



International Accreditation Issues: NASPAA White Paper

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One of the thorniest issues facing the NASPAA accreditation standards revision effort is the need to make a decision regarding the appropriate domain for conducting accreditation of public affairs degrees: should it remain US-based programs only, be opened to all interested programs around the world, or be established somewhere in between?

The purpose of this paper is to review NASPAA's experience with international aspects of accreditation, analyze the evidence and pros and cons of considering such a development, and make a set of recommendations to the membership regarding possible ways forward.

NASPAA's Experience Internationally

NASPAA's Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation began accreditation of professional masters degrees in public affairs in the late 1970s. By the early 1990s, more than 100 programs had become accredited. But it also faced a profound need for change: the accreditation process had proven to be too narrow and constraining for some of the programs which had developed. In a major transformation of its process, NASPAA moved to "mission-based" accreditation in the early '90s, which allowed for significant diversity and variation among accredited public affairs programs. Under mission-based accreditation, programs must demonstrate they have a clear mission that has been developed in consultation with their constituencies. The program's elements are then assessed relative to the mission, as well as against broadly stated standards that include a core curriculum.

NASPAA did not design its accreditation process with overseas programs in mind: the organization understood its international role in developmental terms, not in terms of quality assurance. Along this line, in 1979, NASPAA received initial funding from USAID for a program of research and technical assistance to developing countries. USAID funded a series of cooperative agreements totaling more than \$15 million for research and technical assistance in

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developing nations. This also led to grants to NASPAA in the 1990s from foundations to support the development of networks of public affairs schools in Central and Eastern Europe and in Latin America.

In 1998, however, Erasmus University Rotterdam asked NASPAA to conduct an accreditation review. NASPAA agreed that it wished to be engaged globally in the discussion of education quality, but it elected to stop short of a full-fledge accreditation review, and conducted an external review instead, in the pattern of an accreditation review. As this review was conducted, NASPAA learned a great deal about the applicability of NASPAA's standards in another setting. It also became involved with discussions about forming a European network for public affairs education that might evolve into a European accrediting body. NASPAA has been an enthusiastic supporter of the creation of EAPAA, and looks for opportunities to share experience and exchange best practices with them.

Despite its decision not to expand into international accreditation, NASPAA continued to be approached by dozens of programs around the world who were interested in accreditation by the organization. Partly in response to this interest, but also following their belief that it was vital to continue engagement internationally on the topic of quality in public affairs education, NASPAA continued to study and discuss the issue of international quality assurance.

In 2003, NASPAA formally explored the concept of initiating an *internationalized* accreditation process, in conjunction with other countries and associations. This reflected NASPAA's recognition that many innovations in public affairs were occurring overseas, and that the higher education market was becoming more and more global in reach. In short, it was no longer just a developmental task NASPAA faced internationally, but an increasingly competitive market with many high quality programs around the world. There was a striking rise in international flows of students, faculty, scholarship, and international jobs in public affairs. NASPAA studied this possibility extensively in 2003-04, concluding that an internationalized set of standards and an international accreditation process would require a new, internationally-convened body to create and administer it. NASPAA does not have the expertise or structure to accomplish internationalized accreditation apart from its American "product". Further, at this time, it was felt there is still no consensus about the core of an "internationalized curriculum", and it was unclear that there would be enough international interest to support the expense of an internationalized effort.

NASPAA's Executive Council, while stepping back from the idea of initiating an international process to create an internationalized accrediting body, nonetheless remained explicitly supportive of international engagement. The organization proposed the creation of an international network of public affairs schools, which has manifested itself in an international quality meeting in the United Arab Emirates, planned for December 2007.

With the launch of NASPAA Standards 2009, the first major revision of accreditation standards in more than a decade, the issue of international accreditation has arisen again. One of the newest trends is requests from "hybrids" for accreditation— American programs with overseas branches, explicitly American-style programs on other continents, and "full faith and credit" partnerships between American schools and programs in Europe or Asia. These requests have been less

oriented towards internationalization than by a desire to have an American-style program assessed by NASPAA. NASPAA is at a crossroads, and faces several distinct options at this time.

