

# Public Service Education: Adding Value in the Public Interest

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## ABSTRACT

The goal of public service education is to prepare students to serve in the public interest. Educational outcome measurement is an important method in determining whether public service programs actually are achieving their intended objectives. This paper provides a “Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education.” This model builds on what we already know about outcome assessment, and elaborates on how public service education adds value to individuals, organizations, and governance. Key to this Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education is what we term “enabling characteristics,” or factors that mediate the relationship between short-term, intermediate, and longer-term outcomes in public service education. This process enables practitioners to assess their public service education programs and determine to what extent they add value to students, organizations, and governance. Ultimately, this Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education can be used to improve public service education programs.

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## INTRODUCTION

What value does public administration and public policy education add to students, employers, organizations, the public, and the strength of governance? By measuring educational outcomes, we can better assess how public service programs are working in the public interest. Outcome measurement is not a new idea. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) now requires that accredited programs specify how student outcomes are measured, and how they assess the success of accomplishing their missions (Durant, 2002; NASPAA, 2008). The objective of this paper is to advance

the discussion on educational outcomes, by providing a revised framework for outcome measurement in public service education. This “Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education” elaborates the process of how public service programs can add value to individuals, organizations, and governance.

Evaluating educational outcomes enables us to evaluate and improve the performance of our public service education programs. Beyond NASPAA accreditation, outcome measurement has been used to highlight curriculum weaknesses, illuminate effective teaching, and evaluate how well public service programs satisfy the needs of public and private employers (Boyle & Whitaker, 2001; Champagne, 2006; Cleary, 1990; Mitchell, 1991; Newcomer, 2008; NASPAA, 2008). This paper (a) briefly discusses the public interest, (b) examines existing literature on outcome assessment in public service education and offers an accompanying model, (c) presents the key Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education, and (d) addresses the contributions of this model.

#### PUBLIC INTEREST

The presumed mission of public service education (i.e., public administration, public affairs, and public policy programs) is to prepare students to serve the public — in other words to work in the public interest. The definition of public interest is likely to be context-specific (e.g., see Downs, 1962; Goodsell, 1990; Schubert, 1960; Sorauf, 1957). Gary Wamsley suggests that

...the “public interest” refers to a combination of several habits of mind in making decisions and making policy: attempting to deal with the *multiple* ramifications of an issue rather than a select few; seeking to incorporate the *long-range* view into deliberations, to balance a natural tendency toward excessive concern with short-term results; considering *competing* demands and requirements of affected individuals and groups, not one position...recognizing that to say that the “public interest” is problematic is not to say it is meaningless (Wamsley et al., 1990, p. 40).

What is *not* in the public interest is easily identified: Corruption, injustice, racism, authoritarianism, arbitrary actions, and unethical decision-making are never in the public interest, regardless of context. Though the public interest may be impossible to define precisely, it remains a useful concept. In sum, public service education should work toward a society’s common good and “add value” in the public interest (Office of Information Commissioner-Ireland, 2002).

#### REVIEW OF OUTCOME ASSESSMENT IN PUBLIC SERVICE EDUCATION

Many efforts have been made to measure public service education outcomes, and a fairly comprehensive list of this literature is provided in Table 1. Table 1

begins with literature from the field of public service education, and identifies characteristics that help assess the landscape of this field. These characteristics include the mode of data-collection, the broad inquiry of the study (e.g., student learning outcomes or curriculum quality), the specific research focus, the target population, and an indication of whether data were provided (and if so, the sample size).

The shift toward outcome measurement continues in the field of outcome assessment. In part, this is due to the mandate for outcome evaluation in NASPAA's accreditation standards (Durant, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009). Additionally, the move toward government accountability has overflowed into graduate education, as the public demands that educational programs be receptive to societal concerns (Alexander, 2000). While the specific focus of this review is on public service education, it should be acknowledged that the academic identity of public service programs has blurred in the past decade. There are many joint, master's-level programs that blend public service with health management or business. Certainly, educational outcome measurement in these related fields can be used to improve outcome measurement in public service education. Therefore, examples from other disciplines have been included in Table 1, in order to demonstrate potential fields of inquiry or focus for future educational outcome research. Some concepts from these articles (outside of public service education) later are incorporated into our Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education.<sup>1</sup> [*See Table 1*]

In Table 1, after the section devoted to literature that specifically focuses on public service education, we list selected literature from a variety of other educational fields, including business and economics. The list identifies the same characteristics that were applied to public service education literature. Interestingly, other types of foci and inquiry are more frequent in literature from other fields; there is more attention to student outcomes in careers and more analysis of self-efficacy. Acknowledging and reviewing the literature outside of public service education is an important and useful step as we move forward in assessing educational outcomes of public service education.

