, 2009, at last year's Annual Conference of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), in Crystal City, Virginia. For publication as an article, the text of this speech was edited.

Thank you for the great privilege of serving as NASPAA president. I am truly honored and humbled to have my name on a list with such notables in the field as Dwight Waldo, Donald Stokes, Alan Campbell, Pat Ingraham, and others who read like a public administration Hall of Fame. There is nothing more gratifying and inspiring than to be asked to lead an organization with goals, values and members you have admired for three decades. To be honest, my first experiences with NASPAA suggested that its leadership was an “old boy” network of elite institutions. For example, the first 15 NASPAA presidents were men. I am delighted that the “old-boys” of today are people such as Kathy Newcomer, Nadia Rubii-Barrett, Kathleen Beatty, Lenneal Henderson, and Laurel McFarland.

I have been participating in NASPAA meetings since I became director of the MPA program at the University of Delaware in 1980, and have witnessed many ups and downs for this organization. Despite the difficult economic climate and the decline in the endowments, it is clear we are now in an *up* period for NASPAA. We have an amazingly energetic and able executive director, a highly competent staff, a stream of highly able and committed presidents, and an active, engaged executive council. Most importantly, NASPAA now has a most significant agenda — including a public issues committee that has developed an ambitious Human Capital plan, a data project that will lead NASPAA to being *the* authoritative source of data in our field, an active marketing program that uses the latest technology, and — I hope and expect — new accreditation standards aimed at the challenges of the decade ahead (McFarland, 2009). In

my view NASPAA has never been more relevant. So my first promise follows the Hippocratic Oath — do no harm — I promise not to mess NASPAA up! But I do want to go further.

I weighed many topics for this address, including one on which I have recently published — public sector leadership (Raffel, Leisink, & Middlebrooks, 2009) and the relation of public education to public administration (Raffel, 2007). Then I realized what topic would engage you the most — one where I had true expertise, and that only I could specifically address: What have *I* learned from the NASPAA standards review process, and what are the implications for NASPAA's future path? So I will share my thoughts. And I hope this is not the end of a conversation, but the beginning of one that we all participate in — and that you will convert the “what have *I* learned” to “what have *we* learned?”

I do need to thank several people who contributed to my remarks. Indeed, some of my ideas are probably theirs, but I have worked so closely with Laurel McFarland, Crystal Calarusse, and Steve Maser on the standards process that I can no longer differentiate my mundane thoughts from their deep understanding. I also want to thank my University of Delaware colleague Jerome Lewis, who introduced me to NASPAA almost 30 years ago, and Bob Denhardt, who has persisted in nominating me for NASPAA leadership positions several times over the years. By the way, to prove the adage that no good deed goes unpunished, I have asked Bob to co-chair the 2010 conference and he has accepted.

So here are my 10 lessons; the first four are about NASPAA and the next six are about our field.

NASPAA LESSONS

1. *NASPAA has a global reach, and plays an important role not only nationally, but also internationally.*

When I served on the Executive Council in the 1990s, we faced the issue of whether NASPAA should accredit programs outside the U.S. I remember arguing at the time that NASPAA's name was the *National* Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, not *international*. Today, however, our standards serve as a model throughout the world, even though up until now we have not permitted non-U.S. programs to seek accreditation. As we make it possible for non-U.S. programs to apply for accreditation and membership in NASPAA, our international presence will increase. Indeed, during the revision process we found that we were threatening to some non-U.S. public administration organizations. I hope and expect we will continue to look outward, to welcome international members and integrate them into NASPAA, to be helpful without being confrontational or over-reaching, and to one day consider whether NASPAA should stand for the **N**etwork of **A**round-the-World **S**chools of **P**ublic **A**ffairs and **A**dministration.

- 2. Using new technologies, NASPAA can successfully involve members in many ways, and provide helpful information to member programs.*

During the revision process we used focus groups, Webinars, wikis, and even a brief YouTube video, as well as traditional methods, to involve members in building the principles for accreditation and a new set of standards. We also used clickers at last year's conference to poll those in attendance on some vexing issues. Indeed, no one referred to the latter as a plenary session; they called it the clicker session! The NASPAA staff played a tremendous role in identifying and mastering new technologies to accomplish our involvement goals. We have had three years of extensive civic engagement and have given the term "NASPAA member" new meaning. For decades we have been lamenting our inability to use data about programs collected in the accreditation process. With new technologies, the explosion of access to data, and the ability of consumers to conduct their own analysis, we need to move beyond the current process of accreditation. Linking accreditation to the NASPAA data system will (a) provide a platform for NASPAA and its members to be more transparent, (b) provide students more direct answers to questions about our programs, and (c) allow us to analyze our own field. We can and should continue to involve our members in substantive and meaningful ways by using technologies that were not available just a few years ago. There is no turning back.

