# Models for Assessment of MPA Student Learning[1]
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The revised NASPAA standards propose that accredited MPA programs will demonstrate their students' learning on the required and elective outcomes. The required outcomes include:
- to manage in public organizations;
- to participate in and contribute to the policy process
- to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions; and
- to communicate and interact in diverse groups and in diverse settings.

There are many types of approaches to, or models of, assessment of student learning at the MPA program level. Once program faculty have selected the learning outcomes (competencies) that they expect MPA students to master, and the levels of performance required (benchmarks), then the faculty need a way to assess student performance. What do we expect students to know and be able to do? How well do we expect them to know it and be able to demonstrate it? What types of evidence can we gather of student performance? How will we judge evidence of student competency?

Some of the more typical plans or models of assessment of student learning on these required outcomes are illustrated below. None of these models are "perfect," nor are any of them illustrative of the "one best way" to assess student learning. However, they should provide a range of options for MPA programs choosing how to assess student learning outcomes, generally at the culmination of the student's academic program.

There are a number of types or models of assessment that gather evidence about student performance at the end of the academic program. These are referred to as "summative" assessment. After the student performance has been assessed, there are no opportunities for improvement. Some of these final or summative assessments are called "high-stakes" because the student's entire academic degree depends on achieving a passing mark, for example, in final comprehensive exams.

Other types of assessment gather evidence about student performance at intervals across the student's academic program. These are referred to as "formative" assessment. One example is to ask students to turn in a rough draft of a term paper two-thirds of the way through the course and provide students with feedback that allows them to improve the paper before the final version is due at the end of the course. Eventually, however, a final (or summative) assessment will be necessary to demonstrate the cumulative learning of students on each specified outcome.

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[1] Adapted from *Examples and Analysis of Selected Assessment Plan Models*, Graduate Studies Office, California State University San Bernardino, http://gradstudies.csusb.edu/outcome/analysis.html

**Model 1: A CAPSTONE COURSE**

A capstone course can help students to integrate their knowledge of management in public organizations and to demonstrate their ability to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions. One (or more) opportunities should be provided to students to allow them to demonstrate their learning and their level of mastery of the required competencies, for example, a case study

**1. Student Learning Outcome (Competency):** Students are expected to demonstrate:
- understanding of major concepts in the management of public organizations, and
- ability analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions.

**2. Student Work (Evidence):** A written case study that requires students to examine a controversial initiative proposed for adoption at some level of government (e.g., pay for performance), identify the inherent management issues and problems, and proposes one or more approaches or solutions to the controversy.

**3. Evaluation Criteria**: Student work will be evaluated on three criteria: 1) problems and issues are correctly identified; 2) appropriate concepts in the management of public organizations are considered; and 3) one or more reasonable approaches or solutions are described.
The scoring sheet can take the form of a rubric that specifies what is expected on each of the three dimensions of evaluation (issues, concepts, and solutions) in terms of varying levels of performance. For example, each case study can be ranked on each dimension as below expectations, meets expectations, or exceeds expectations (see sample Rubric #1). Faculty may also set goals or benchmarks for the entire group of case studies, for example, that no work will be scored as below expectations on more than one dimension, or that at least 25% of students will be scored as exceeds expectations on at least one dimension.

**4. Assessment methods:** The case study is submitted once in draft form at the midpoint of the course and the student receives feedback based on the rubric. The written paper is submitted a second time at the end of the course, and the student receives a grade on the assignment. After completion of the course, a sample of case studies is drawn and reviewed by a faculty group that rates them using the scoring rubric as below expectations, meets expectations, or exceeds expectations.

**5. Time Frame:** The capstone course is offered once per year in the spring. Students take the capstone in their final semester. Assessment of student work will take place in the summer. Results will be presented at the first faculty meeting of the fall.

**6. Who will do the Assessment?** Department Chair and appointed faculty Committee will obtain a representative sample of case studies and carry out the assessment activities.

**7. Type of Feedback:** The faculty Committee analyses the evidence and reports it to the full faculty, summarizing student performance on each outcome being assessed, e.g., percentage of students judged as below expectations, meets expectations, or exceeds expectations on each of the three criteria (identification of issues, selection of appropriate management concepts, and elaboration of one or more reasonable approaches or solutions).

