

# How Do We Know What They Know? Evaluating Student-Learning Outcomes in an MPA Program

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## ABSTRACT

The development of student-learning assessment systems is a resource- and time-intensive process. Instituting a comprehensive assessment system is especially important in Master's of Public Administration (MPA) programs, due to the emphasis on skill-based education. This paper details the development of an assessment system in the MPA program at California State University, Long Beach, and reports some preliminary data collected from this new system. An argument is presented for the use of a holistic, rather than a layered, assessment system.

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## EVALUATING STUDENT-LEARNING OUTCOMES IN AN MPA PROGRAM

In the past two decades, we have witnessed an increased emphasis on assessing the utility of educational programs. As external resources diminish, and student tuition and fees increase, educational programs are being held accountable for the education they provide to students. Over the past 50 years, the Master's of Public Administration (MPA) has become the vital degree in the public service (NASPAA, 2009). As MPA degrees continue to become more vital, the emphasis on assessing the skills that MPA students acquire becomes even stronger. In order to respond to these pressures and continue refining the MPA curriculum, programs need to continuously improve their student-learning assessment systems.

## DEFINITIONS OF ASSESSMENT

Before beginning a discussion of the development of an assessment system at California State University, Long Beach (CSULB), it is important to explore the definitions and purposes of assessment. Accepted definitions of assessment are as varied as assessment systems themselves. One common theme in academic literature is the formative-summative taxonomy of assessment purposes (Terenzini, 1989). Formative assessment refers to the examination of individual outcome data for the purpose of redesigning curricula and programmatic

requirements. By contrast, summative assessment is often done on the aggregate level, and views outcomes on a programmatic rather than individual level. For MPA programs, the results of summative assessment prove beneficial in the accreditation process.

Terenzini (1989) also identifies two additional aspects of assessment systems — the level and focus of assessment. The level of assessment refers to assessment by individuals or groups. This is not a mutually exclusive situation, and effective assessment systems often incorporate both individual- and group-level assessments. The focus of the assessment system may target knowledge, skills, behaviors, or attitudes (Ewell, 1994).

Even within these foci, there are important distinctions. Knowledge may be viewed from either a knowledge-reproduction or knowledge-construction perspective (Ewell, 1994). Assessment for knowledge reproduction analyzes the ability of students to reproduce the knowledge acquired in the classroom, while knowledge construction focuses on students' abilities to create new knowledge and contribute to the phenomenological development of the discipline. Because most MPA program mission statements are geared toward preparing students to contribute to the community, as well as the discipline, assessment must go beyond the mere reproduction of knowledge. As a practical program, the MPA should afford students the opportunity to develop skills that may be applied to a myriad of public sector issues. Behavior and attitude assessments also are important for ethical adherence and public accountability. Therefore, assessment in public affairs education must be multi-dimensional and comprehensive.

The instances of assessment also may vary between programs. Kennedy (1999) identifies four possible levels of assessment: classroom observations and student surveys, teacher depictions of teaching, specific depictions of teaching strategies, and general depictions of teaching strategies. This definition of multiple levels of assessment underscores the need for a multi-dimensional assessment approach — one that includes many different mechanisms within an integrated assessment process.

#### WHY ASSESSMENT?

Developing assessment systems requires a significant investment of time and energy. In order to justify this investment, there must be compelling rationales for it. Weiss, et al. (2002) cite a renewed emphasis on assessment during the 1980s, due to highly publicized stories of student failures in numerous public school settings. This prompted state legislatures to become engaged in mandating assessment for public schools. As it is with most policy changes, the implementation of change is usually easier when the impetus comes from within the organization. Fortunately, there are several reasons for initiating an assessment revision within a department or college. Denton, Swanson, and Mathews (2007) recommend the involvement of teachers in developing an

assessment system. This involvement facilitates implementation, and enhances the positive benefits of assessing student-learning outcomes. Some of these positive benefits include faculty development, curricular improvement, improved teaching, and improved learning (Angelo & Cross, 1993). If faculty members are committed to assessment, students are more likely to view assessment as something that enhances accountability and potentially improves the quality of teaching in the classroom (Brown, Hirschfeld, & Gerrit, 2008).

