

Executive MPA Curriculum Models

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ABSTRACT

The paper builds upon a 2006 U.S. survey of NASPAA member schools that offer Executive Education programs, including Executive MPA degrees. The survey results suggest that Executive MPA programs follow a variety of approaches and formats. Program distinctions include cohort versus open enrollment, set of required core courses, and their accreditation status. The paper examines the implications of these Executive MPA characteristics in developing the capacity of today's public service. This study employs a descriptive analysis employing based on results of an online survey and document analysis.

Introduction

A select number of National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) member schools have offered Executive MPA degrees for over 30 years. In the past decade though the number of NASPAA members schools offering non-degree Executive Education programs and Executive MPA degrees has doubled and an ever increasing number of NASPAA member schools have expressed an interest in developing or expanding Executive MPA programs for public service professionals. Yet there is a dearth of aggregate information on Executive MPA program formats and their impact on the development of public sector professionals and the implementation of public services.

Executive MPA programs have the potential to support a burgeoning demand for experienced public service professionals who possess the leadership capacity to effectively achieve common good. Executive MPA programs develop the managerial leadership competencies of current public sector professionals, serve as an educational vehicle to transition experienced professionals from other sectors to the public sector, and provide the foundation for sustainable learning networks of public managers. This study explores how Executive MPA program format and curriculum models support these assertions. The paper concludes with a discussion of issues that need to be explored to continue the development of quality Executive MPA programs.

Study Methodology

In April 2006 NASPAA conducted an initial online survey of its member schools to determine which schools offered Executive Education programs. Based on the survey responses and additional web research, 57 schools were identified as offering some form of Executive Education program. This included both degree programs, such as an Executive MPA and non-degree programs, such as certificate and leadership programs. A follow-up online survey was sent to the NASPAA principal representatives of the 57 schools identified as offering Executive

Education programs. 27 schools responded to the follow-up survey, yielding a response rate of 47 percent.

This study focuses on the 16 Executive MPA and equivalent degrees identified through the online survey. The study examined the degree format, number of required credit hours and core courses. Additional document analysis of the Executive MPA degrees was conducted by examining the content available on the degree websites. Informal discussions were conducted with several staff and faculty members of Executive MPA programs to verify information on the website.

History and Trends of U.S. Executive MPA Programs

Since the late 1960s, Schools of Public Affairs and Administration have steadily grown the number of Masters degrees for experienced public service professionals. The last ten years though has produced the greatest increase in the number of Executive MPA and similar degree programs. From 1996-2006, 7 new schools began offering Executive MPA or equivalent programs compared to the previous trend of 3 or 4 new programs developed within each decade. The survey results indicate that 9 of the 16 schools that offer a Masters degree for experienced public service professionals called the degree an Executive Masters of Public Administration. Several schools adopted variations on the Executive MPA degree title, including Executive Master of Public Management or and Master of Policy Management, whereby the degree title does even include the word Executive.

Schools have generally adopted two approaches in offering Executive Masters degrees. The first approach is to offer a discrete Executive Masters program for public service professionals separate from their traditional MPA program. The discrete programs have a distinct curriculum, credit requirements, and admission process from the traditional MPA. Ten schools identified their programs as discrete Executive Masters programs. The second approach adopted by schools is offering an executive track or option within their traditional MPA degree. This approach allows experienced public service professionals, who are working full-time, to take classes part-time, in the evenings, or on weekends. In offering an executive track or option, schools make special exceptions in the curriculum requirement to reflect their practitioner experience, such as not requiring internships or awarding credit hours for professional experience. Under the track or option format executive students are expected to meet the curriculum requirements of the traditional MPA. Six schools identified their programs as an Executive or Mid-career track within the traditional MPA degree program.