As seen in Table 1, the most common mode of data collection for assessing educational outcomes (across all fields of education) is a survey (see Cleary, 1990; Champagne, 2006; Herbert & Reynolds, 1998; Mitchell, 1991). Less often, case studies have been used (see Aristigueta & Gomes, 2006; Boyle & Whitaker, 2001). Rarely, field experiments have been performed (see Schwoerer et al., 2005; Tracey et al., 2001). Other methods such as testing, assessment centers, rubrics, and teacher-centric evaluations have been employed, but not frequently (see Beaumont 2005; Jennings, 1989; Peat, 2006).

Table 1.  
*A Review of Research on Public Service Outcome Assessment*

Source/ Year	Field	Mode of Data Collection	Inquiry	Focus	Target Population	Data Provided
PUBLIC SERVICE EDUCATION (Sorted by year)						
Kirkpatrick & Miller- Stevens (2009)	Public Admin- istration	Rubrics  Survey	Quality of Outcome Assessment/ Student Learning Outcomes	Developing a rigorous method of outcome assessment, obtaining faculty involvement, and using the results	MPA Program – University of Colorado Denver	No
Yeager et al. (2007)	Public Service	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes in Career	Return on education investment	MPA and MBA Graduates	Yes n=389
Aristigueta & Gomes (2006)	Public Service	Case Study	Student Learning Outcomes	How to assess graduate program performance	NASPAA Graduate Programs	Qualitative, University of Delaware Case Study
Castleberry (2006)	Public Service	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes	Are students meeting objectives of program?	MPA Graduates – Texas State University	Yes n=27
Beaumont (2005)	Public Service	Testing/ Teacher Evaluation	Quality of Outcome Assessment	How well is civic engagement assessed?	Civic Learning in Colleges	No
Nishishiba et al. (2005)	Public Admin- istration	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes in Career	What factors foster civic engagement?	MPA Graduates – Portland State University	Yes n=435
Durant (2002)	Public Service	Case Study	Curriculum Quality  Quality of Outcome Assessment	How well is a program achieving its mission?	MPA Capstone Course and Mission Statement – University of Baltimore	Qualitative, University of Baltimore Case Study
Williams (2002)	Public Admin- istration	Case Study	Quality of Outcome Assessment	How appropriate and useful are outcome measures?	MPA Program – West Virginia University	No

Table 1.  
*Continued*

<b>Source/ Year</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>Mode of Data Collection</b>	<b>Inquiry</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Target Population</b>	<b>Data Provided</b>
Roberts (2001)	Public Admin- istration	Survey	Employer Feedback	Stakeholder perceptions	MPA Graduates	Yes n=139
Boyle & Whitaker (2001)	Public Affairs	Case Study	Curriculum Quality	How are MPA programs adapting with the trans- formation of governance?	Public Affairs Students – UNC Chapel Hill	Some n=34 for graduates; anecdotal evidence
Herbert & Reynolds (1998)	Public Admin- istration	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes	Are student learning outcomes better in cohort programs than in non-cohort programs?	12 MPA and Professional Degree Programs, 6 Cohort, 6 Non-cohort	Yes n=177 cohort; n=165 non-cohort
Mitchell (1991)	Public Service	Survey	Curriculum Quality	What types of skills are needed in public admin- istration?	Public Authority Executives and Managers	Yes n=1243
Cleary (1990)	Public Service	Survey	Curriculum Quality	How well program curriculum matches practical needs	All types of public admin- istration master's degrees	Yes n=173
Jennings (1989)	Public Service	Survey	Quality of Outcome Assessment	Perceptions of How Edu- cation has Contributed to Workplace Success	Public affairs and public admin- istration students	No
		Testing/ Teacher Evaluation		Evaluating the Cognitive Development of Public Affairs Students		
		Assessment Center		Evaluation of Student Performance in Employment		

Table 1.  
*Continued*

Source/ Year	Field	Mode of Data Collection	Inquiry	Focus	Target Population	Data Provided
RELATED DISCIPLINES (Alphabetical order by field)						
Stone & Bailey (2007)	Business	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes	How well are conflict resolution skills used outside the class? (self-efficacy)	Juniors and Seniors in Business and Economics.	Yes n=140
Lucas & Cooper (2004)	Business	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes in Career	Does a student program improve entrepreneurial self-efficacy later?	Students at the University of Strathclyde	Yes n=55
Michlitsch & Sidle (2002)	Business	Survey	Quality of Outcome Assessment	Frequency of employment and perceived effectiveness of learning outcomes	Professors in U.S. Undergraduate Business Schools	Yes n=573
Yamarik (2007)	Economics	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes	What is the outcome difference between cooperative and lecture-based learning?	Intermediate Macroeconomics Students	Yes n=93
Tam (2006, 2007)	Education	Survey	Quality of Outcome Assessment	Relationship between university experience and learning outcomes – is the university meeting its objectives?	Students at Lingnan University in Hong Kong	Yes, 2 samples n=706 n=988