Unfortunately, the draw of assessment is countered by several factors that add difficulty to the implementation of a comprehensive assessment system. Weiss, et al. (2002) point out that resistance to assessment often results from the system not being marketed correctly to faculty. The development and implementation of comprehensive assessment systems is resource-intensive for administration and faculty alike, and if the benefits are not viewed as exceeding the costs, resistance will be profound. Banta, Lund, Black, and Oblander (1996) recognize that, because assessment is often contrary to faculty reward structures, it can increase resistance. If faculty members are faced with a choice of doing research or assessment, the reward structure in most academic environments is certainly skewed toward the former. Academic tradition also values the individuality of teaching, thus making it difficult to apply the standardization that is often a hallmark of assessment systems. A multi-dimensional assessment system that includes open participation by multiple assessors usually involves scrutiny by other faculty, which may make some of them unlikely to participate.

Despite these sources of resistance, the utility of a comprehensive assessment system has led most programs to develop assessment measures. This is true for the MPA program at CSULB, and this paper explores the development of the assessment system and some preliminary data that have emerged in the early period of implementation.

#### LAYERED VS. HOLISTIC ASSESSMENT

The assessment system at CSULB was originally envisioned as a layered assessment approach that afforded assessment opportunities at several points in a student's academic career. However, it was soon apparent that the characterization of the assessment system as "layered" was incomplete at best. A layered assessment approach denotes a vertical design, where one participant would have multiple opportunities to assess a student's development. It is essential to include multiple participants in the assessment process and to afford these participants the opportunity to assess student progress at multiple points in a student's career.

Therefore, a more accurate characterization of the new assessment system is that it is holistic rather than layered. A holistic approach is multi-dimensional as well as longitudinal. It involves multiple participants who engage in assessment at multiple points of time during a student's academic career. These attributes characterize CSULB's system.

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In this view of assessment, there are multiple stakeholders who are actively engaged in student assessment, from a student's entry into the program of study until graduation. In the fall semester of 2007, the MPA program at CSULB instituted a holistic assessment system that gives multiple stakeholders numerous opportunities for student-learning outcome assessment. These stakeholders may include the students, full-time faculty, part-time faculty, administration, advisory board members, and members of the community. These multiple stakeholders need multiple opportunities to become engaged in the assessment process. For the assessment system at CSULB, assessment begins upon entry into the program.

#### ENTRY-LEVEL ASSESSMENT

The first point of assessment for most students is, naturally, an admission file. As part of admission, prospective students must submit an essay and other items intended to provide insight into their career-based goals, and objectives for the MPA program. Historically, it also has been used to evaluate student writing competencies. This process has occurred on an individual basis, with inter-student comparisons made only on an anecdotal level. This assessment was done solely by the admissions committee. Once admitted to the MPA program, specific student skills were not assessed in a standardized fashion, thus making it difficult to determine the skill levels of students upon entry into the program.

In the fall semester of 2007, the MPA program initiated the use of Initial Skills Self-Assessments. An example of this assessment instrument can be found in Appendix A. The purpose of this instrument is to enable students to evaluate their own skills in several important skill areas. This is done through an ordinal ranking and a narrative analysis. Students complete this assessment in their PPA 500 Foundations of Public Administration (PPA 500) course, and it is evaluated at the course level by the instructor of record. Each PPA 500 instructor also supplies a copy to the departmental assessment director, who compiles a database of the ordinal rankings. These Initial Skills Self-Assessments are then coupled with a final assessment that students complete at the end of the PPA 697 Directed Research (PPA 697) course program, and are submitted as part of the Student Learning Portfolio. The addition of these Initial Skills Self-Assessments has enabled students, course instructors, the departmental assessment director, and other faculty to review the self-perceived strengths and weaknesses of students in each of the important skill areas for the program. The data generated by the Initial Skills Self-Assessment, completed by PPA 500 students enrolled during the fall 2007 semester, appear in Tables 1 and 2. (See *Tables 1 and 2.*)