The variation in both the degree titles and approaches to offering Executive MPA and similar degree programs represents a broader challenge for the degrees - defining the term Executive. The public administration education literature has no discussion on defining who is an executive student. Criteria for defining executive range from specific professional benchmarks, such as years of management and supervisory experience, to reflections of student's leadership potential as institutional change agents. The former criterion emphasizes a student's past contributions with little indication of future potential and interest in serving in an executive leadership capacity. The latter criterion emphasizes a commitment to continued leadership development to

succeed at the executive level. The underlying implication of defining “executive” for degree programs is whether to focus on individuals who have already achieved executive status and improve their leadership capacity or focus on individuals aiming to achieve executive status, thereby emphasizing the critical skills to develop leadership potential.

Study Results

The study focuses on three key areas in reviewing Executive MPA degrees, the use of a cohort versus open enrollment models, comparison of core courses, and the accreditation status of the Executive MPA degrees. A cohort is defined as an intact group of students who take a set or all courses together. The cohort approach assumes that students will start and end their degree program at the same time and have a shared experience as a group. This is in contrast to the traditional open enrollment approach that allows students to enter and exit the program at different intervals thereby allowing for greater flexibility in completing degree requirements. The comparison of both the number and type of core courses required for Executive MPA and similar degrees examines the issue of curriculum focus at the executive level. Specifically, is there a different set of core course for Executive MPA programs compared to traditional MPA programs? Finally, the study addresses the issue of accreditation of Executive MPA degrees. Currently, the Commission of Peer Review and Accreditation has accredited Executive MPA programs through the same process and accreditation criteria established for traditional MPA and MPP programs. This study examines the extent to which Executive MPA programs are accredited and the implications for ensuring quality Executive Masters programs for experienced public service professionals.

Application of the Cohort Model

Taking a page from playbook of graduate higher education programs, some schools of public affairs and administration have embraced the cohort model for delivering Executive MPA programs. Studies suggest that the cohort model supports improved student learning through deeper discussions, the foundation for professional networks that would support their future leadership opportunities (Teitel 1997), and as a tool for building collaboration skills (Ross et al. 2006). This study confirmed that the Executive MPA programs are more likely to adopt a cohort model compared to traditional MPA programs. As Table A demonstrates, of the 16 Executive MPA programs surveyed, over half the programs adopted a cohort model. This is marked difference compared to the traditional MPA programs where only a handful employ a cohort model.

The explicit use of the cohort model in Executive MPA programs may be result of several factors. One assumption is that experienced public service professionals significantly benefit from peer-to-peer learning that is enhanced through the cohort model. Executive MPA programs also market the cohort model as an opportunity to network with individuals at equivalent management levels or within their specific public sector profession. For example, American University’s Key Executive Masters in Public Administration is predominately targeted towards federal employees at or above the G-13 pay grades. Portland State University’s Executive MPA program actively recruits police and fire chiefs from jurisdictions around Oregon. The third advantage of the cohort model for Executive MPA programs is leveraging limited faculty and

staff resources to more effectively administer executive programs. The most structured cohort models offer no flexibility to students in curriculum choice in order to make use of limited faculty time and relatively small class sizes. Annual enrollment in Executive MPA programs tend to be smaller. Over two-thirds of the Executive MPA programs enroll fewer than 50 students annually, with the smallest class size reported at 7 students. Traditional MPA programs on average enroll about 75 students annually (NASPAA 2006). The larger enrollments in traditional MPA programs may also be factor in the limited use of cohort models in traditional MPA programs.

Core Courses

As stated earlier, some schools employ the cohort model to maximize faculty and staff resources by developing a rigid curriculum structures. University of Washington Seattle, for example, requires executive students to follow a 15 month curriculum progression with each course building upon the preceding course. On the other end of the spectrum are Executive MPA programs that require a minimum number of executive-level core courses and require executive students to enroll in courses with traditional MPA students to complete their degree. Executive MPA programs at Syracuse University and University of Minnesota-Minneapolis exemplify this approach in requiring executive students to complete only 3 core courses. As a result, the Executive MPA programs that do not use the cohort model tend to have fewer number of required core courses and conversely the programs employing a cohort model tend to have a greater number of required core courses.

