
NASPAA as a Global Accreditor

Policy Brief

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By Laurel McFarland¹

NASPAA² was created 45 years ago, by a group of graduate schools of public administration and affairs, interested in advancing quality in this vital sector of professional graduate education. Organized as a nonprofit organization (NGO), it was independent of the government, and like most quality assurance organizations in the American tradition of higher education, it did not receive funding or regulation by the government. It essentially operated as a “club” of universities sharing a common interest in quality.

Its stated mission then, as now, is “to ensure excellence in education and training for public service and to promote the ideal of public service.” In the first decade of its existence, NASPAA gained experience in quality assurance, and on October 3, 1986, the Board of the [predecessor of] the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA) granted NASPAA recognition as a specialized accrediting agency.³ Now itself an internationally-oriented quality assurance body, CHEA fully recognized NASPAA without conditions in 2014 as a global accrediting agency for public policy, administration, and affairs education for a period of 10 years, until its next review in 2024.

NASPAA became an international membership organization in 2009, the same year a four year-long effort to overhaul accreditation standards was completed. The guidelines for membership, and the accreditation standards were both aligned with goals of globalization. Public affairs schools from any country were granted the same opportunities and responsibilities of membership, and the same standards and processes for accreditation. Since that time, NASPAA has added dozens of members from five continents to its membership roster.

The Emergence of Global Accreditation

Public Affairs education has not led the higher education field into global accreditation. Several other graduate education fields, pushed by their own globalizing professions, have developed international accreditation entities, typically evolving from American accrediting bodies into global enterprises. The models have varied by profession, including the creation of global compacts, accords, and self-standing incorporated entities. Business, engineering, and psychology have been some of the most prominent professions to develop global accreditation programs.

The value of global accreditation has long been established in business. As Urgel (2007) argues, the main value-added of global business accreditation derives from the interconnected assessment of the quality of the school against standards, the branding facilitated by the accredited status, and the program improvement that comes from self study and site visits. He argues the advantage stemming from this interwoven set of benefits is unique to accreditation and “unobtainable by any other means.”

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² NASPAA—the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration—was first incorporated as the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration. A name change to reflect its international mission was approved by membership on March 1, 2013.

³ CHEA is an independent, nongovernmental body funded by universities and fees.
<http://www.chea.org/pdf/Overview%20of%20US%20Accreditation%202012.pdf>

The Purpose of Global Accreditation

NASPAA's mission as a global accreditor has several aspects, some common to global accreditors across graduate education, and some unique to NASPAA as an accreditor of public service graduate programs.

Common goals of global accreditors:

1. **Seek harmony in quality assurance approaches.** Quality assurance (QA) processes and approaches come in many forms, each offering certain advantages and limitations. Often the various options set up social and institutional tensions between conflicting goals. In a global higher education context, some of these tensions are accentuated. Accreditation represents an orderly approach to balancing and resolving the tension in quality assurance. This is especially true of global accreditation.

Scholarship on global accreditation in engineering has identified two axes of tension in QA. The first is the tension inherent in the *purpose* of accreditation, between improvement and accountability. Recent literature suggests that there is more "pull" than ever from public pressure for accountability. As the "massification" of higher education has continued in a number of countries-- while budget constraints have kept public subsidies from rising in sync-- students have had to bear more of the costs, and universities have become more entrepreneurial and competitive. As Perellon (2007) notes, in a global market for higher education, particularly where the student bears the brunt of the cost, cross-national comparability of degrees is important. So there is a desire for comparable structures and procedures of quality assurance, and global accreditation serves that need well⁴.

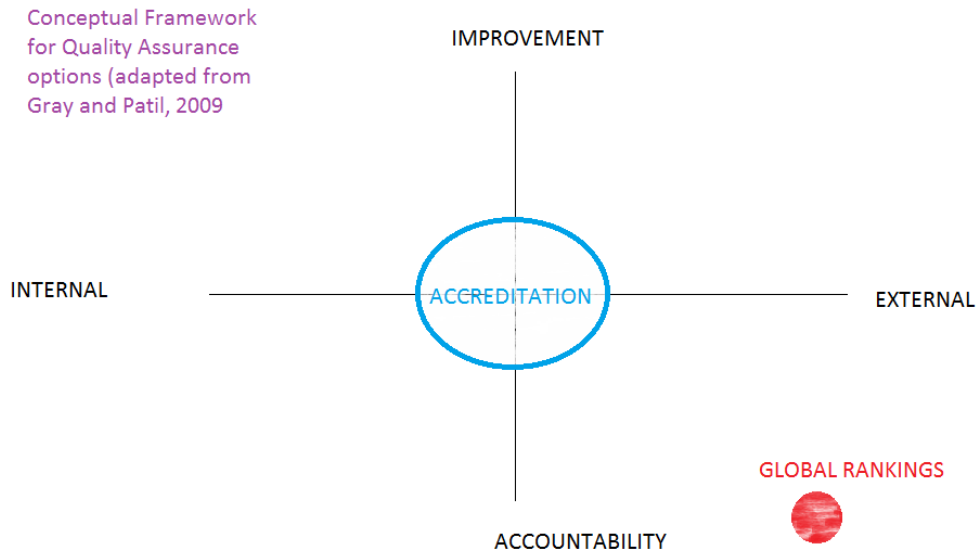
The second axis denotes the tension regarding *ownership* of the process, between internal stakeholders (especially the universities) and the external stakeholders (the public and the student "consumers" of the education services).