Table 1.  
*Continued*

<b>Source/ Year</b>	<b>Field</b>	<b>Mode of Data Collection</b>	<b>Inquiry</b>	<b>Focus</b>	<b>Target Population</b>	<b>Data Provided</b>
Lee (2006)	Education	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes	How vicarious student experiences are affected by strategies that promote effective learning	Introductory Education Technology Course –Large Midwestern University	Yes n=65
Champagne (2006)	Health	Survey	Curriculum Quality	Assessment of service learning requirements	Undergraduate Health Education Students	Yes n=12
Schwoerer et al. (2005)	Human Resource Development	Case Study Field Experiment	Learning Outcomes and Self-Efficacy in Career	How does training impact self-efficacy outcomes?	New recruits –individuals hired for summer work for independent contractor	Yes n=420
Carter (2002)	Human Resource Development	Field Experiment	Student Learning Outcomes and Self-Efficacy in Career	How can the relationship between cognitive ability and training methods be used to improve training outcomes?	Undergraduates in an introductory human resources management company	Yes n=93
Tracey et al. (2001)	Human Resource Development	Field Experiment Survey	Learning Outcomes and Self-Efficacy in Career	How do individual characteristics impact/affect training and learning outcomes?	Private organization managers (hotel industry). Both managerial trainees and supervisors	Yes n=420

Table 1.  
*Continued*

Source/ Year	Field	Mode of Data Collection	Inquiry	Focus	Target Population	Data Provided
Sullivan & Thomas (2007)	Psycho- logy	Case Study  Survey	Student Learning Outcomes/ Curriculum Quality	Measuring and demon- strating that under- graduate curriculum results in positive learning outcomes.	Department of Psychology – Southern Illinois University Edwardsville	Yes, qualitative and survey of post- grads n=229
Fenwick (2002)	Various	Survey	Student Learning Outcomes in Career	How does a Master’s program using problem- based learning develop skills?	MA – Harrington University (Canada)	Yes n=133 n=20 (follow up survey)

Attributing outcomes to education programs is challenging. Donald Kirkpatrick’s four-tier model for evaluating educational outcomes has been the dominant conceptual framework for more than three decades (Kirkpatrick, 1959, 1976, 1998). The literature in Table 1 predominately uses Kirkpatrick’s work as a foundation for outcome research. Kirkpatrick’s framework measures educational outcomes in four stages:

1. The students’ perceptions and assessments of program quality, at its conclusion.
2. The realized use of knowledge and skills in the workplace at some point after program completion.
3. Changes in work processes that are the result of students’ learned skills and knowledge.
4. Overall productivity increases in organizations where alumni are employed.

Hamblin (1974) has offered a fifth level: ultimate value. Later, Phillips (1997) refined Kirkpatrick’s model, by suggesting the monetary return on investment (ROI) as an additional level.

Time, resources, and analytical challenges have constrained outcome research. Outcome measurement in public service education rarely is evaluated beyond Kirkpatrick's second level, and infrequently it examines the impact of public service education on organizations or governance. Related literature focuses predominately on outcomes that directly and immediately emerge from public service education (Aristigueta & Gomes, 2006; Boyle & Whittaker, 2001; Castleberry, 2006; Cleary, 1990; Jennings, 1989; Nishishiba, Nelson, & Shinn, 2005; Williams, 2002; Yeager, Hildreth, Miller, & Rabin, 2007). Research in Table 1 from economics and education shows a similar focus (Lee, 2006; Michlitsch & Sidle, 2002; Yamarik, 2007). As mentioned, studies in the fields of human resource development and business offer some interesting insights. For example, this literature examines self-efficacy, an important concept that does not fit neatly into Kirkpatrick's model (Carter, 2002; Lucas & Cooper, 2004; Schwoerer, May, Hollensbe, & Mencl, 2005; Stone & Bailey, 2007). We will return to this concept in our Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education.

#### LOGIC MODEL OF PUBLIC SERVICE EDUCATION

Figure 1 is a logic model for public service education programs (for more on logic models, see McLaughlin & Jordan, 2004). A logic model is a useful tool to describe how a program is supposed to work, and can be used for evaluative purposes (McLaughlin & Jordan, 2004). Logic models are constructed to help all stakeholders understand and communicate about a program. In addition, these models can help identify areas of the program that need to be evaluated (Newcomer, 2008). A logic model traces the path of a program — from the components that go into a given program, to the intended outcomes of the program, and ultimately to its projected longer-term impacts. In this case, given the expected inputs and activities in public service education programs, the model offers expected outputs and short-, intermediate-, and longer-term outcomes (Wholey, 1983). *[See Figure 1]*