- 3. NASPAA members make extraordinary contributions to NASPAA and its activities.*

The list of people who contributed to the standards process is very long. If we added up those members who attended plenary sessions, focus groups, shared ideas by E-mail, used the wiki, participated in the two Webinars, and so on, our total would be more than 200 participants. That is expected and appropriate. But what I appreciated even more were the number of individuals who made COPRA-like commitments to the process.¹ The commitment of Steve Maser, chair of the Standards Committee; Jack Meek, chair of the Self Study Instructions Committee; Craig Shinn, chair of the Executive Council's Eligibility Committee; and the members and subcommittee chairs of the Steering, Standards, and Self Study committees were extraordinary. We had an editorial committee that did much editing and some writing — Michelle St. Germain was a key player here. Other committees added standards issues to their regular work — especially COPRA members, who, after holing up in a windowless room for several days, still had the time and energy to discuss new standards and the Self Study Instructions. It may take a village to raise a child but it took 5 committees, 2 Webinars, 14 focus groups, 3 staff, and hundreds of NASPAA members to build new standards. In short, I learned that you can count on NASPAA members "big time."

4. *NASPAA has friends we can count on.*

Laurel McFarland did a great job of making new partners and engaging them with NASPAA in the standards process. Sallyann Harper of the Government Accountability Office (GAO) has been an active member of the Steering Committee, and has shared research the GAO completed on who succeeded there and why, as well as coming to meetings well outside of [Washington] DC. The Accreditation Summit in August, 2007, was very helpful. We hosted top executives of several accreditation agencies who shared their thoughts and experiences. The International City/County Management Association (ICMA) has been working with NASPAA to define a set of competencies for local managers. And we engaged with the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and an ASPA committee as well, as those of you who are regular *Journal of Public Affairs Education* readers will attest. As we have seen with our Public Issues committee, NASPAA and our field can benefit from extending our network and collaborations.

OUR FIELD

5. *We agree on the need to differentiate our programs from others and to trumpet what is important in our field.*

As I have indicated in *Public Enterprise*, the major theme of those involved in the standards process was to “Highlight the features of our degree programs that are distinctive!” (Raffel, 2009). And, as we considered this imperative, it became clear that it was not so much the *substance* of our curriculum — after all, other programs may require statistics, human resources management, or courses in the policy process — but the *values* that underlie our programs that make them distinctive. Thus, we ultimately placed “public service values” first and foremost in our standards document. While there are still many issues revolving around the definition of these and how we can instill and measure them, we are off and running with this conference. Clearly defining, specifying, and operationalizing public service values have to be part of NASPAA’s future agenda.

6. *We have somewhat of an identity crisis as exemplified by disagreement over what to call our field!*

Early in the process we tried to use generic titles to encompass our field. We tried “public affairs,” but some said there were few programs with this title. We tried “public service,” but some said that smacked of fire and police departments. Trying to avoid controversy over names, we went to the old standby of “public affairs, administration, and policy,” but even with this long title there were those who questioned its inclusiveness. “What about public management?” someone asked during a Webinar. Indeed, a majority of you just voted in favor of an amendment that includes yet another set of words to describe our field. While NASPAA always has believed in letting a thousand flowers bloom — or, as of

last week, 270 flowers — frankly, it does not help our field to appear confused and long-winded about its name. I don't have the answer to this dilemma, but it sure would help to find one.

7. *The standards are the tip of the iceberg; implementation will be critical and NASPAA has much work ahead.*

At the accreditation summit we discovered that the accreditors who demanded the stating and measurement of achieving competencies *on paper* were not actually expecting full compliance. As Laurel put it, “While we couldn't say the emperor had no clothes, at best, he was in his underwear.” They realized that implementation of their new standards would take time and would be developmental. From the start of this process, the NASPAA staff has been quite aware and vocal about the implementation issues ahead. New standards mean we need to train site visitors, program directors, and even COPRA members. New standards mean we need a new set of Self Study Instructions (SSI), and while the Steering Committee recognized this early on and developed an initial document, the SSI Committee has accomplished a great deal, by integrating data and transparency requirements — plus examples and a glossary — into a complete guide. Thus, for a number of reasons — including the collapse of the economy — we also face questions about the economics of accreditation that must be addressed. Will all programs be able to afford accreditation? Is accreditation appropriately priced? What is the political economy of international programs? After three years of work on the standards, we can now say — as the Carpenters once sung — “We've only just begun!” So, NASPAA will have to continue devoting resources to the standards revision process, helping programs define and measure competencies, preparing for non-U.S. programs seeking accreditation, coordinating accreditation with building the data system, and even considering the price of accreditation. While we should work with partners in this process, NASPAA must take the lead.