As Gray and Patil (2009) render it (please see illustration below), the axes can be graphically depicted as continua between the polar extremes of total internal ownership/control of the process by insiders (especially universities) and total control by outsiders such as the public and media, *and* between the polar extremes of accountability vs. improvement as the sole goal of a QA process. The authors note, "It is especially important to appreciate the range of quality assurance approaches that are available in higher education because recent developments have focused the discussion on the extreme ends of the two continua." (p. 299)

NASPAA accreditation, like other global accreditors, is a search for harmony between these poles. Unlike the QA approach of global rankings, such as *QS* and *Times Higher Education* which would be placed as shown (below) as an extreme case (focusing everything on public media presentation for accountability and competitive purposes), accreditation finds more balance along these control and purpose continua, and resides at the center of the conceptual diagram (below).

⁴ Juan Perellon, "Analysing Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Proposals for a Conceptual Framework and Methodological Implications," in Westerheijden, Don, Bjorn Stensaker, and Maria Joao Rosa (Eds), *Quality Assurance in Higher Education: Trends in Regulation, Translation, and Transformation*, 2007, p. 174-175.

In practical terms, this means the global accreditation process serves both internal and external concerns, and generates information useful for program improvement and accountability to government and consumers.



2. Facilitate international mobility and exchange.

Several accreditors have cited mobility as a motivation for broadening and deepening their global accreditation programs. As Bullock and Hall (2008) document, the move toward global accreditation of professional psychology programs was powerfully influenced by the desire of psychologists to study and work in where they would like, and where opportunities were greatest. At the same time, work flowed across borders as health and counselling services began to be delivered across distances.⁵

Management education is one of the “the most exposed academic disciplines” to the rising internationalization of its profession. Schere et al (2005) argue that the field of business is undergoing unprecedented changes due to “...globalization, technology transformation, new forms of competition, and increased emphasis on managerial competency.” In pursuit of profitable opportunities, businesspeople want to flow where the business is, regardless of location. And they want their skills and credentials recognized wherever they go. They also frequently wish to study where the opportunities are.

In the case of public affairs education, the last three decades have seen steep increases in the number of students studying outside their home countries. There are some important restrictions and opportunities for mobility in public service—a number of countries, for example, limit civil service opportunities to citizens only. Conversely, since public service is not a

⁵ Merry Bullock and Judy Hall, “The Promotion of International Mobility” in Hall, Judy and Elizabeth Altmaier (Eds), *Global Promise: Quality Assurance and Accountability in Professional Psychology*, 2008, p216.

licensed profession (as medicine, law, professional psychology and clinical social work are), MPAs and MPPs do not need to go through elaborate credential recognition reviews or obtain a new license when they cross borders.

Like all mobile graduate students, public affairs students want to study where they can best prepare for their desired career: seeking to emulate the “Korean economic development miracle”, students interested in economic development from around the world might seek to study in South Korea. Globally accredited programs are able to communicate concisely and authoritatively that their program reliably serves the mobile student in search of quality.

Similarly, globally accredited programs also communicate clearly to potential partner programs that the credits and competencies attained within the degree program can be more readily recognized in joint degree or exchange programs with other accredited institutions. While accreditation does not provide a “full faith and credit” guarantee, it certainly speeds the process, and lowers the cost and effort of constructing exchanges and joint degree programs across borders.

3. **Ensure that global accreditation is a dynamic, learning enterprise.** By entering into the accreditation process, a school helps to transform the process. This is because of the role of peer review and a peer review-driven process. Though a global accrediting agency may have its roots in a single country, as schools from other countries participate in accreditation, they bring new examples and insights regarding quality... different missions... new ways of measuring student learning... alternative public service values.. and different employment opportunities for graduates. NASPAA has committed to learn and adapt to lessons provided by the schools pursuing global accreditation.

Goals Unique to quality in public affairs education

4. **Public problems cross borders.** Global accreditation takes account of that. The 2004 Tsunami affected eight countries profoundly, and a dozen others suffered serious damage. The management of the disaster recovery demanded the highest skills and public service commitment, but it also benefited from those with an ability to work across borders, leading and managing recovery across many jurisdictions, policies, and funding sources.

Countries may have different political and governmental structures, but they share a common need to serve both their domestic population, and grapple with problems that transcend borders. Global accreditation in public affairs serves that purpose.

