NASPAA Accreditation

Policy Briefs

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What are the Characteristics of NASPAA Accreditation?

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The Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) provides quality assurance services through accreditation for masters-level public service degrees (namely the MPA, MPP, MPM and similar). NASPAA is a "professional accreditor," which means that the organization operates "to ensure that students in educational programs receive an education consistent with standards for entry to practice.[2]" The review standards are developed together by the academic experts for public service education and the employers that these degree programs seek to serve. The NASPAA Accreditation process is an attempt to both provide external accountability and to ensure students graduate with the knowledge, skills, and abilities to become effective public administrators.

NASPAA's design and goals reflect the global norms of typical high-quality professional accreditors. The accreditation process is centered on the unique mission of each degree program. Every case is reviewed with respect to the goals the program seeks to accomplish, and the evidence it can produce to demonstrate it is achieving its goals or aspiring to them. Thus, the process is designed to encompass a wide variety of programs that have differing missions and goals with respect to public service. Broad universal thresholds of quality are also used to ensure the tailored core process has broad accountability.

The nature of the accreditation process is both formative and evaluative, which distinguishes the process from an audit or other simple evaluation exercise. The overall goal of the accreditation enterprise is not to achieve a threshold level of quality, but rather to foster continuous improvement and reflection, to pursue ever higher levels of achievement and quality over time. Improvement is a higher goal than evaluation in NASPAA accreditation.

NASPAA's accreditation is voluntary, and programs pursue accreditation for a variety of reasons. A common goal outside the United States is to foster student mobility, faculty exchange, and partnerships with schools worldwide. Programs in all locations seek an external, respected signal of the quality of their offerings to students, employers, university administrators, and the public. Many participate to support the community of public service programs and to support the notion of high quality for the degrees. Others are primarily motivated by the assessment process itself, seeking to improve their outcomes utilizing a global quality framework.

NASPAA began accrediting programs in 1977 and the NASPAA Standards have since gone through three primary stages that mirror the development of accreditation practice in the United States. The first stage of accreditation practice focused primarily on "inputs" and was conducted in a more evaluative

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[2] Association of Specialized and Professional Accreditors website. Accessed 4.2015. http://www.aspa-usa.org/

fashion than today's conceptualization of accreditation. The standards stipulated what should be in the core curricula of programs and asked about basic resources, such as library holdings. A foundational characteristic of this early stage of accreditation was developing the notion of what public service programs are, of forming an academic and professional identity, and strengthening the emerging field.

The second stage in NASPAA's development, which began in the 1990s, can be characterized by the advent of mission-based accreditation. The more inputs-focused standards on curriculum and resources were retained, but they were viewed in the context of the program's own mission and goals. The catalyst for this change was perceived rigidity of the previous inputs-based model. High quality programs with innovative or unique practices, or that had a special mission focus, were not able to be successful in the process. While having a consistent approach in the first phase of accreditation was important to the development of the field, it ultimately led to too many restrictions and conformity over time.

The third, and current, stage of NASPAA accreditation has been described as outcomes-based and public service values-focused. The majority of the "inputs" requirements of the past have been eliminated, or have been made suggestions and norms, rather than requirements. The review now focuses on the evidence that programs can produce publicly to support their own quality, with respect to their goals. Programs must have robust strategic assessment and management processes that foster organizational learning and continuous improvement. They must articulate the public service values embedded in their mission and goals, as well as the achieved skills of their students in five domains:

- to lead and manage in public governance;
- to participate in and contribute to the policy process;
- to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions;
- to articulate and apply a public service perspective;
- to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry.

NASPAA's current phase also opened the accreditation process for programs outside of the United States. When many of the input requirements were removed in favor of a broader and more challenging outcomes-based assessment, the traditional barriers to global programs were eliminated. NASPAA's 2009 Accreditation Standards were accompanied by an explicit decision of the membership to open the possibility of accreditation to programs worldwide. The explanatory materials for the standards were written to provide flexibility with respect to regional context.

While NASPAA accreditation has evolved considerably over four decades, there are some elements of best practice in accreditation that have remained constant. The process continues to value a self-reflection exercise by programs that begins their accreditation journey, followed by formative and evaluative feedback from a commission of peers. A peer review fact-finding site visit remains a crucial element of the review, as well as a final deliberation of the peer review commission. Throughout the process practitioners/employers are involved in setting the standards, participating in the peer review, and visiting programs.