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**Table 1.**  
*Initial Skills Self-Assessment Averages  
– Course A (PPA 500)*

<b>Skill Areas</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Dev</b>
Budgeting	1.73	(0.799)
Decision Making	2.73	(0.704)
Ethics	3.2	(1.42)
Oral	3.27	(0.884)
Organization Theory	2.13	(0.743)
Personnel	1.67	(0.816)
Policy	2.07	(1.22)
Problem Solving	3.13	(0.99)
Research Methods	2.33	(0.899)
Teamwork	4.07	(1.03)
Written	3.53	(0.743)

*Note: Sample Size = 16*

*The number on the left is the average of results from an ordinal ranking scale of 1 to 5, where students entering the program self-rated their knowledge levels in each identified skill area. The number in parentheses is the standard deviation.*

**Table 2.**  
*Initial Skills Self-Assessment Averages  
– Course B (PPA 500)*

<b>Skill Areas</b>	<b>Mean</b>	<b>Std Dev</b>
Budgeting	1.73	(0.991)
Decision Making	3.31	(1.06)
Ethics	3.47	(0.964)
Oral	3.5	(1.04)
Organization Theory	2.31	(1.20)
Personnel	2.10	(1.04)
Policy	2.05	(1.18)
Problem Solving	3.21	(0.976)
Research Methods	2.31	(0.820)
Teamwork	4.10	(0.737)
Written	3.58	(1.07)

*Note: Sample Size = 19*

*The number on the left is the average of results from an ordinal ranking scale of 1 to 5, where students entering the program self-rated their knowledge levels in each identified skill area. The number in parentheses is the standard deviation.*

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The fall 2007 ordinal rankings reveal that students felt they possessed the strongest skill sets in teamwork, oral and written communication, problem-solving, and ethics. The mean for each of these exceeded three, on a five-point scale. Problematic skill areas for many students included budgeting, organization theory, policy analysis, personnel, and research methods. There was remarkable congruence between the responses of students in both class sections (Course A and Course B).

The narrative responses from students supported the ordinal results. Students indicated that they had the least amount of practical experience in budgeting, organization theory, and research methods. Their experience in these core content areas also was cursory, and involved reading research, receiving budgetary documents, and being aware of the organizational structures in their agencies.

The identification of problematic skill areas by students should help to shape curriculum modifications in the program. For instance, the low mean ranking in research methods indicates that additional focus should be placed on developing these skills. As a result of this feedback, as well as more narrative evaluations of research-methods training in the program, the faculty recently revised prerequisites for the research methods course, so that they include a statistics course. This essentially will create a two-course sequence for some students who lack the prerequisite skills in statistical analysis. In the areas of personnel management and budgeting, the assessment results suggest a need to incorporate more practical exercises because so many students report having little-to-no experience or skills related to budgeting and finance, and personnel management.

#### IN-PROGRAM ASSESSMENTS AND CORE COURSE ASSESSMENTS

Core and elective courses in the MPA program have been designed to provide students with the opportunity to develop many of the skills necessary as indicated by the Initial Skills Self-Assessment. The basic core curriculum consists of the following courses:

- PPA 500 Foundations of Public Administration
- PPA 555 Public Budgeting and Finance
- PPA 577 Human Resource Management
- PPA 660 Organization Behavior and Theory
- PPA 670 Policy Analysis
- PPA 696 Research Methods

Each core course requires completion of a Pre-Instructional and Post-Instructional Assignment. The Pre-Instructional Assignment must be completed within the first three weeks of the semester. A similar Post-Instructional Assignment is required during the final three weeks of the semester. The two

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assignments are then combined, and submitted by students to their Student Learning Portfolios at the end of the program of study. The purpose of the Pre- and Post-Instructional Assignments is to give the course instructor and the student an opportunity to assess the achievement of course-specific learning objectives. While instructors have great latitude in developing these assignments, the Pre- and Post-Instructional Assignments must gauge similar skills, and provide an empirical basis for comparison of student performance at both points in the semester. The Departmental Assessment Coordinator is charged with the responsibility of collecting and reviewing copies of these assignments from one core course per semester. In the fall 2007 semester, the core PPA 555 Public Budgeting and Finance (PPA 555) course was selected for analysis.