In discussions regarding the value added of Executive MPA programs, the topic usually turns to defining critical competencies necessary for executive leadership in the public sector. This study explored how Executive MPA programs interpreted these critical competencies through the required curriculum. Table B illustrates that course topics on Leadership, Organizational Management, Quantitative Analysis, Economics and Financial Management/Budgeting were most frequently included in core curriculum, in that 12 of the 16 Executive MPA programs required these four types of courses. 11 out the 16 Executive MPA programs required a final project. The scope of the final project ranged from an Action Learning process of diagnosing a personal professional opportunity to a capstone consulting project for a sponsored public sector agency. Courses on the Policy Context and Ethics of Public Sector were included in the Executive MPA curriculum, 10 and 9 times respectively. Less than half the Executive MPA programs required courses in Human Resource Management, Legal Issues, Information Technology, and Communications. Less than a third of the schools required courses in Administrative Environment, Decision-Making, and Research Methods. Two Executive MPA programs explicitly required courses on Negotiation and Conflict Analysis.

The study results indicate there is some consistency in the required curriculum for Executive MPA programs. The emphasis on organizational management, quantitative analysis, economics, budgeting/financial management and completion of a final project reflect similarities with traditional MPA accreditation standards. Executive MPA programs tend to depart from traditional MPA programs with greater emphasis on leadership, communications, and other executive skills. Given that the graduate business programs are increasingly competing for

students with public sector experience, Executive MPA programs must identify ways to differentiate themselves from general management and leadership graduate programs. Two potential areas of curriculum differentiation are an explicit emphasis on the policy process and the legal issues in public administration. Currently, two-thirds of the Executive MPA programs require courses in the Policy Process but less than half require courses in Legal Issues in Public Administration.

Accreditation Status

With the recent growth of Executive MPA programs and potential for more NASPAA member schools to begin offering Executive MPA degrees the question of ensuring the quality and value of Executive MPA degrees has arisen among NASPAA members. Since the main vehicle for supporting quality MPA and MPP programs is the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA), the Commission has increasingly had to address the unique issues of accrediting Executive MPA programs. One issue is how the degrees are administered by the universities. Some Executive MPA programs are simply extensions of the traditional pre-service MPA. Students graduating from the Executive MPA and traditional MPA program receive the same degree. The distinction between the executive and traditional track is usually based on more flexible course scheduling, credit waivers to reflect professional experience. Other Executive MPA programs are discrete degrees that have distinct curriculum requirements and even a separate administrative structure from the traditional MPA programs.

Currently, three schools offer accredited discrete masters degrees for experienced public service professionals, including American University, Ohio State University, and Carnegie Mellon. However, even among these three accredited programs there is a distinction in professional experience required for admission. American University targets students with over 10 years of experience, while the latter two programs target more mid-level professionals with around 5 years of experience. Five schools that offer an Executive MPA track are accredited through the traditional MPA program.

This dual-approach to accrediting Executive MPA programs poses several issues for the accreditation process itself and for schools interested in accrediting their Executive degrees. Executive MPA tracks that evolve from traditional MPA programs occur as a result of demonstrated demand and interest in a program that reflects students' extensive professional experience and work schedule demands. However, public administration departments are hesitant to pursue establishing a distinct Executive degree given the immense obstacles of maneuvering through university bureaucracy. As a result, the Executive MPA tracks are retrofitted to accommodate Executive students within the traditional MPA program. Schools that offer distinct Executive MPA programs face the challenge of meeting COPRA standards, especially the Five Faculty Rule. The Five Faculty rule identified in the COPRA standards states:

This regular faculty should consist of a sufficient number of full-time faculty significantly involved with the program to support the set of teaching, research and service responsibilities appropriate to the size and structure of the program. In no case

should this faculty nucleus be fewer than five (5) full-time persons. The institution should specify how each regular faculty member is involved in the teaching and related research and service aspects of the program. At least 50 percent of the courses offered in the curriculum as well as at least 50 percent of the courses covering the common curriculum components shall be taught by full-time faculty of the institution (COPRA 2006).