**8. How data will be used to improve program or revise curricula?** The department will meet as a whole to discuss findings. For areas where students did not meet faculty expectations, actions will be recommended to improve student success.

## Model 2. COMPREHENSIVE EXAMS

Comprehensive exams allow students to demonstrate their mastery of the theoretical concepts and practical knowledge taught in the MPA program. With well-crafted questions, comprehensive exams can elicit both the analytical and the integrative abilities of students. Comprehensive exams can be structured in a variety of ways, as individual sit-down, closed book exams, as semester-long group reading and writing projects, as take-home data sets to be analyzed, and so forth.

**1. Student Learning Outcome (Competency):** Students are expected to demonstrate their ability to participate in and contribute to the policy process. Specifically, students are expected to be able to describe the policymaking process, including defining the problem, setting the agenda, formulating policy, implementing policy, and evaluating policy.

**2. Student Work (Evidence):** Students will individually write a timed, two-hour response to an examination question on a policy problem, in a proctored room with no access to books or notes.

**3. Evaluation Criteria:** Students will demonstrate their ability to 1) describe the correct stage of the policymaking process (defining the problem, setting the agenda, formulating policy, implementing policy, and evaluating policy) and 2) explain the important actions that must be accomplished at this step before proceeding to the next step.

The scoring sheet can take the form of a rubric that specifies what is expected on each of the two dimensions of identifying the correct step in the policymaking process and describing the important actions to be taken. On each of these two dimensions, student work can be evaluated as below expectations, meets expectations, or exceeds expectations (see sample Rubric #2). Faculty may also set goals or benchmarks for the entire group of examination question responses, for example, that less than 10% of essays will be evaluated as below expectations on both dimensions, or that at least 15% of students will be scored as exceeds expectations on both dimensions.

**4. Assessment Methods:** Faculty experts in the field will evaluate all student answers to the comprehensive exam question using the rubric, and assign a score of below expectations, meets expectations, or exceeds expectations on each of the two evaluation criteria.

**5. Time Frame:** The comprehensive examination is administered once each semester (fall and spring). At the end of each administration, a faculty committee will evaluate each answer.

**6. Who will do the assessment?** Faculty experts in the field will evaluate the student responses and assign a score (below, at, above expectations) to each answer.

**7. Type of Feedback (Data):** The expert faculty group analyses the evidence (student responses to the comprehensive exam question) and reports it to the full faculty, summarizing student performance (e.g., percentage of students judged as below, at, or above expectations on each of the two dimensions).

**8. How will data be used to improve program or revise curriculum?** The department will meet as a whole to discuss findings. Results will be explained in terms of student strengths and weakness in each of the subject areas covered by the comprehensive examination and each of the evaluation dimensions. Where students did not meet faculty expectations, actions will be recommended to improve student success.

**Model 3.  ASSESSING COMPETENCY USING A STANDARDIZED TEST**
A standardized test can provide students with the opportunity to demonstrate their knowledge as well as their critical thinking skills.  A standardized test offers not only an individual score but also an indication of where the performance ranks compared to a national database (e.g., percentile rank).  Even if the test results are not used for assigning student grades, the scores and percentile rankings can provide information relevant to program level assessment.

**1. Student Learning Outcome (Competency):**  Students are expected to demonstrate the ability to communicate and interact in diverse groups and in diverse settings.  This MPA program requires students to demonstrate spoken and written proficiency at an advanced beginner level in one language other than the student's native language.

**2. Student Work (Evidence):**  Students will take a standardized test that measures written and spoken proficiency in the chosen language.  Standardized tests of language proficiency are widely available and levels of performance (beginner, intermediate, advanced) are defined by experts in the language.

**3. Evaluation Criteria**:  Student performance will be evaluated on the technical dimensions of proficiency in spoken and written aspects of the language.  Spoken performance is evaluated by a jury of experts in the speaking of the language; written performance is evaluated by a jury of experts in the writing of the language.

**4. Assessment Methods:**  Students will take a standardized exam that has been nationally normed.  Experts in the language will score the student performance.

**5. Time Frame:**  Students may take the standardized language examination at any point in their academic program.  Students are encouraged to take the exam as early as possible so that any deficiencies identified can be corrected before the end of the student's academic program.

