



Transforming Education for Public Service

Provisional Guiding Principles

WORKING DRAFT
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This preliminary set of guidelines is a committee draft. Input is sought as the Standards Steering Committee further develops this document.

1. **Mission Based Accreditation**: To recognize the great variety of programs, missions, constituencies, and processes among NASPAA programs educating public affairs leaders, mission-based accreditation should be maintained.

Rationale: NASPAA programs range from traditional public administration programs through policy programs, offered in quite different settings with diverse student bodies (e.g., part-time U.S., full-time international) and various missions. Mission-based accreditation has been successful and allows for the accreditation of a great diversity of programs under the NASPAA umbrella, all focused on preparing leaders in public service.

2. **Learning Environment**: NASPAA Standards should include multiple dimensions of quality, including the learning environment.

Rationale: The movement to performance measures and accountability has led to a focus on outputs and outcomes over inputs and processes. This “correction” was necessary and appropriate. However, the quality of education is determined in part by the way that students are educated and treated within the context of their program. For example, typically programs require a minimum of five faculty to offer an adequate learning environment built upon a diversity of disciplines and personal factors and a critical mass of faculty devoted to the program, Other learning environment factors include quality advising, the quality of teaching, and the quality of program management.

- 3. Measuring Student Competencies: Identifying and measuring student competencies, in order to ensure students will be capable of acting ethically and effectively in pursuit of the public interest, and based on the mission of the program and selected by the program, should be a major focus of accreditation.**

Rationale: CHEA, Congress, State Legislators, and members of the public are calling for the measurement of student competencies. The “science” of such measurement has advanced in recent years. Programs need to be more aware that curriculum is not equivalent to learning. Yet there are no accepted national examinations or measures in the field of public affairs. Measures of student competencies are expected to vary across programs but should reflect program mission, professional levels of achievement, and valid measures.

- 4. Accountability: In the interest of improving and promoting public service, and of affirming a commitment to public accountability, the NASPAA accreditation process should require programs to publicly communicate student learning outcomes.**

Rationale: NASPAA accreditation is the primary source of quality information on MPP/MPA programs in the U.S. Currently, that information is not collected in a manner that would facilitate aggregate analysis or the development of benchmarking information. At the same time, the higher education community and the public are demanding more information on student learning outcomes for individual programs and aggregate fields. Accreditation standards should require that programs make certain types of outcomes information available to the public. Student outcomes, especially student learning measures, should be externally validated, that is, include judgments by members of the profession as well as academics. Any comparability structures should be explicitly designed to avoid unintended consequences of homogenization by sacrificing the unique characteristics or diversity of programs.

- 5. Embrace challenges and change: Programs should demonstrate both insight and foresight to respond to changing needs in public service.**

Rationale: A decade ago the role of the internet, homeland security, and emergency preparedness were not key areas of focus for public service organizations. It is difficult to predict what topics and even what specific knowledge and skills graduates in 10 years may need. The pace of change is rapid. Therefore, programs need to prepare graduates who can master a new topic quickly by accessing available and valid sources of information, applying theories, concepts, knowledge from related areas, embrace critical thinking skills, and develop viable responses. All programs need to prepare their students for the rapidly changing context of their work. To do so, programs need to be responsive to the changing context. This heightens the need for stakeholder information and environmental scanning mechanisms and program response mechanisms.

6. Continuous Improvement: The accreditation process should promote continuous improvement and planning for excellence.

Rationale: The Annual Report from accredited programs has become a more important assessment tool to COPRA over the past few years. Many programs have experienced significant changes and a seven year interval is proving inadequate to deal with the pace of change. Alternatively, some programs demonstrate limited commitment to assessment and improvement in the interim period between the accreditation cycles. Accreditation should be not only a stamp of quality, but a commitment to continuous improvement. Reducing the reporting burden during the primary cycle could allow for more continuous improvement processes.

7. Public Service Mission: The mission of every program should include having a positive impact on public service and public policy in a way that is demonstrable to prospective students, peers, and external audiences.

Rationale: NASPAA accredits master's degrees with an explicit orientation towards preparing capable professionals for the public service and improving the quality of public service education. The aggregate outcome of master's education is presumably to improve the public service activities. Programs should be able to document the impacts of their efforts on their communities, at the scope appropriate to the program.

8. Competencies for Public Service Education: Curricular competencies identified in the curriculum standard should: achieve adequate specificity leading to a collective identity among those engaged in public service education; acknowledge and encourage the diversity among the programs seeking accreditation; and ensure students will be capable of acting ethically and effectively in pursuit of the public interest.

Rationale: It is important that the standards, in general, and the curriculum standards in particular, recognize the intended diversity among member schools in terms of mission, emphasis, and resources. At the same time, they should reflect those elements of education in public affairs and administration that are crucial to our collective identity and mission.