Several executive programs note that one of the advantages of their program is augmenting their instructional faculty with exceptional public sector leaders who serve as adjunct faculty. This allows programs to functionally bridge theory and practice throughout the curriculum, either through academic-practitioner team teaching or alternating academic and practitioner instruction within the curriculum. Moreover, dedicating full-time faculty to the Executive MPA program has the potential to cannibalize faculty resources from the traditional MPA. As a result, discrete Executive MPA programs must balance an interest in seeking accreditation, preserving faculty resources, and meeting student demand for a more practitioner orientation.

Discussion

The study is a critical step in establishing a baseline for understanding the state of Executive MPA programs. The results reiterated anecdotal evidence that Executive MPA programs are very diverse in terms of their program formats and curriculum models. In reviewing the Executive MPA programs a critical question emerges from the study results - What is the goal of Executive MPA programs? Is it to develop the leadership capacity of public service professionals? Is it to develop a collaborative network of peers that sustain a continuous supportive relationship after the program? Or is it to facilitate the transition of experienced professionals from other sectors to public sector leadership positions?

Linking Public Sector Leadership Competencies to Executive MPA Curriculum

Within the succession planning strategy to address the looming retirement tsunami at all levels of government the call for leadership development has been a consistent mantra. The challenge for public sector employers is how to facilitate leadership development. This involves more than just thinking about the leadership development vehicle, such as formal mentoring program, external leadership training, or supporting employees pursuing additional degrees, it also requires a normative decision about which leadership principles to emphasize. The comparison of Executive MPA curricula, offers some insight into what conceptual topics academic institutions value in developing the leadership capacity of public service professionals, but there is limited discussion on how the curriculum links to critical public sector leadership competencies.

Identifying critical public sector leadership competencies may be the first step in evaluating the impact of current Executive MPA curricula to develop leadership capacity of public sector professionals. I offer two competency models to initiate a discussion of how Executive MPA can ensure they are not only delivering appropriate content but developing leaders who can succeed in the public sector. Table C is a synopsis of public sector leadership competencies developed by a task force sponsored by the Center for Public Leadership (CPL) of Harvard

University's Kennedy School of Government. The CPL competency model appears to emphasize two dimensions - the capacity to "modulate" and reflect upon personal behavior and ability to analyze and act within complex political and social contexts (Pittinsky 2006). The Table D is a synopsis of competencies developed by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management (OPM) to evaluate Senior Executive Service candidates. The OPM competency model emphasizes a leader's ability to motivate, coordinate, and demonstrate that his or her actions are meeting the organizational goals (U.S. OPM 2006). Even though the two models differ in perspective there are some commonalities. Both models express that leaders should be able to manage change and coordinate for collective action.

Differentiating the Executive MPA

Initiating a discussion on the critical competencies for public sector leaders has additional implications for developing quality Executive MPA programs. In identifying and linking critical competencies to curriculum, Executive MPA programs are more clearly able to articulate an educational advantage for experienced public service professionals, compared with Executive MBA and the traditional MPA. If Executive MPA programs continue to evaluate, develop, and promote the unique leadership competencies necessary to succeed in serving the public from any sector – public, private, or non-profit – the Executive MPA become the degree for raising the leadership capacity within the public sector.

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Table A: Comparison of 16 Executive MPA Degrees Based on Program Format, Credit Hours, and Accreditation Status