The results of analyzing assignments from two sections of PPA 555 demonstrate that students were better equipped to analyze city budget documents after finishing course requirements. Both assignments required students to analyze a city budget, and document the type of budget format used, the revenue/expenditure patterns for the city, and the fiscal solvency of the city. Both assignments also required students to recommend the appropriate budget format for the city to use. In the Pre-Instructional Assignment, less than 50 percent of the students were able correctly to identify the type of budget format used (n=25). This compares to 92 percent of students (23 of 25) who performed this task correctly in the Post-Instructional Assignment. The fiscal solvency question also demonstrated an increase in student skills. Fewer than 10 percent of Pre-Instructional students (2 of 25) were able to correctly assess the fiscal solvency of the city. In the Post-Instructional Assignment, 80 percent of students (20 of 25) were able to assess it correctly.

The data generated by these Pre- and Post-Instructional Assignments are complemented by traditional student course evaluations. The mean value for the question regarding the usefulness of the PPA 555 Public Budgeting course is 4.57, on a 5-point Likert scale. This is typical for most courses in the MPA Program (program average = 4.5).

#### PROGRAM CONCLUSION ASSESSMENTS

The capstone experience for MPA students is the completion of PPA 697 Directed Research. PPA 697 is the final required course in the program, and it gives students the option to complete a traditional research project, or a series of five case studies. The case study option requires the completion of a case study in each of five core content areas, which include budgeting, human resource management, organization theory, policy analysis, and research methods. Upon receiving a case study from a student, the PPA 697 advisor routes it to the core content faculty member(s) for review and evaluation. Once evaluated, these case studies are returned to the PPA 697 advisor for delivery to the student.

#### FINAL SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENTS

Regardless of whether a student selects the traditional research paper option or the new case study method, all PPA 697 students are required to submit a Final Skills Self-Assessment. This assessment has three parts. Part I is an ordinal ranking of how much students feel they know in each of the skill areas listed on the Initial Skills Self-Assessment. The areas and the ranking system in the Final Skills Self-Assessment are identical to those provided in the Initial Skills Self-Assessment. This assessment is designed to provide a post-curricular test of self-perceived student-learning outcomes as students prepare to exit the MPA program. Part II is a narrative description of students' experiences and/or skills in each of the five core content areas. Part III of the assessment requires students to reflect on their experiences and determine how well the program met their expectations. An example of the Final Skills Self-Assessment is shown in Appendix B. The Part I results of the Final Skills Self-Assessment are presented in Table 3. (See Table 3.)

The sample of students' who completed the Final Skills Self-Assessment admittedly are different from those sampled in the Initial Skills Self-Assessments. Given the newness of the assessment system, students who completed the Initial Skills Self-Assessment were in their first semester of study

**Table 3.**  
*Part I: Final Skills Self-Assessment Averages  
for Academic Year 2007-2008 (PPA 697)*

Skill Areas	Mean	Std Dev
Budgeting	3.71	(0.984)
Decision Making	4.13	(0.704)
Ethics	4.00	(0.771)
Legal	3.18	(0.730)
Oral	4.31	(0.740)
Organizational Behavior	4.08	(0.850)
Personnel	4.03	(0.788)
Policy	4.03	(0.972)
Problem Solving	4.24	(0.675)
Research	3.89	(0.863)
Teamwork	4.5	(0.688)
Written	4.5	(0.647)

*Note: Sample Size = 38  
The number on the left is the average of results from an ordinal ranking scale of 1 to 5, where students completing the program self-rated their knowledge levels in each identified skill area. The number in parentheses is the standard deviation.*

when it was completed. Because the students who completed the Final Skills Self-Assessment were in their last semester of study, they never completed an Initial Skills Self-Assessment at the time they entered the program. However, it is still instructive to compare results from the Final and Initial Skills Self-Assessments, in order to determine whether there are any significant trends. (For purposes of comparison, it should be noted that, when the results of Tables 1 and 2 are combined, it produces a total sample size of 35, which is equivalent to the sample size in Table 3.)