Accreditation is one method of quality assurance in the global educational space; there are others and it is important to understand its strengths and weaknesses in order to determine its role in a given region. There are some things accreditation does not do well. For example, it is not designed to foster overall comparability and rankings. Most accreditation systems, NASPAA's included, favor a yes/no approach to the quality of an institution. There are often specific indicators that can be compared, but the overall quality statement is not designed to produce rankings. This is a sacrifice in favor of the overall goals of individual program improvement and allowance of unique missions. Another aspect of quality that accreditation is not designed for is the auditing of bad actors, especially if the accreditation process is mandatory for all programs in a field. In NASPAA's voluntary process, the minimum thresholds are robust enough that very poor programs would be challenged to achieve compliance; in most cases, they avoid applying altogether or withdraw during the process when they begin to struggle. However, in mandatory accreditation systems designed for all programs (to achieve licensure or operational status, for example), accrediting bodies often face hard choices between their regulatory evaluation role and overall improvement and innovation.

On balance, the strengths of accreditation make it a powerful tool for achieving quality goals in many contexts. The concept of raising the overall quality of a field on a continuous basis, can be very appealing, especially in a flexible platform that fosters innovation. Accreditation allows for tremendous diversity of programs, one of its key strengths, while still ensuring a central identity for a profession. It privileges peer review and expert knowledge, connects the academy to the profession, and allows a community of scholars and practitioners to have ongoing and meaningful conversations about purpose.

How Accreditation Systems Measure Quality: Thresholds and Successful Outcomes

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Accreditation agencies like the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) at the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), seek to ensure quality in degree programs in a given profession or subject area. To accomplish this goal, programs under review must present evidence of how they meet a set of standards, or criteria, set by the academy in conjunction with the profession.

A question with which all accreditors struggle is how to measure the success of the programs under review. Each quality assurance body must strike a balance between its evaluative (regulatory) and quality improvement functions. How accrediting bodies design standards and thresholds is reflective of the overall goals of the organization. Many accreditors seek to recognize excellence and expect to accredit only some percentage of programs in a given field. Others have an obligation to review all programs and determine minimum conformance for licensure or operational status. Each type of system has unique challenges for ongoing operation. NASPAA falls into the former category of only seeking to accredit a portion of public service programs, albeit a large portion, and the examples that follow reflect this type of model. Were NASPAA to accredit more comprehensively, the character of the process would likely change substantially to facilitate a more regulatory view.

Accreditation standards are important signals to the world about the identity of a profession and its goals. They often serve as purpose and vision statements for a profession as a whole. However, in order to function in accreditation practice, they must also define the boundaries of what constitutes quality. They should delineate what evidence programs must demonstrate to be distinguished as an accredited program.

In the NASPAA accreditation process, the most important evidence of conformance is the program- and student-based outcomes that programs can articulate to demonstrate their quality. The heart of the accreditation process is the logical presentation of outcomes that relate to a program's mission, and the program's ongoing strategic management process to continually improve those outcomes. The NASPAA Standards state:

> 1.2 Performance Expectations: The program will establish observable program goals, objectives, and outcomes, including expectations for student learning, consistent with its mission.
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> 1.3 Program Evaluation: The program will collect, apply, and report information about its performance and its operations to guide the evolution of the program's mission and the program's design and continuous improvement...

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This focus on measuring outcomes is consistent with global best practice in accreditation and is an evolution from the more "inputs" focused schemes of the past, which counted things like library holdings. While some basic resource requirements still exist in the NASPAA Standards, the focus of the conversation is at the higher level questions of purpose, intent, and measurement.

In the NASPAA process, this conversation surrounding outcomes is divided into two primary components: programmatic outcomes and a special subset of these known as student learning outcomes. Student learning outcomes are defined "in terms of the particular levels of knowledge, skills, and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences."[4] In the NASPAA process, these are defined as the "5 universal competencies" and each program is expected to define the knowledge, skills, and abilities it seeks to measure in its students within each of these broad competency domains. Programs must articulate the process of defining these objectives with respect to their missions, how they measure student learning in these areas, and how they analyze and use the results of this learning for ongoing improvement. The NASPAA competency domains are:

- to lead and manage in public governance;
- to participate in and contribute to the policy process;
- to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions;
- to articulate and apply a public service perspective;
- to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry.