Reading from left to right, the logical progress flows from *inputs* — the people, resources, services, and standards of public service education — to the *activities* of public service education. Activities include an assessment of the mission and of collaborative projects between the school, community, and government. These inputs and activities are expected to result in *outputs* — changes that occur in both the students and faculty who are involved in public service education. Beginning at this stage, we have separated the faculty and student outputs, as well as short-term and intermediate outcomes, in order to indicate the more specific, intended aims of public service education and its effect on both students and faculty. These outputs result in public service education *outcomes*, in the short, intermediate, and longer-term.<sup>2</sup> The intended outcome of public service education is to add value to individuals and organizations — ultimately in the public interest. In order to point out

Figure 1.  
A Logic Model for Public Service Education

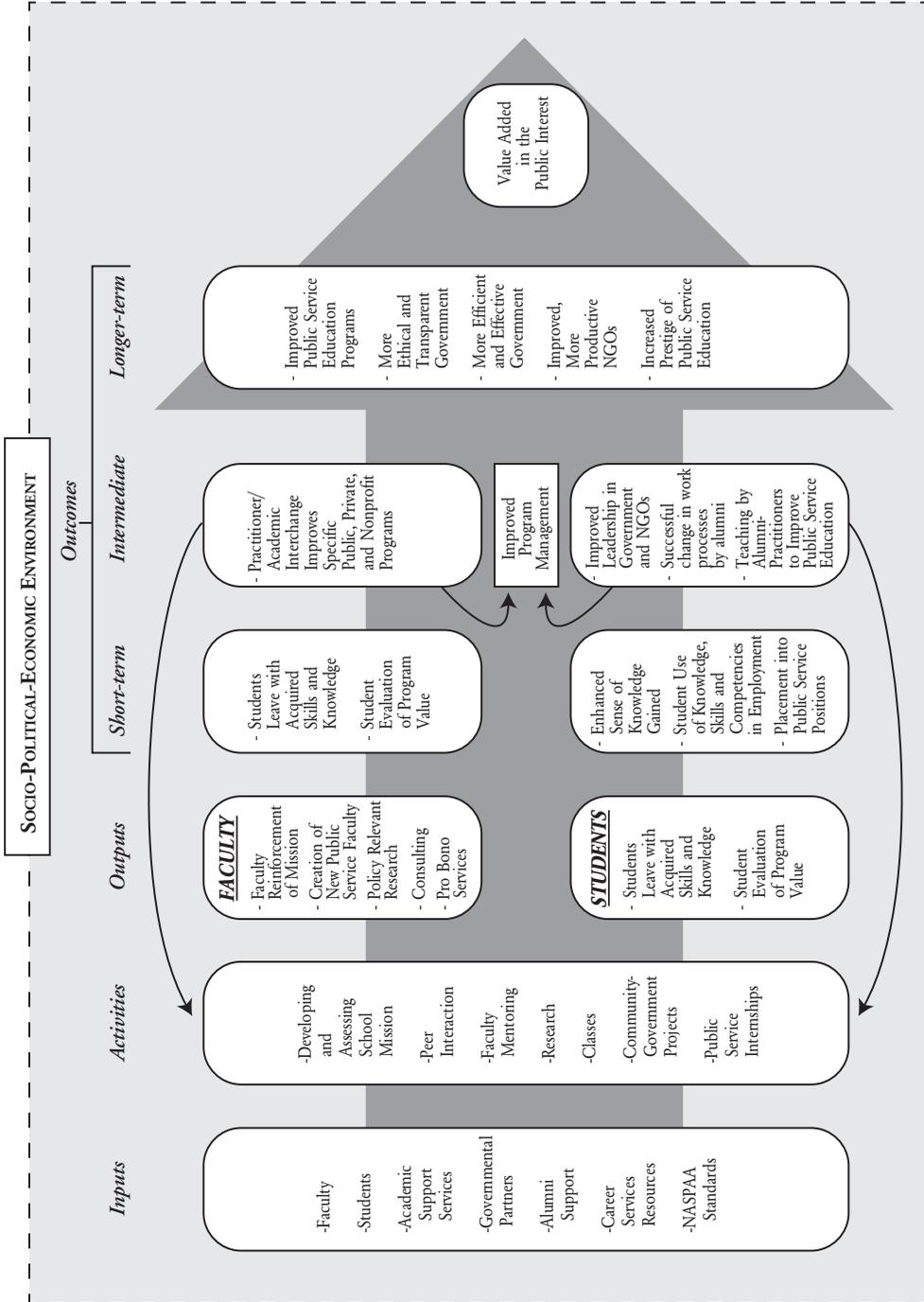
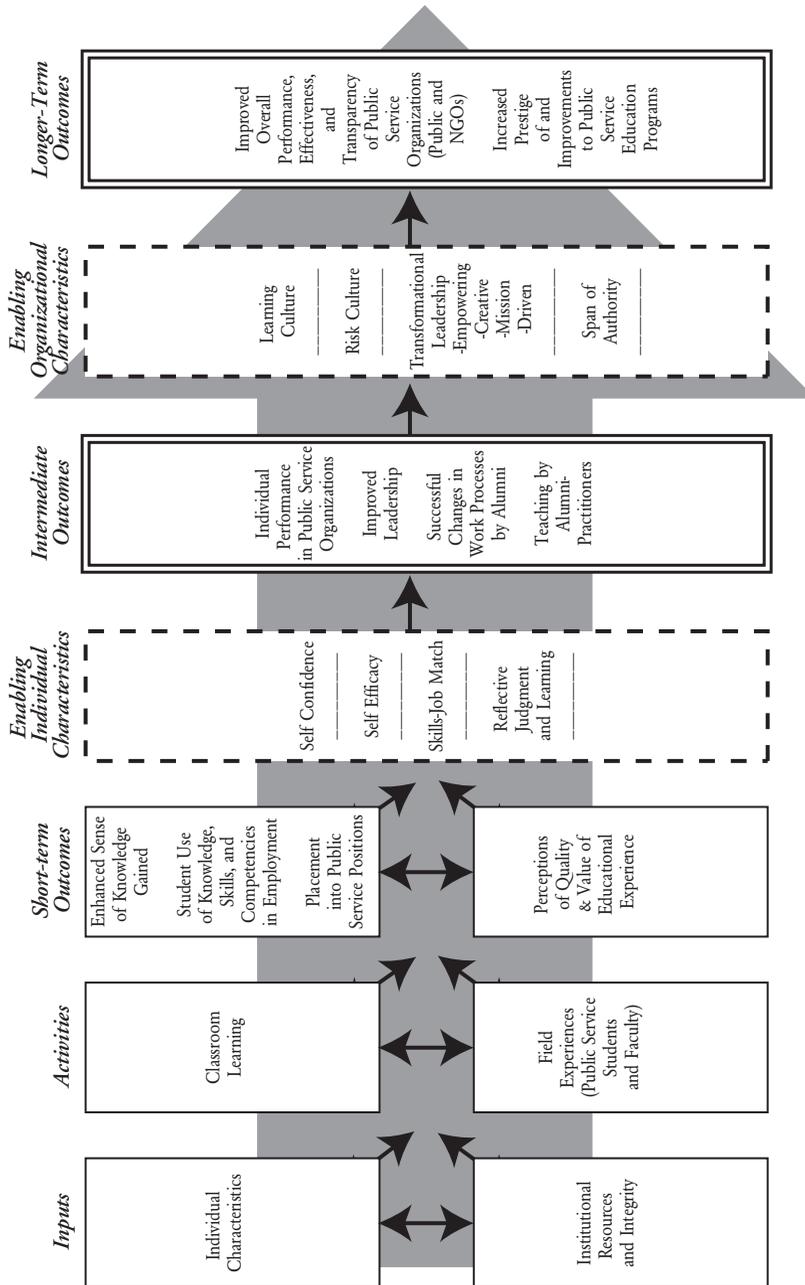