If curricular competencies are to ensure students will be capable of acting ethically and effectively in pursuit of the public interest, the required competencies must reflect the relevant environmental characteristics of the public service such as diversity, globalization, rapid technological change, and its multi-sectoral scope

Employers of NASPAA program graduates emphasize the need for graduates to develop skills and abilities beyond the traditional content knowledge such as critical thinking, interpersonal skills, and cultural competencies. These skills are a major factor in the success of NASPAA program graduates and have been recognized by the PMF and state and local fellowship/internship programs. There is every indication that such skills will increase in importance in the foreseeable future. As is the case with traditional content

knowledge, programs will vary in the skills they emphasize and their means to build skills

In all areas, the curricular components should strike a balance between engendering a shared identity while maintaining a level playing field among programs with different missions.

9. Innovation: NASPAA Standards should allow for innovation, including program design and pedagogy, where appropriate to achieve mission-related goals without diminishing the quality of educational offerings.

Rationale: Just as the public sector changes, the needs of students preparing for public service also change. NASPAA accreditation should ensure that a threshold level of quality exists in a program and should serve to maintain a recognizable degree and cohesiveness nationally. However, these goals should not be pursued at the price of hindering innovation when appropriate to improve quality of education for public service professionals.

10. Transparency: The NASPAA accreditation process itself should become more transparent in areas where additional information could provide a clearer demonstration of public accountability or where information could serve to advance the field of public service education.

Rationale: Confidentiality remains important to some aspects of the peer review process. However, accreditation norms on privacy are changing, just as public and private institutions are facing increased pressure to demonstrate increased accountability to the public. One aspect of this trend is to provide more documentation on the accreditation process and release more reports and evaluations into the public domain. This will necessitate changes in the nature of the current self study report. In part because of NASPAA programs' unique commitment to public service, maintaining best practices in public accountability is imperative. However, this does not suggest that all aspects of the accreditation review will become public or that self-study documents would necessarily be public in their entirety. Rather, a balance should be struck somewhere between the current state of releasing almost no information and a converse state of releasing an overwhelming amount of data.

11. Reporting: Accreditation delivery mechanisms should be creatively and thoughtfully designed to minimize potential reporting burdens to programs seeking accreditation. Information collected should be meaningful and serve to improve public service education.

Rationale: Reporting processes that are redundant, superfluous or time-consuming can reduce confidence in and commitment to the accreditation process. The accreditation process should collect information when it serves as an aid to improvement of the individual program and the field, but should balance reporting requirements with the potential burden on the program. Delivery

methods should be designed to ensure effective communication and ease of use to all parties.

12. Truth in Advertising: Programs should meet a “truth in advertising standard.” In those areas of specialization and concentration where professional associations have defined guidelines for curriculum for masters programs and where the NASPAA Executive Council has approved the guidelines, programs claiming to offer the area should specifically and publicly indicate the extent and means by which they address the guidelines.

Rationale: Accreditation demonstrates to a variety of stakeholders (faculty, employers, students, etc.) that a program complies with a set of expectations about the quality of the education. Programs should establish those expectations in their mission statements and promotional materials and be accountable for the representations they make.

Most areas of specialization are not subject to national guidelines and are shaped to meet the program’s mission. Therefore there should not be a requirement that programs meet national standards. Nor can NASPAA define all possible standards for all possible areas. However, programs should appropriately describe their areas of specialization and the resources available to implement these areas. Where such guidelines have been established, NASPAA should not require that program offering this area meet the guidelines as if they were standards. However, the program should specifically inform its potential applicants and students how it addresses such guidelines. The standards should address the adequacy of program resources, including but not limited to faculty and courses, to meet program areas of specialization.

13. Scope of Accreditation (International): NASPAA seeks to lead in new ways and to improve the quality of graduate education for students seeking to work in public service worldwide. NASPAA accreditation should not preclude international programs absent a compelling practical or values-driven reason.

Rationale: While some programs outside the U.S. have sought NASPAA accreditation, the NASPAA standards and the COPRA accreditation process were designed for U.S. programs (including such assumptions as regional accreditation as the indicator of university soundness, a four year undergraduate degree preceding entry to a graduate program, a credit hour system, and American laws regarding diversity and discrimination in educational practices). The NASPAA site visit of a non-U.S. program in the late 1990s resulted in a reaffirmation that the non-U.S. context would require a different set of standards for this different context. NASPAA should work collaboratively with others outside the U.S. to improve the quality of programs and the accreditation process in the U.S. and other nations, and conduct research in order to identify how sensitive quality assurance is to differences in underlying legal, regulatory, and financial frameworks.