5. **Define and recognize “globally-engaged” public affairs schools.** As referenced above, one of the chief purposes of global accreditation is to serve globalized higher education. Some NASPAA schools feature high percentages of overseas students and faculty, their curriculum knows no borders, and their research is aimed at the international market. Some global accreditors, in fact, require significant internationalization of a program before it is eligible for review. (Business schools seeking accreditation from EQUIS, for example, “... must demonstrate not only high general quality in all dimensions of their activities, but also a high degree of internationalisation. With companies recruiting worldwide, with students choosing to get their

education outside their home countries, and with schools building alliances across borders and continents, there is a rapidly growing need for them to be able to identify those institutions in other countries that deliver high quality education in international management.”)⁶

While business management education has been internationalizing at a rapid pace, the pace within public administration and public policy has been more uneven. Certainly those public problems that transcend borders create a demand for internationalized programs, and a number of public affairs schools have moved to internationalize their programs to prepare their students to address them. Public affairs schools are globally-engaged for a purpose, not solely because the profession for which they are preparing students has globalized.

However, many prominent schools have not intentionally globalized their curriculum, and their curricula remain focused on serving a regional or national market for its graduates. However, even those schools have discovered that the skills demanded of their graduates have “internationalized”—even at the local level. Many local government functions now arise from the actions of networks of public servants, private consultants, contractors, and NGOs, some of whom reside continents away. Insight into data analysis of public services now comes from many countries, and even domestically-focused programs find they need to engage globally to tap into the best research for use in the classroom.

Thus, NASPAA global accreditation encourages not just “internationalized” programs, but rather “globally-engaged” programs to participate. The degree of internationalization provides just one indicator of the potential usefulness of global accreditation to a particular institution.

Participation in NASPAA global accreditation is by design and spirit, *voluntary*. Each program needs to examine itself and develop its own rationale for its desire to be a globally-engaged institution, and to participate in a global accreditation process.

NASPAA, through its Memoranda of Understanding with regional associations of public affairs schools, in Latin America, Canada, Europe, and Eastern Europe/former Soviet republics, has also pledged to assist those regions, and in some cases countries within those regions, as they develop their own domestic accreditation and evaluation programs, often for a burgeoning number of public affairs programs within their borders. Global accreditation is *not for all*, or even most, schools in a region. It is primarily for a limited number of schools who have reflected on their mission, faculty and students, resources, and outcomes, and find that they can truly benefit from a global accreditation process and the accreditation status, if awarded.

6. **Provide a common means for schools around the world to explore and articulate public service values.** NASPAA requires this in its standards (“NASPAA expects an accredited program to be explicit about the public service values to which it gives priority; to clarify the ways in which it embeds these values in its internal governance; and to demonstrate that its students learn the tools and competencies to apply and take these values into consideration in their professional activities.”)⁷ But though every school articulates its public service values differently, it creates a common discussion for the relationship between quality in public affairs education and satisfying the demands of public service. Ethics. Social harmony. Fiscal sustainability.

⁶ <https://www.efmd.org/accreditation-main/equis>

⁷ <https://naspaaccreditation.files.wordpress.com/2014/05/standard-one-text-ssi.pdf>

Transparency. Social welfare. Social equity. These public service values run deep currents through curricula and the public role of the school on the campus and in its community. They are not universal to every program, but the mosaic of practice across public affairs schools makes a vital contribution to our global understanding of quality in public service education.

7. **Reinforce the transformative effects of public affairs schools.** Public affairs degrees around the world share a common basis: they exist separate and apart from business management or generic management degrees for a reason.

The universal competencies contained in NASPAA standards articulate part of that reason: because graduates are expected to be able to go out and do what the jobs in public service require: to analyze, synthesize, think critically, and then solve *public* problems. To serve others, and work with all the members of a community to advance the public good. This is not about business and profit-making. It is about meeting human and social need and the need of future generations. Every country that possesses distinct public affairs degree programs recognizes and celebrates that distinction from generic management education. These schools are educating graduates competent to serve the public.

The other part of the reason is the public purpose of the school of public affairs itself. NASPAA accreditation encourages schools to articulate the contribution of the degree program, the faculty, its research output, the student body, to the public good. Schools of public affairs provide a visible platform on university campuses for the discussion of public problems and providing research- and evidence-based suggestions for their solution. Through the self study and site visit, NASPAA global accreditation encourages schools wherever they are to reflect on their collective role in advancing the public good through its people and research.

Conclusion

NASPAA's role as a global accreditor in public policy and affairs education has its roots in some of the same forces moving other professions in that direction: responding to a globalizing profession, providing a valuable and balanced source of quality assurance, enhancing mobility for the profession and for students, and committing to an ongoing, flexible two-way learning environment for truly globalizing the accreditation process. At the same time NASPAA's global accreditation process demonstrates some features unique to our field, reflecting the influence of public service values and social purpose of globally-engaged schools of public affairs to train the next generation of public servant and pursue the public good.

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