Figure 2.  
Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Affairs Education Model



their collaborative and integrated nature, longer-term outcomes do not separate students and faculty. This entire process is embedded in the *socio-political-economic environment*. Public service programs naturally are tied to contextual factors that surround public service.<sup>3</sup>

This logic model illustrates how we currently analyze outcomes of public service programs. As can be seen in Figure 1, Kirkpatrick's four levels relate respectively to characteristics listed in outputs (student perceptions of quality), short-term outcomes (using skills and knowledge), intermediate outcomes (improved leadership and processes in organizations), and longer-term outcomes (more efficient and effective government). While this model is useful in demonstrating the intended outcomes of public service education, given the inputs and activities of public service education, we feel that it can be refined in order to trace the learning outcomes for alumni of specific public service programs. The next section develops our Model of Learning Outcomes for students of public service education. In a sense, this model (provided in Figure 2) is an iteration of Figure 1 that also provides a framework to better assess the value that public service education adds for specific alumni. Figure 1 and Figure 2 are not mutually exclusive approaches to outcome assessment. However, we suggest that the nuances of the logic model in Figure 2 can improve our understanding of the intended learning outcomes for cohorts of alumni. *[See Figure 2]*

### *Model*

Figure 2 is quite similar in many ways to Figure 1. Both are logic models of public service education that highlight the intended outcomes of programs. However, the inputs and activities of Figure 2 are simplified so that they relate more specifically to the enabling characteristics, and only are applicable to program alumni (not faculty). By contrast, Figure 1 more broadly defines inputs and activities according to existing literature. The short-term, intermediate, and longer-term outcomes generally are analogous in the two models, but, again, Figure 2 details the steps between the short-term, intermediate, and longer-term outcomes only for program alumni.