With regard to programmatic outcomes, all programs in the NASPAA process must articulate graduation rates and employment rates, and should be able to explain these with respect to mission and context. They must also articulate a minimal level of scholarship from the faculty of the program. However, the standards do expect programs to go further and emphasize unique outcomes with respect to their mission, and to provide a logical illustration of how these indicators are used within the strategic management system to improve the program, on a continuous basis. For example, a program with a research mission and at a university with a strong research focus would be expected to articulate how it consistently measures the scholarly output of its faculty and the impact of that research. A program focused on nonprofit management would be expected to demonstrate that its students achieve employment in that sector. A program that focuses on diversity in its mission would be expected to provide evidence of accomplishment, such as strong marks in an alumni survey regarding cultural competency issues, and so on.

While the conversation about student learning outcomes measurement is newer and a developing area in professional accreditation, its frequent emphasis should not overshadow the importance of these overall programmatic outcomes and outputs, which are crucial to achieving conformance in accreditation. In many professional fields, minimum quality thresholds are set with respect to these types of outcomes. For example, to achieve accreditation, program graduates might need to have an overall passage rate on a national exam, or must achieve licensure. In the NASPAA process, there is no

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[4] Ewell, Peter. 2001. http://www.chea.org/award/StudentLearningOutcomes2001.pdf

one indicator that applies globally to the very diverse set of accredited programs. Thus, the programs must define their own successes within some defined parameters.

A subset of these overall outcomes receiving heightened attention in the review process are the student learning outcomes. The NASPAA review committees employ thresholds for conformance of student learning; in particular, programs must show that they perform this assessment in a way that is logically consistent with mission, and with the rigor expected of graduate education. Basic concepts of validity and reliability are important in this process, as well as direct measurement of learning through tools like capstone projects, theses, portfolios, exams, or similar. COPRA analyzes the overall system and the onsite peer reviewers examine artifacts for rigor. The program's stakeholders should be involved in this process and be able to discuss their involvement with NASPAA reviewers. Overall, the conformance threshold is related to having a sustainable and meaningful assessment system. A strong articulation of continuous improvement within a logical framework, supported by stakeholders and artifacts, is difficult to counterfeit.

NASPAA's approach to accreditation is complex and formative. It would be much easier, as an evaluation body, to set minimum quantitative thresholds and conduct a more streamlined review. However, for NASPAA and the public service education field, the goal of accreditation is to improve the overall quality of the sector on a continuous basis. A focus on minimum thresholds would risk harming one of the perceived distinctions of the sector, the tremendous diversity and innovation of public service programs worldwide, all operating for unique sectors and with unique strengths.

The Underlying Values in NASPAA Accreditation

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The Accreditation Standards of the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) are a product of the underlying values of both public service education and professional accreditation. Public service values serve to distinguish NASPAA accredited programs from those in other professional fields and include "pursuing the public interest with accountability and transparency; serving professionally with competence, efficiency, and objectivity; acting ethically so as to uphold the public trust; and demonstrating respect, equity, and fairness in dealings with citizens and fellow public servants."[6] Accreditation values, while not always explicitly stated, also play a guiding role in the design and operation of the process and include concepts such as self-regulation, peer review, accountability, and academic independence.

Public service values are central to the NASPAA accreditation process and the concept is explicitly outlined as a requirement in the Accreditation Standards:

> *The mission, governance, and curriculum of eligible programs shall demonstrably emphasize public service values. Public service values are important and enduring beliefs, ideals and principles shared by members of a community about what is good and desirable and what is not. NASPAA expects an accreditable program to define the boundaries of the public service values it emphasizes, be they procedural or substantive, as the basis for distinguishing itself from other professional degree programs.[7]*

The program under review must define its own public service values, in conjunction with its internal and external stakeholders. Those values should infuse the program and be evident in the mission, goals, operations, and measures of success. Programs are expected to be sensitive to the needs of their employers and contexts, and to develop an agreed-upon set of values that reflects the purpose of the degree program.