University	Degree Name	Discrete/ Track	Cohort	Accredited	Credit Hours	Number of Core Courses
American University	Key Executive Masters of Public Administration	Discrete	Yes	Yes, Discrete	36	15
University of Maryland College Park	Executive Master of Public Management	Discrete	Yes	No	36	10
University of Colorado Denver	Executive Master of Public Administration	Track	No	Yes, Track	36	7
Columbia University	Executive Master of Public Policy and Administration	Track	No	No	54 points	5
Indiana University	Master of Public Affairs	Track	No	Yes, Track	48	11
Ohio State University	In-Career Master of Arts in Public Policy and Management	Discrete	No	Yes, Discrete	56	10
Georgetown University	Master of Policy Management	Discrete	No	No	36	7
Brigham Young University	Executive Master of Public Administration	Discrete	Yes	No	45	14
University of Washington Seattle	Executive Master of Public Administration	Discrete	Yes	No	45	11
Rutgers University	Executive Master of Public Administration	Track	Yes	Yes, Track	30	10
Baruch College	Executive Masters of Public Administration	Discrete	Yes	No	42	7
University of Minnesota Minneapolis	Master of Public Affairs	Discrete	No	No	30	3
Syracuse University	Executive Master of Public Administration	Discrete	No	No	30	3
University of Utah	Executive Master of Public Administration	Track	Yes	Yes, Track	42	8
Portland State University	Executive Master of Public Administration	Track	Yes	Yes, Track	45	9
Carnegie Mellon University	Master of Public Management	Discrete	Yes	Yes, Discrete	36	7

Table B: Comparison of Required Core Courses of 16 Executive MPA Degrees

University	Policy Context	Administration	Legal Issues	Quantitative Analysis	Budgeting/Financial Management	Public Finance	Economics
American University	Politics, Policymaking & Public Administration		Legal Issues in Public Administration	Analysis and Evaluation	Budgeting & Financial Management		Public Managerial Economics
University of Maryland College Park	Political Institutions and Strategies			Quantitative Analysis for Leaders	Finance and Budgeting		Managerial Economics
University of Colorado Denver	Policy Making in Democracy	Governance and Institutions		Information and Analytic Methods			Economics and Public Finance
Columbia University				Quantitative Techniques for Policymaking	Financial Management in Government		Microeconomics and Policy Analysis I and II
Indiana University			Law and Public Affairs	Statistical Analysis for Public Affairs	Public Finance and Budgeting		Public Management Economics
Ohio State University	Policy Formulation and Administration		Legal Environment of Public Administration	Program Evaluation	Public Budgeting and Spending Decisions	Public Finance	Economics of Public Policy and Management
Georgetown University	The Public Policy Process			Management of Program Evaluation			Economic Analysis for Public Policy
Brigham Young University		Administrative Environment	Legal Issues in Public Administration	Statistical Analysis	Budgeting and Finance		Economic Decision Making for Managers
University of Washington Seattle	Policies and Politics	Performance Challenge			Strategic Financial Management	Public Private Partnerships	
Rutgers University				Analytic Methods	Government Budgeting		Political Economy
Baruch College	Introduction to Public Affairs			Research and Analysis I and II	Budgeting, Accounting, and Financial Analysis		Economic Analysis and Public Policy
University of Minnesota Minneapolis	Transforming Public Policy						
Syracuse University	Fundamentals of Policy Studies						
University of Utah		Administrative Theory	Constitutional Law & Administrative Law		Public Budgeting and Finance		
Portland State University	Public Policy: Origins and Process		Administrative Law and Policy Implementation	Analytic Methods in Public Administration	Advanced Budgeting Concepts and Techniques		Administrative Theory and Behavior
Carnegie Mellon University				Data Analysis for Managers	Financial Analysis for Managers		Economic Principles for Managers