Our conception of short-term, intermediate, and longer-term outcomes is similar to the approach Jennings (1989) took to measuring MPA outcomes. Much like his value-added approach, short-term outcomes are the changes in student skills and knowledge. Similar to his career success approach, the intermediate outcomes involve individual career progress. Finally, Jennings' impact approach (1989) evaluates "the impact of graduates on their organizations" (p. 442), which is a longer-term outcome in the Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education. Also, this model attempts to remedy Holton's (1996) criticism that Kirkpatrick's four-level model failed to provide linkages between the various levels. To gauge the contribution of our programs, we judge that Figure 2 is a more useful logic model than Figure 1.

In the Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education, *inputs* include individual and institutional characteristics that impact *activities*, including classroom and field learning. These inputs and activities result in *short-term outcomes*: changes in an individual's knowledge, skills, and abilities at the completion of her/his public service education. Short-term outcomes also include the student's perception of his or her educational experience. The crucial next phase in the Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education is *enabling individual characteristics*. Enabling individual characteristics affect *intermediate outcomes*. As in Figure 1, these intermediate outcomes include individual performance in public service organizations, as well as improved leadership by alumni. The key intermediary step of *enabling organizational characteristics* lies between intermediate and longer-term outcomes. Finally, *longer-term outcomes* show the ultimate aims of public service education: for example, to improve the overall performance and effectiveness of public service organizations.

As pictured in Figure 2, this Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education elaborates the steps — termed as *enabling characteristics* — between short-term, intermediate, and longer-term outcomes. *Enabling characteristics are those factors intrinsic to an individual or an organization that are not taught or learned directly through a public service education program*. Certainly, these characteristics may in some way be shaped by public service graduate education, but usually they are not explicitly taught by faculty and/or learned by alumni.

For example, while successful individual performance in a public service organization (intermediate outcome) is intended to result in the improved overall performance of public service organizations (longer-term outcome), other factors that mediate this pathway include the organizational learning culture, as well as the capabilities and abilities of the organization's leadership. These enabling organizational characteristics *may* be influenced by the inputs and activities (or intermediate outcomes) of public service education, but this is not necessarily the case. Therefore, so far as these characteristics (both individual and organizational) are *not* influenced by public service education programs, we suppose that their relative levels mediate the intended intermediate and longer-term outcomes of public service education. This hypothetically would mean that, even if the knowledge, skills, and abilities gained by alumni of a public service program are excellent, their moderate levels of self-confidence and self-efficacy will moderate performance in a public service organization. Similarly, even when there is excellent individual performance in public service organizations (from excellent public service graduate education), if the risk culture of these organizations is not supportive of calculated risk-taking, then they are less likely to improve. We return to this notion in the next major section, by discussing how it may be possible or even desirable to directly address these enabling characteristics through program and curriculum changes.

*A Key Concept in Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education:  
Enabling Characteristics*

Enabling characteristics are a fundamental concept that has been absent from outcome assessment in public service education. Enabling individual and organizational characteristics can help explain to what extent public service education adds value to students, organizations, and governance. For example, despite achieving intended short-term outcomes, public service alumni may not perform well in their careers. And even if public service alumni are successful in the workforce, organizational performance may not improve. By analyzing the enabling individual and organizational characteristics, respectively, we can achieve a better understanding of the impact of public service education, and see where value is or is not being added.

In business literature, these individual characteristics are frequently termed as “transfer” characteristics, and they are linked to individual and organizational innovation and achievement (see Brown & Reed, 2002; Ford, Quiñones, Sego, & Sorra, 1992). Enabling individual characteristics influence an individual’s capability to successfully apply the knowledge, skills, and abilities he or she has attained in a public service education program. Ford et al. (1992) cite self-efficacy and personal ability as such characteristics. Self-efficacy has been a common topic in outcome assessment outside public service education; it can be defined as the “willingness to act in an entrepreneurial way, to identify and seize opportunities” (Gecas, 1989; Lucas & Cooper, 2004, p.4) in a particular context (in this case, public service). Individual self-efficacy is closely related to an individual’s perception of and comfort with his or her own knowledge, skills, and abilities — what we term as “self-confidence” (Lucas & Cooper, 2004). Another enabling individual characteristic is that of reflective judgment and learning. Brinkerhoff & Apking (2001) suggest that the individual must reflect on his or her experiences in order for knowledge and skills to be employed and learned (also see Knowles, 1990; Tse, 2007). Emerging from this, the Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education also lists a job-skills match as an enabling factor. In a rapidly changing public service sector, appropriate employment for a given alumnus and other enabling individual characteristics are likely to be crucial facilitators of success. These four, key enabling individual characteristics help us to understand why — despite the realization of short-term outcomes — intended intermediate outcomes may not be achieved.<sup>4</sup> In other words, it explains why public service education may not be adding value to students and organizations.

