

“What We Have Learned from the NASPAA Standards Review Process”
Jeffrey A. Raffel
October 16, 2009

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, and Pat Ingraham and others who read like a Hall of Fame of public administration. There is nothing more gratifying and inspiring than to be asked to lead an organization whose 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 NASPAA endowment, it is clear we are now in an up period for NASPAA. We have an amazingly energetic and able executive director, 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 which will lead NASPAA to being the authoritative source of data in our field, an active marketing program using 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—so 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 relations of public education to public administration (Raffel, 2007). Then I realized what topic would engage you the most, where I had true expertise, that only I could specifically address was: 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 but I hope this is not the end of a conversation but the beginning of one that we all participate in—that you will convert the what have I learned to what have we have 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. And 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 about NASPAA and then the next six about our field.

NASPAA

(1) NASPAA has a global reach, playing 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 US. 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 to now we have not permitted non-US programs to seek accreditation. And as we make it possible for non-US programs to apply for membership in NASPAA and accreditation, our international presence will increase. Indeed, during the revision process we found that we were threatening to some non US 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 one day consider whether NASPAA should stand for the Network of Around-the-World Schools of Public Affairs and Aadministration.

(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 U Tube 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. We have been lamenting our inability to use data about programs collected in the accreditation process for decades. With new technologies and 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. Our linking accreditation to the NASPAA data system will provide a platform for NASPAA and its members to be more transparent, provide students more direct answers to questions about our programs, and 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 email and used the wiki, participated in the two webinars, and so on, our total would be over 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. 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 which did much of the editing and some of the writing, and Michelle St. Germain was a key player here. And 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 the 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 you can count on NASPAA members “big time.”

(4) NASPAA has friends we can count on.

Laurel McFarland did a great job making new partners and engaging them with NASPAA in the standards process. Sallyann Harper of Government Accountability Office (GAO) has been an active member of the Steering Committee, sharing research GAO had done on who succeeded there and why as well as coming to meeting well

outside of DC. The Accreditation Summit in August, 2007 was very helpful; we hosted top executives of several accreditation agencies who shared their thoughts and experiences. 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 *JPAE* readers will attest to. 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 “Highlight the features of our degree programs that are distinctive!” 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 which make our programs 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

these, 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 are few programs with this title. We tried "public service" but some said that smacks of fireman and police. Trying to avoid controversy over names, we went to the old standby of "public affairs, administration, and policy" but even with this long title we had those who questioned its inclusiveness. "What about public management?" someone asked during a webinar. Indeed, in a few minutes you will vote on an amendment which includes even another set of words to describe our field. While NASPAA has always believed in letting a thousand flowers bloom, or as of last week 270 flowers, frankly, it does not help our field to seem 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 those accreditors who were demanding 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. The NASPAA staff has been quite aware and vocal about the implementation issues ahead from the start of this process. 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, integrating data and transparency requirements as well as 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 to devote resources to the standards revision process, helping programs define and measure competencies, preparing for non-US programs seeking accreditation, and coordinating accreditation with building the data system, and even considering our pricing 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." What was an eye opener was the retreat which began this process held at the University of Arizona in the spring of 2006 with the Executive Council. Our purpose was to consider "The Future of the Public Service." What I remembered best was the 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 last decade had not been predicted. This led me to try to build a set of standards that would allow adaptation and flexibility. Of course you know we have already had several new developments during the 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.

The surveys conducted by NASPAA originally for marketing purposes and the work cited earlier by GAO indicated that while many programs require statistics and the old POSDCORD-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 which 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 notions of distributed leadership 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 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: public organizations will be hit by the baby boomer retirement wave; 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 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 competition for our students from business and other programs, a continuing skepticism about government leading to young people seeking positions outside of government, and shrinking resources for the great diversity of programs NASPAA represents. As but one very specific example, I am still shocked by the results of the last NASPAA student survey which indicated a majority of the students who responded did not view their ideal position in government positions in the U.S. upon graduation from their masters program!

http://www.surveymonkey.com/sr.aspx?sm=H_2f_2fJ8K4QGCWviJkANEReJTR3MiLboy7m79FjMyLaDik_3d) The majority were looking 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 to build on these opportunities and meet these challenges. We have the people, the resources, the ideas, the means, and the commitment.

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.” 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 we need to continue to address the issues that

have confronted us for decades as we also confront those unknown 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!

References

McFarland, Laurel, (October 2009) “Executive Director’s Report” submitted to the Executive Committee of NASPAA

Raffel, Jeffrey A. (2007). “Why Has Public Administration Ignored Public Education and Why Does It Matter?” *Public Administration Review*, Vol. 67, No. 1, January/February, 135-151.

Raffel, Jeffrey A., Peter Leisink, and Anthony E. Middlebrooks (2009) *Public Sector Leadership: International Challenges and Perspectives* (Cheltenham, U.K.”Edward Elgar).