A simple t-test of independent sample means produces the results shown in Table 4. (See Table 4.) All of the differences between the means on the Initial Skills Self-Assessment and the Final Skills Self-Assessment are statistically significant. The largest differences appear in the areas of budgeting, decision-making, organization behavior, personnel, policy, problem-solving, and research. As mentioned earlier, caution should be used in interpreting these results, because the two samples are independent. However, because the admission standards that students in both samples entered under were equivalent, it is unlikely that students' characteristics were so significantly different that it would account for such differences in their initial and final perceptions of core content skills.

**Table 4.**  
*Differences in Students' Perceptions of Knowledge for Five Core Content Areas on the Initial and Final Skills Self-Assessments*

Skill Areas	t Values	p Values
Budgeting	-8.84	p<0.001
Decision Making	-5.38	p<0.001
Ethics	-2.70	p<0.01
Oral	-1.97	p<0.05
Organizational Behavior	-8.31	p<0.001
Personnel	-10.11	p<0.001
Policy	-7.62	p<0.001
Problem Solving	-5.32	p<0.001
Research	-7.53	p<0.001
Teamwork	-2.21	p<0.05
Written	-4.95	p<0.01

*Note: Table 4 uses a simple t-test of independent means to compare the combined independent sample size of 35 from Tables 1 (Sample Size = 16) and 2 (Sample Size = 19), to the similar independent sample size of Table 3 (Sample Size = 38). The t values are in the left-hand column. In the right-hand column, p is the probability that the t values are greater than or equal to the number shown on the left. Small values of p (less than .05) typically represent significant differences.*

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Another point of comparison is to analyze results of the Final Skills Self-Assessment, and the Alumni Survey conducted in March, 2008. One relevant question on this survey asked alumni to rank the amount of knowledge they gained from each core area — using the same five-point ordinal scale that was used in the Final Skills Self-Assessment. Table 5 reports the results of that comparison. (See Table 5.)

In eight out of 11 areas, the perceptions of students just leaving the program were higher than the perceptions of the alumni. In the three instances where perceptions of graduating students were lower than those of alumni, the small differences were not statistically significant. Significant differences in the eight areas could have been the result of several factors. First, there could have been differences in alumni responses based on graduation years. To control for this, the data were sorted into two samples of graduates — one from before 1998 and one from after 1998. There were no significant differences or patterns when comparing these two samples. Second, the differences could have been driven by the non-equivalence of alumni

**Table 5.**  
*Differences Between Students' Perceptions of Knowledge in Five Core Content areas on the Final Skills Self-Assessment and on the 2008 Alumni Survey*

Skill Areas	t Values	p Values
Budgeting	0.74	NS
Decision Making	2.57	p<0.01
Ethics	3.18	p<0.01
Oral	2.87	p<0.01
Organizational Behavior	-0.05	NS
Personnel	14.18	p<0.001
Policy	-0.8184	NS
Problem Solving	1.46	NS
Research	-0.17	NS
Teamwork	4.94	p<0.001
Written	2.87	p<0.01

*Note: Degrees of Freedom = 148 NS = Not Significant Table 5 uses a simple t-test of independent means to compare results from the independent sample size of 38 in Table 3, to the independent averaged results of the 2008 Alumni Survey (sample size not listed), which also are based on an ordinal ranking scale of 1 to 5. The t values are in the left-hand column. In the right-hand column, p is the probability that the t values are greater than or equal to the number shown on the left. Small values of p (less than .05) typically represent significant differences.*

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samples and graduating student samples. This is an issue that in the future could be addressed by comparing characteristics of both samples. However, a cursory examination of the demographic characteristics of these two samples reveals that they are equivalent in age (while in the program), ethnicity, and prior educational training. The one major difference is in the income level of the two samples, because, obviously, income levels of alumni are significantly higher than those of graduating students. One of the most probable explanations for the differences between the two samples is the recent experience of graduating students. Because graduating students completed the core courses more recently than the alumni did, the courses may give have a higher perceived utility.