**6. Who will do the assessment?**  The administrator of the standardized examination will conduct the assessment and report student scores back to the student and to the program.

**7. Type of Feedback (Data):**  The administrator of the standardized examination will report student scores on the requisite technical dimensions of spoken and written performance.  Scores will show the total score on each dimension as well as the percentile ranking of each score.  The level of student performance (beginner, intermediate, advanced) will also be reported.

**8. How will data be used to improve program or revise curriculum?**  The department will meet as a whole to discuss findings.  Results will be explained in terms of student strengths and weakness in each of the dimensions covered by the standardized language examination.  Where students did not meet faculty expectations, actions will be recommended to improve student success.

**Model 4.  ASSESSMENT VIA PORTFOLIO**

A portfolio of student learning gives students the opportunity to showcase their best work in the MPA program.  As students move through the program, they become more aware of the expectations for and more accomplished at meeting the learning outcome goals set for them.  A portfolio gives students a developmental picture of their progress over the course of the degree.  Finally, students can use their portfolios as resources in job applications, competitive promotions, and other career-related situations.

**1. Student Learning Outcome (Competency):**  Students are expected to demonstrate their ability to:
> •manage in public organizations;
> •participate in and contribute to the policy process
> •analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions; and
> •communicate and interact in diverse groups and in diverse settings.

In this MPA program, the outcomes are further specified (operationally defined) as:
> •Manage information and networks
> •Recognize the social construction of problems
> •Understand financing and allocation of budgets
> •Work productively in teams

**2. Student Work (Evidence):**  A portfolio of student work gathered over the entire academic program from specified required courses that all students must complete.  The student must provide at least one example of work that demonstrates competency on each of the four learning outcomes.

In this MPA program, all required courses have an assignment related to the management of information and networks.  The student may select the best one or two completed assignments that demonstrate his or her competency in this area.  The description of the assignment and its grading scheme (rubric) are included along with the student work.  The same process is followed for the other three dimensions (social construction; budgets; teamwork):  students include their completed work in the portfolio along with the description of the assignment and how it was graded.

Students must have at least one unique assignment in each of the four categories.  For example, one assignment may combine budgeting and working in teams, but the student has to choose whether to include it under the budgeting category or under the teamwork category.  The faculty responsible for the required courses ensure that students have numerous opportunities to demonstrate their learning in each of the four required outcomes.

**3. Evaluation Criteria**:  Student work will be reevaluated on the original grading criteria (rubric) for each assignment included in the portfolio, and judged as below, at or above expectations.  In addition, the entire portfolio will be evaluated holistically to ensure that the spirit of the portfolio requirement has been met (i.e., that it demonstrates the student's best work), and that all other requirements have been met, e.g., unique work in each area,

presentation formats (paper or electronic), and any other relevant criteria. Note that neither the student's grade on each assignment nor the student's grade in the course is considered.

**4. Assessment methods:** The student collects their work and presents it in a portfolio when all required courses have been completed, generally at the end of their academic program. The portfolios (or a representative sample) are evaluated by a faculty Committee. Each portfolio will be assigned a summative score of below, at, or exceeds expectations.

**5. Time Frame:** Portfolios are collected each fall and spring semester one month before the end of the semester. The faculty Committee selects a representative sample of portfolios and evaluates them before the end of the semester. Analysis of findings will take place in the summer. Results will be presented at the first faculty meeting of the fall.

**6. Who will do the Assessment?** Department Chair and appointed faculty Committee will obtain a representative sample of portfolios and carry out the assessment activities.

**7. Type of Feedback:** The faculty Committee analyses the evidence and reports it to the full faculty, summarizing student performance on each of the areas required in the portfolio as well as on the portfolio as a whole. Performance may be reported as percentage of students judged as below expectations, meets expectations, or exceeds expectations on each of the areas, as well as on the holistic evaluation of the completed portfolio.

**8. How data will be used to improve program or revise curricula?** The department will meet as a whole to discuss findings. For areas where students did not meet faculty expectations, actions will be recommended to improve student success.