Table B: Comparison of Required Core Courses of 16 Executive MPA Degrees

University	Leadership	Ethics	Organizational Management	Human Resource Management	Final Project
American University	Leadership for Key Executives	Ethics for Public Managers	Organization Diagnosis and Change	Human Resource Management for Executives	Action Learning
University of Maryland College Park	Seminar in Leadership and Innovation	Moral Dimensions of Leadership	Management and Strategic Planning		Project Course
University of Colorado Denver	Assessment Seminar	Leadership and Professional Ethics	Organization Management and Change		
Columbia University			Public Management		Portfolio Presentation Workshop
Indiana University	Executive Leadership	Professional Ethics	Strategic Management of Public and Nonprofit Organizations	Public Human Resource Management	
Ohio State University	Strategic Leadership Public Management and HR		Strategic Management		
Georgetown University	Experience and Innovation in Public Management				Capstone Project
Brigham Young University	Leadership in Public Organizations	Ethics for Management	Organizational Behavior	Human Resource Management	Public Administration Capstone
University of Washington Seattle	Strategic Leadership	Leading with Integrity	Organizational Culture	Human Resource Management	Leadership Commitment and Legacy
Rutgers University	Leadership	Administrative Ethics	Strategic Planning	Human Resource Administration	Capstone
Baruch College			Managing Organizations in the Public and Not-for-Profit Sectors		Capstone
University of Minnesota Minneapolis	Leadership for the Common Good				Synthesis Workshop
Syracuse University	Mid-career Seminar				Master's Project
University of Utah		Public Administration Ethics		Public Human Resource Management	Capstone in Public Administration
Portland State University	Leading Public Organizations	Administrative Ethics and Values	Organizational Development	Human Resource Management	
Carnegie Mellon University			Organizational Management: Theory and Practice		

Table B: Comparison of Required Core Courses of 16 Executive MPA Degrees

University	Decision-Making	Communications	Executive Skills	Information Technology	Research Methods	Other Core Courses
American University	Executive Problem Solving	Marketing and Strategic Communications	Executive Skill Modules	Government and Nonprofit Informatics		Acquisition Management
University of Maryland College Park			Managing Differences (Negotiations)	Information Policy and Technology Management		
University of Colorado Denver						
Columbia University						
Indiana University			Briefings, Presentations, Teamwork	Information Systems		Environmental Policy Analysis; Topics in Public Affairs
Ohio State University				Governmental Information Systems	Research Methods in Public Administration	
Georgetown University	Decision Making for Public Policy					Public Policy Seminar
Brigham Young University	Applied Decision Analysis	Communication in Public Administration	Writing Practicum			Public Services Management; Managerial Accounting
University of Washington Seattle		Effective Communication	Negotiations and Conflict Analysis			
Rutgers University					Research Design	Public and Nonprofit Productivity
Baruch College		Communication in Public Setting				
University of Minnesota Minneapolis						
Syracuse University						
University of Utah					Research Design	Practice of Public Management
Portland State University						
Carnegie Mellon University		Professional Writing Professional Speaking		Information Systems for Managers		

TABLE C: Synopsis of public sector leadership competencies developed by a task force sponsored by the Center for Public Leadership of Harvard University’s Kennedy School of Government.

Competency	Description
Catalytic	Ability to identify, analyze, and judge complex collective challenges and opportunities, and mobilize others to remain focused on addressing them.
Contextual	Know the cultural, historical, institutional, intellectual, and policy context in which one operates.
Interpersonal	Modulate one's behavior in order to interact effectively in a variety of settings.
Leadership Theory	Understand the fundamental leadership concepts, constructs, and research findings.
Organizational	Plan, organize, coordinate, and execute collective action.
Personal	Ability to reflect on one's own thinking, feeling, and behavior; knowing one's strengths and weaknesses, predilections, dominant tendencies, and values.
Social Systems	Ability to read and analyze dynamic social and political systems.

TABLE D: Synopsis of U.S. Office of Personnel Management competencies required for entry to the Senior Executive Service as defined by the Executive Core Qualifications (ECQs).

Competency	Description
Leading Change	Ability to bring about strategic change, both within and outside the organization, to meet organizational goals, establish an organizational vision and to implement it in a continuously changing environment.
Leading People	Ability to lead people toward meeting the organization's vision, mission, and goals by providing an inclusive workplace that fosters the development of others, facilitates cooperation and teamwork, and supports constructive resolution of conflicts.
Results Driven	Ability to meet organizational goals and customer expectations and make decisions that produce high-quality results by applying technical knowledge, analyzing problems, and calculating risks.
Business Acumen	Ability to manage human, financial, and information resources strategically.
Building Coalitions	Ability to build coalitions internally and with other Federal agencies, State and local governments, nonprofit and private sector organizations, foreign governments, or international organizations to achieve common goal.