This focus on public service values relates to public service motivation and serves to distinguish the diverse array of public service programs from those that serve other purposes, such as business education. When new standards were proposed that included a focus on these values, the NASPAA leadership stated, "I believe it is at least worth discussing the proposition that an important characteristic of our programs, regardless of their specific labels, is that we and our graduates bring — or at least aspire to bring — an appreciation of public values to bear upon the analysis and management of organizations, programs, and policies. Further, this characteristic is common to all of our members,

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[6] NASPAA Accreditation Standards. https://naspaaaccreditation.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/naspaa-accreditation-standards.pdf

[7] NASPAA Accreditation Standards. https://naspaaaccreditation.files.wordpress.com/2015/02/naspaa-accreditation-standards.pdf

and distinguishes us from other professions."[8] The drafters of the accreditation standards further explained, "We have reasoned that a "pure" mission-based approach is not appropriate. 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. A values-driven approach helps to define the range of acceptable program outcomes."[9]

One hallmark of NASPAA's values approach is its flexibility. There is no one established set of public service values appropriate for programs seeking to achieve conformance with NASPAA standards. In fact, there is great variety in how programs have chosen to articulate their purpose. In their self-evaluation reports, programs are asked to describe the public service values reflected in their mission. In an analysis of these reports from 122 schools recently applying for accreditation, there are very few words that consistently appear in more than half of these responses. Common words in over half the responses include some version of "ethical" and "lead". Common words appearing in approximately 50-60 of these responses include versions of "accountability", "efficient", "effective", "equity", and "diversity". Many more worthy values, such as "fairness" or "transparency" appeared even less consistently. This list is not exhaustive of all the specific public service values articulated by programs but it is included to illustrate that programs employ a wide variety of values to guide their strategies - there is no one approach that has been deemed superior.

In addition to the deeply held core values of public service programs, the NASPAA process is in part a product of the United States accreditation system, built on its own set of shared values. Accreditation is founded on the principles of self-governance and peer review. In the case of professional accreditation, the academy itself creates the indicators of quality and conducts the peer review assessments, with the participation of the profession. Accreditation expects the academic institution to operate with an appropriate level of autonomy and freedom to conduct research and convey knowledge to students. Accreditation requires integrity in action and accountability to students and the external stakeholders of the university. Accreditation has often fostered the public responsibility of an institution within its society, as a contributor of knowledge and a preparer of the labor force.

More recently, accreditation has sharpened its focus on continuous improvement and student learning as the hallmarks of a strong process. Most accrediting bodies facilitate a mission-based review, require support for students, and increasingly, mandate strong public communication. These concepts are central in the recognition requirements of the Council for Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), by which NASPAA is recognized to accredit globally.

The NASPAA Standards as written are a reflection of these underlying values. The NASPAA Standards require the program to have strong leadership, to engage all of its relevant stakeholders in its strategic management process, and to make decisions based on evidence. The standards expect scholarly output relevant to the program's mission and for programs to demonstrate evidence that students have

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[8] Mandell, Marv. (2008) "Public Values as a Core Element of NASPAA." *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 15(3).* http://www.naspaa.org/jpaemessenger/Article/jpae-v15n3-01Mand.pdf

[9] Raffel, J., Maser, S., &, McFarland, L. (2007). *NASPAA Standards 2009:Public Service Values, Mission-Based Accreditation.*[White paper]. https://naspaaaccreditation.files.wordpress.com/2014/04/naspaastandardsphilosophy09-12-2007.pdf

mastered the knowledge, skills, and abilities appropriate for their unique set of employers. They expect transparency in public communication and support for student success. The development of the Standards themselves mirrors these values: requiring a vote of all accredited programs and the inclusion of peer academics and practitioner members on all review bodies.

Thinking about the values required by the public service accreditation process, and about those underlying NASPAA's existence as an accreditor, is important for determining fit to become a partner or an accredited program. Globally, there is a shared vision in public service education of high-quality programs that graduate students with exceptional skills. Even more imperative is the notion that these educational programs will make a difference in public service, through the actions of their graduates and the impact of their scholarship and service. Accreditation is an established vehicle that can be utilized to seek these goals.