Note that other items can be included in a portfolio, such as a student's resume at entering the program and a resume at graduation; a section on personal accomplishments, awards, citations, memberships, and so forth; a pre-admittance essay and a culminating, reflective essay; student self-assessments; etc.

## Model 5.  COURSE-BASED ASSESSMENT USING "EMBEDDED" QUESTIONS.

To assess whether students are meeting a specific learning outcome equally well across multiple sections of the same course or across multiple offerings of the same course by different instructors, one approach is to use a few, specific exam questions that are "embedded" into all final examinations.

**1. Student Learning Outcome (Competency):**  Students are expected to demonstrate their ability to:
   •analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions

In this MPA program, this outcome is further specified (operationally defined) as:
   • Identify and employ alternative sources of funding, including grants, taxes, and fees

**2. Student Work (Evidence):**  The faculty who teach the course(s) where this outcome is addressed meet to devise three short-answer final exam questions that will be used in all sections of the course or all of the courses taught by different instructors over the year.  These three questions address the specific learning outcome by asking the student to correctly identify where alternative sources of funding such as grants, taxes, and fees would be appropriate.  These three final exam questions are embedded into the final exam for each course, along with all the other questions that the instructor wishes the students to answer.

**3.  Outcomes Criteria:**  The faculty who design the questions provide the correct answers, i.e., what they expect students to demonstrate on the three exam questions.

**4.  Assessment Methods and Measures:** The embedded questions demonstrate how students as a whole are performing on this outcome, not individual students.  Faculty instructors will grade their final exams as usual, and then a record is kept of student answers to the embedded questions.  A copy of the exact written answer provides the best evidence of where students performed up to expectations and where they did not in terms of the concepts represented by the three embedded questions.  After final grades have been assigned, the student answers to the embedded questions will be gathered by designated staff.  Note that this method does not take into account the score assigned by the instructor on any of the embedded questions, the score obtained by the student on the entire final exam, or the final grade awarded to the student for the course.

**5. Time Frame:**  The final exam containing the embedded questions is administered at the conclusion of the course, each time the course is taught.  At the end of a one- or two-year time period, the collected answers will be provided for analysis.

**6. Who will do the assessment?**  Faculty experts in the field will evaluate the student responses to the three embedded questions and assign a score using a grading scheme such as percent correct or incorrect, or assigning some number of points to each response.

**7. Type of Feedback:**  The faculty experts will analyze the evidence and report it to the full faculty, summarizing student performance on each of the three embedded questions.  Performance may be summarized as the percentage of student responses that fell below or met expectations, or some more detailed analysis may be provided for each of the three questions.

**8. How data will be used to improve program or revise curricula?**  The department will meet as a whole to discuss findings.  For areas where students did not meet faculty expectations, actions will be recommended to improve student success.

## Other Examples

There are many other examples of types of student work that can be evaluated to demonstrate student learning on the program outcomes. The following chart provides some examples with their suggested, relative appropriateness for each of the required competencies.

| Type of Evidence | Management | Policy | Analysis | Communication Interpersonal* |
|---|:---:|:---:|:---:|:---:|
| Annotated Bibliography | X | | | |
| Assessment Center/Mock Interviews | X | X | X | X |
| Blogging | X | X | X | X |
| Case Study | X | X | X | |
| Comprehensive Exam | X | X | X | |
| Community Public Service Project | X | X | X | X |
| Embedded exam questions | X | X | X | |
| Individual/Team Presentation | X | X | X | X |
| Internship | X | X | X | X |
| Journaling | X | X | X | X |
| Language proficiency exam | | | | X |
| Portfolio | X | X | X | X |
| Policy Analysis Project | | X | X | |
| Role-Playing | X | X | X | X |
| Simulation | X | X | X | X |
| Standardized Test | X | X | X | |
| Team Project | X | X | X | X |
| Technology Project | X | X | X | X |
| Term/Research Paper (Individual) | X | X | X | |
| Thesis/Project | X | X | X | |
| Videotaped presentation | | | | X |
| Written paper | X | X | X | |

*Communication/Interpersonal includes leading, foster team building, interacting in diverse settings, resolving conflict, negotiating, acting ethically, demonstrating self-knowledge, demonstrating flexibility, facilitating, working productively in teams, and other allied outcomes.