CASE STUDY OPTION

As mentioned earlier, PPA 697 students also have the option of completing five case studies to satisfy course requirements. The primary impetus behind creating the case study option was to develop mechanisms that measure a student’s ability appropriately to apply information, from each core area, to practical public-sector situations. Student performance results from case studies throughout the 2007-2008 academic year are reflected in Table 6. (See Table 6.)

The case studies are evaluated by core-content faculty from each area. In order to make the evaluation fair and uniform, only one faculty member is assigned to evaluate the case studies in a particular core content area. Each faculty member develops a specific grading rubric that is made available to students at the beginning of the semester, on the departmental Blackboard Web site.

As seen in Table 6, students were generally successful, with no one receiving a grade below C+. Students also performed very well in the PPA 577 Human Resource Management case studies. The lowest grades appeared in PPA 660 Organization Behavior and Theory.

Table 6.  
*PPA 697 Student Performance – Case Study Option*

PPA# & Course Title	A	A-	B+	B	B-	C+	Total
555 Public Budgeting and Finance	4	5	1	0	0	0	10
577 Human Resource Management	10	0	0	0	0	0	10
660 Organization Behavior and Theory	2	2	0	4	6	1	15
670 Policy Analysis	2	3	1	2	2	0	10
696 Research Methods	3	4	2	0	0	0	9
Total	21	14	4	6	8	1	54

Note: Students completed a case study in each of five core content areas, as represented by the course titles. Case study performance results are based on a standard A-F grading system.

#### STUDENT LEARNING PORTFOLIO

Starting in the 2001 fall semester, the MPA program replaced its comprehensive examination option with a required Student Learning Portfolio (SLP). Implementation of the SLP was intended to provide a more comprehensive assessment mechanism than the comprehensive examination.

##### *Part I*

The original SLP required construction of a four-part portfolio. Part I of the portfolio included a resume and a “where I am now” essay that both were completed in PPA 500. The purpose of these assignments was to enable students to assess their current career statuses upon entry into the program. A primary problem with this requirement was that the assignments were not evaluated by the PPA 500 instructor. A second problem involved the content of these assignments. The essay lacked structure and an objective basis for student-to-student comparisons. A revised SLP was implemented in fall of 2007, in order to rectify these deficiencies. The revised SLP now requires submission of the Initial Skills Self-Assessment and the Final Skills Self-Assessment. The Initial and Final Skills Self-Assessments are reviewed by at least two faculty members. (The PPA 500 Instructor reviews the Initial Skills Self-Assessment and the PPA 697 instructor reviews the Final Skills Self-Assessment.) This rectifies the second deficiency associated with the lack of comparability between assignments, because the Final Skills Self-Assessment mirrors content of the Initial Skills Self-Assessment. Using an ordinal ranking system in Part I of the assessments, when combined with the narrative assessments in Parts II and III, provides a more complete picture of student skills in each core content area.

##### *Part II*

Part II of the original SLP required the submission of portfolio assignments from each core course. These assignments normally were completed at the end of each course, and required approval of the course instructor and a second faculty member. This process presented many problems. First, the paper could be revised up to three times. If after three submissions the paper still was not approved by the original instructor and the second faculty member, the student was required to re-take the course. Most students found themselves revising their papers for up to one year after completing the course. Therefore, the paper did not necessarily reflect skills acquired in the course. Second, obtaining approval from a second faculty reader proved problematic, and imposed additional work on instructors that was beyond their normal course loads. This in turn posed problems for adhering to the requirements of collective bargaining agreements. The second readers also would occasionally impose requirements on students that were not part of the standard paper requirements for the course. In the fall semester of 2007, Part II of the SLP was revised to require the