Options

One option is to maintain the status quo. Even if desirable, it seems unlikely to be possible. One reason is that the language in the NASPAA standards that has served to exclude overseas programs has been the requirement that a program be “regionally accredited” before it can submit for NASPAA accreditation review. Once that ensured only American programs would be eligible. However, now that several regional accreditors are accrediting non-American programs,² that requirement is no longer sufficient to exclude overseas programs.

Part of what’s pushing this is “organic”: programs are morphing in all different directions. American universities, for example, have begun to take overseas cohorts of students, to set up branches or entire campuses in other countries, and to arrange strategic partnerships with overseas schools. If we cannot assess quality in these circumstances, we risk marginalizing the accrediting body as schools in these situations cease looking to NASPAA for accreditation.

Another option is to create an internationalized accrediting body, as NASPAA explored in 2004. It would require some conviction that the core of internationalized curricula and programs could be identified, and that there was collective will and resources among programs in the US and abroad to create a separate product.

A final option would be for NASPAA to conduct some accreditation reviews of overseas programs, but to strictly limit it to programs that met extensive criteria demonstrating sufficiently “American-style” features to justify an American review.

Criteria for Considering International Accreditation

It is vital for NASPAA member schools to know—and to agree on-- *why* NASPAA should consider expanding its scope to include international applicants for accreditation.

NASPAA could consider several adopting one or more possible “Criteria” for reversing the status quo and considering entry into International Accreditation:

1. Is geographic location (US vs. abroad) now so irrelevant to public service that the physical location of the school no longer matters in a flat world?
2. Is public affairs education around the world so “internationalized” that the task of conducting quality assurance would not vary significantly from country to country?

² Middle States Commission on Higher Education, for example, the regional accreditor in the Midatlantic region of the United States has accredited the American University in Cairo, the American University of Paris, The American University of Beirut, The American University of Sharjah, Athabasca University in Canada, Central European University in Hungary, Franklin College in Switzerland, Open University in the UK, Zayed University, etc.

3. Is the “American Style” program worth encouraging replication in the world, both philosophically and market wise— that is, is it valuable to support the creation of more programs in the world that support the creation of civil societies and democratic frameworks? And is it useful to help create more programs that serve the rising market for “American style” programs?
4. Do NASPAA and its schools risk being internationally uncompetitive and/or irrelevant if we do not do international accreditation?

If the answer to any of the questions above is “yes,” then there is reason for NASPAA to at least consider developing some form of international quality assurance process.

Recommendations

It seems naive either to ignore the rising international market for public affairs education, or to imagine NASPAA could create something on its own that would serve the rest of the world’s quality assurance needs.

Therefore, there is considerable merit to the idea of **creating a research laboratory for studying the sensitivity of quality assurance processes and outcomes to differences in legal, political, regulatory, and financing environment in which the program is located.** Programs would apply to participate in a research project, with no guarantees of accreditation at the end (but without prohibitions, either), to isolate the key factors.

NASPAA could conduct such research in cooperation with other regional accrediting bodies, such as EAPAA, and could even apply for outside research funding for the endeavor.

The next set of standards could establish a method for allowing experimentation outside the specific frame of accreditation as specified, along certain dimensions, or without restriction.

Alternative recommendations, if a more “active” stance on international accreditation is desired, would include establishing specific eligibility criteria that would enable international programs with certain characteristics (say, regional accreditation) to apply for NASPAA accreditation. The least restrictive option would be to create eligibility standards that allow any international program to apply if they met the standards, barring compelling administrative, financial, or interpretational issues. Wherever NASPAA decides to go, however, it should provide very clear guidance about eligibility to programs abroad—well in advance of accepting applicants for the accreditation process.