Enabling organizational characteristics function similarly, by connecting intermediate and longer-term outcomes. Ford et al. (1992) note that culture is an important organizational factor: It can influence whether individual job performance impacts organizational performance. This Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education offers both learning culture and

risk culture as characteristics that enable longer-term outcomes (see Kee & Newcomer, 2008). If the public service organization encourages and facilitates learning and calculated risk-taking, it is more likely that achievements of alumni will result in overall organizational improvement. Furthermore, transformational leadership in an organization is vital to non-profit and public organizational change (Kee & Newcomer, 2008). Leaders must be empowering, creative, and driven by a common mission to transform public service organizations. Furthermore, intuitively, they must allow their employees (public service alumni) sufficient authority, in order for individual performance to influence organizational performance. Enabling organizational characteristics help explain the way that intermediate outcomes of public service education add value to public service organizations.

Given this new Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education and the concepts of enabling individual and organizational characteristics, how can practitioners use the model to inform outcome assessment in public service education? In other words, what can be done for Public Service Education with this Model of Learning Outcomes? More importantly, how can it be used to improve public service education?

#### MODEL OF LEARNING OUTCOMES FOR PUBLIC SERVICE EDUCATION: MOVING FORWARD

##### *Value of the Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education*

The dialogue about outcome assessment needs to move toward evaluating the value added by public service programs to students, organizations, and governance. The Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education helps explain the way that public service education adds this value. It provides a framework to explain why appropriate curriculum and short-term outcomes do not necessarily mean that intermediate and longer-term outcomes will be attained (see Salas & Cannon-Bowers, 2001).

Public service practitioners acknowledge that different categories of students (e.g., full- and part-time) may have different outcomes: All data gain meaning through comparison (e.g., see Mason, 2002; Shadish, Cook, & Campbell, 2002). In the same way, the model presented here posits that varied enabling individual characteristics could result in varied intermediate outcomes. And, varied enabling organizational characteristics could result in varied longer-term outcomes. These characteristics both facilitate and hinder the value-added impact of public service education. How can we develop evaluations to assess these enabling characteristics?

##### *Developing Assessment Tools*

In public service education, assessments of graduate students and alumni

employers frequently take place (see Aristigueta & Gomes, 2006; Boyle & Whitaker, 2001; Cleary, 1990; Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009; Tam, 2007). Complete evaluations clearly identify the span of success throughout a diverse group of alumni (see Brinkerhoff & Apking, 2001). Crafted thoughtfully, these assessments also can be used to indicate the presence and absence of enabling characteristics.

While surveying is a common and useful technique, surveys frequently have been criticized for being incomplete and for assessing *perceptions* of a construct, rather than the construct itself (Jennings, 1989; Lee & Pershing, 2002). But, in order to capture enabling characteristics — due to their relative and subjective nature — evaluating perceptions is vitally important. A survey to evaluate the outcomes of public service education should be designed to gather data, not only from alumni, but also from other stakeholders such as employers, so that a variety of perspectives about enabling individual and organizational factors are captured.

Questions about enabling characteristics systematically can be included in performance surveys: It is possible to survey alumni about their self-confidence or to survey organizations about whether they have transformational leaders. Survey tools can ask questions about self-confidence, self-efficacy, skills-job match, reflective judgment, and the perceived impact of these factors on work performance. The results may be incredibly useful to illustrate the previously undeveloped enabling factors that either hinder or facilitate alumni in using the skills, knowledge, and abilities they gained from a program. For example, students may respond that their organizational culture facilitates the application of specific performance-measurement skills that were learned in an MPA program. The same applies to enabling characteristics at the organizational level: Surveys can be used to examine perceptions about an organization's culture, individual span of authority, and transformational leadership. The results are likely to offer information about organizational characteristics that are either impeding or contributing to organizational change. Questions can be asked directly, "How would you evaluate your skills in facilitating change?" or indirectly, "When completing an important project using skills and knowledge that you acquired in your public service program, how confident are you when sharing this project with your peers and superiors?"

Faculty should think strategically when they design assessment processes, in order to develop tools that identify the interaction between enabling characteristics, and the skills and knowledge imparted by public service programs. Questions must be created to systematically tease out the relative impact that these enabling characteristics have on outcome measures. Where possible, evaluations should use comparison groups to simulate the control of key factors. For example, an evaluation could survey alumni with similar knowledge, skills, and abilities, and ask whether they feel as if their skills are a good fit for their employment position. In further analysis, those who believed their job-skill match was appropriate could be compared to those who did

not. Ideally, this would help tease out the impact of enabling characteristics on intermediate outcome measures.<sup>5</sup> In other words, it would enable public service educators to evaluate how much value their programs do or don't add to students and organizations.