8. *We need flexibility in the accreditation process.*

When one reads the history of NASPAA, it is clear that the diversity of programs has been a value from the start. So, when I began this process, I recognized that the standards had to be compatible with NASPAA's “big tent.” The eye-opener was the retreat that began this process, held at the University of Arizona in spring 2006 with the Executive Council. Our purpose was to consider “The Future of the Public Service.” What I remembered best was a statement by one speaker that the profound events and developments that had recently caused major upheavals in our field — the rise of the Web and its use in E-government, the 9-11 attack and the imperative for security, and Katrina and the emphasis on preparation for disasters — were not predicted a decade before. So here we were, launching an effort to adopt standards for the next decade,

knowing that three major influences of the past decade had not been predicted. This led me to try and build a set of standards that would allow adaptation and flexibility. Of course, you know we already have had several new developments during three years of the standards revision process — the financial meltdown, the election of the first African-American president, and one political party controlling the presidency and both houses of Congress — leading to a more active Federal government. Who knows what the next shocks to the system will be? NASPAA must continue to take a leadership role in helping programs to scan the environment and respond to major changes in our field.

9. Practitioners appropriately moved us beyond POSDCORB.²

Surveys conducted by NASPAA for marketing purposes, and the work cited earlier by the GAO indicated that, while many programs require statistics and the old POSDCORB-based courses, professionals value leadership and interpersonal traits such as initiative, confidence, and courage. Indeed, our standards had called for programs to “prepare *leaders* in public affairs, administration and policy” but there was little in the actual standards that supported this. Not surprisingly, as we placed the term “leadership” front and center in the standards, we have heard comments such as “We cannot teach leadership” and “Not all of our graduates can be leaders.” Part of the response is because many of us have traditional positional and/or charismatic views of leadership, rather than the notions of distributed leadership that are more in vogue these days. Here I have to admit I have been educated by my colleagues in our School’s undergraduate leadership program, having shared the traditional view at one point myself. Yes, even *policy analysts* can lead by running research projects, developing new methodological approaches, and influencing policy makers. We appreciated the nudge and help we received from the James McGregor Burns Academy at the University of Maryland on leadership, but we will need to continue to work on how leadership relates to our programs and how leadership competencies may be taught and measured. Fortunately, *JPAE* has taken the lead here by publishing several helpful articles on this topic.

10. Our field needs NASPAA and NASPAA leadership, and there is plenty for NASPAA to do!

The standards review process identified many opportunities and challenges for our field and for NASPAA. Three examples of opportunities include the following: (a) public organizations will be hit by the baby-boomer retirement wave, (b) with the election of President Obama and the stimulus efforts there is a renewed interest in public service and positions in the Federal government, and (c) the solutions to our nation’s problems are more and more defined by government-led programs such as financial regulation and health care reform. At the same time, there are challenges for us as well, including (a) competition

for our students from business and other programs, (b) a continuing skepticism about government that has led young people to seek positions outside of government, and (c) shrinking resources for the great diversity of programs that NASPAA represents. As but one very specific example, I am still shocked by the results of the last NASPAA student survey, which indicated that a majority of the students who responded did not view that their ideal area of work would be in a government position in the U.S. upon graduation from their masters programs! (See results at http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=H_2f_2fj8K4QGCWvijkANEReJTR3MiLboy7m79FjMyLaDlk_3d.) The majority looked to the nonprofit sector (20.5%), international organizations (10.8%); the private sector, consulting, or contracting (13.9%), or furthering their education (5.7%). But when all is said and done — and I realize outside of NASPAA much more is said than done — NASPAA is the organization uniquely positioned to lead the way for building on these opportunities and meeting these challenges. We have the people, the resources, the ideas, the means, and the commitment.

CONCLUSION

Steve Maser predicted much soul-searching as we began the standards review process. Indeed, as Steve later wrote, “The process ... surfaced philosophical disagreements and fault lines as old as the discipline” (personal communication, August 2009). As we searched for our collective soul, many of us found it in public service values, in a reinvigorated NASPAA building a data base in coordination with the accreditation process, and a set of standards appropriate for the next decade. The overall lesson of this process is that we need to continue to address the issues that have confronted us for decades, as we also confront those unknown to us today. And we will. To build on a phrase in some currency in this metropolitan area of late, “Yes we did! Yes we can! Yes we will!”

So as your incoming president, recognizing that NASPAA will build on these lessons as we look to the future, there is only one more thing to say about the year ahead: Viva Las Vegas!³

REFERENCES

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FOOTNOTES

¹“COPRA” is the NASPAA Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation.

²In 1937 Gulick and Urwick created the POSDCORB acronym to define the competencies required of public administrators: Planning; Organizing; Staffing; Directing, Controlling; Reporting; and Budgeting.

³NASPAA’s 2010 conference will be held in Las Vegas.

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