### *Improving Public Service Education*

The question then becomes the following: How can we translate this knowledge about enabling characteristics into improved public service education programs? Admittedly, the value of this Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education relies, in part, on the assumption that enabling characteristics can be targeted and improved upon through changes in the inputs and activities of public service education programs. While it is useful to know if a public service education program has not achieved its desired outcomes due to factors beyond the program's scope, it is not satisfying. The purpose of rigorous outcome assessment is to improve public service programs.

We offer two hypothetical examples (one individual, one organizational) of how the Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education could be applied to improve public service education programs. First, it is clear that students have varying levels of enabling individual characteristics before they enter a program. If the public service curriculum previously has been extremely successful in outcome evaluations, students could be pre-screened for these enabling characteristics. Perhaps an assessment center or a case study interview could be used for admission evaluation (see Jennings, 1989). Second, our model suggests that organizational characteristics may impede the achievement of longer-term outcomes (organizational improvement). There are many ways that public service faculty can contribute to public and private organizations (Smith, 2007). If alumni continually express that organizations are inflexible and do not readily adapt or adjust as needed, program standards and expectations could be adapted to ensure that more faculty-practitioner collaboration occurs. Programs also could educate students on ways to be effective in this type of organizational environment.

As NASPAA moves to even more mission-based accreditation, with new standards set to be finalized in October 2009, there will be higher expectations for programs to demonstrate how they produce mission-based outcomes, and to what extent. A critical precondition for accreditation review is that "the mission, governance, and curriculum shall demonstrably emphasize public values" (NASPAA, 2009, p.2). Programs will be expected to clarify how they contribute to the furtherance of values such as "...ethical behavior and transparency; and the public interest and social equity" (NASPAA, 2009, p.2). Furthermore, the new standard regarding a mission statement specifically states that a program mission should include "the contributions it intends to produce to advance the knowledge, research and practice of public affairs, administration and policy"

(NASPAA, 2009, p.4).

In the rationale provided for the standards of a mission and the expectations for an ongoing evaluation of achieving mission-based outcomes, NASPAA clarifies “the expectation that the Program will evolve and improve reflects NASPAA’s commitment to public values of responsiveness and sustainability. In this way, NASPAA’s accreditation process promotes public values as the heart of the discipline” (NASPAA, 2009, p.4). Indeed, adding value to governance in the public interest is exactly what makes the public service discipline unique, and our programs are expected to measure how well they accomplish this worthy objective. Such evaluations need to be “approached creatively” to help programs provide useful answers to themselves, as well as to outside stakeholders (Durant, 2002, p.194).

## CONCLUSION

This paper has set the stage for the Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education by offering a literature review and a logic model of public service education (shown in Table 1 and Figure 1). The Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education offers an improved theoretical understanding of the ways that public service education adds value in the public interest (Figure 2). Finally, we have recommended how this new model can be used to inform outcome assessment per NASPAA standards, and to improve public service education programs.

Enabling characteristics deserve substantial research, specifically in relation to public service education. Public service educators need to utilize various evaluation techniques, and do so rigorously (see Carter, 2002; Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009; Schworer et al., 2005; Tracey, Hinkin, Tannenbaum, Mathieu, & Black, 2001). Public service education programs need to consistently measure the right things, in the right way, to ensure that outcome assessment is credible. Furthermore, public service education needs to be creative and proactive in recognizing and dealing with the enabling characteristics in program curriculum — a topic that this paper has only touched upon.

There is no doubt that it will be costly to measure the intermediate and longer-term outcomes of public service education. But if public service educators do not understand the way that public service education achieves intermediate and longer-term outcomes, then it will be difficult to assess whether our programs are truly working in the public interest. Due to many contextual factors, it is impossible to *prove* that public service education has added value to individuals, organizations, and governance in the public interest. However, with improved outcome evaluation, we may be able to *plausibly attribute* the added value to public service education programs. It is not easy to judge the quality of our contributions to public service education and, subsequently, to the common good, but it is a worthy objective. The Model of Learning Outcomes for Public Service Education takes a step toward attaining this goal.

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### FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> The articles from other disciplines are listed as examples. We acknowledge the differences between public service education and other professional education, but outcome measurement — if adapted appropriately — can be used across disciplines and cultures. In addition, public service education should compare itself, where possible, to other fields, in order to gauge progress in outcome evaluation.
- <sup>2</sup> The arrows in the model are learning loops, and suggest that intermediate outcomes also can improve public service education activities, as organizational processes improve.
- <sup>3</sup> This logic model is intended to be illustrative of most public service education programs. However, the examples cited throughout the model are not meant to be exhaustive or exclusive.

- 4 These enabling characteristics were determined during a thorough literature review, and by practitioner intuition about public service education students. Other characteristics found in future theoretical and empirical research (but not mentioned here) justifiably can be included.
- 5 Both qualitative and quantitative data collection techniques are likely to be appropriate. Educational outcome measurement is complex; it is unlikely that causality will ever be certain.

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