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submission of Pre- and Post-Instructional Assignments from each core course. These papers require approval only from the course instructor, which limits the possibility of a second faculty member imposing additional, non-course-related requirements on them. Obviously, the primary superior quality of the Pre- and Post-Instructional Assignments is that the Pre-Instructional Assignments create a baseline that is used to compare them with the Final Skills Self-Assessments. This provides a more accurate and complete basis for the analysis of skill-acquisition in each core course.

*Part III*

Part III of the SLP required the submission of professional development documentation. This could include documents such as training certificates and promotion letters. Unfortunately, this requirement did not give students or faculty any opportunities to assess the students' development while in the program. Also, many students lacked physical documentation of training while in the program. Therefore, Part III also was revised to include at least two examples of written work that was completed in the MPA program. Students are instructed to include projects that provide examples of their best work while in the program. These projects are reviewed by faculty for the purpose of determining the students' writing competency skills. These papers are reviewed by all PPA 697 faculty, as part of the SLP approval process.

*Part IV*

Part IV — the final part of the SLP — focuses on the outcome of the PPA 697 course (either the five case studies or the research project, depending on the student's choice). At this point, case studies already have been reviewed by the core content faculty, and are reviewed again for assessment purposes by the PPA 697 advisor. Compiling all four parts of the SLP results in a holistic assessment document that also serves as a collection of work completed in the MPA program. Students may then use the SLP to document their skill sets and writing abilities for present and future employers. Each semester, a random sample of portfolios is reviewed by the departmental Assessment Coordinator, and in the future they also will be provided to members of the departmental Advisory Board for review and comment. The feedback from these community leaders and public officials will help inform changes to the necessary skills and concepts covered in the MPA program.

CONCLUSIONS AND FUTURE DIRECTIONS

The purpose of this paper is to report initial findings from a new assessment system in a large MPA program. Even though the data are preliminary, and are from a system that has been in place for only one academic year, the findings indicate some success. First, results of the Final Skills Self-Assessments are significantly different than results of the Initial Skills Self-Assessments for all

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core content areas. Despite the fact that the samples are from two different groups of students, all students were admitted under the same criteria. Therefore, there should not be significant differences in the samples' characteristics. The significant differences in these responses indicate that students who are exiting the program have a higher-level perception of their skills in all core content areas than students who are entering the program.

In terms of skills-acquisition in the core courses, a small sample of Pre- and Post-Instructional Assignments from a Public Budgeting class seem to indicate that students improved their abilities to analyze a local city budget as a result of the course. However, this finding is preliminary, and must be augmented with analyses of Pre- and Post-Instructional Assignments from all core courses in the future.

Students also appear to be performing well on the PPA 697 case studies, because none of them received a grade below a C+. However, there were large variations in grades between the core content areas. Again, more data need to be generated before conclusions can be drawn regarding the ability of students to apply core content skills to relevant public-sector scenarios.

While all of these results are very preliminary, CSULB's new holistic approach to assessment presents the opportunity to expand assessment efforts of the department by involving more stakeholders in the assessment of student-learning outcomes. Assessment mechanisms alone are inadequate to assure a comprehensive assessment of student-learning outcomes. Involvement of stakeholders is vital to any assessment system, because they must be engaged in the process in order for it to be successful. This involvement will be fostered by rotating the Assessment Coordinator role throughout all department faculty members. Engaging community members is a difficult task, but it could be made easier by beginning the engagement process with members of the departmental Advisory Board.

Assessment is a process, rather than a result, and development of the assessment system is based on feedback from all stakeholders. Hopefully, as more stakeholders are engaged, their constructive feedback will continue to further refine and develop this holistic assessment system.

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APPENDIX A.

EXAMPLE OF INITIAL SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT

**GRADUATE CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION**  
**INITIAL SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT**

**Instructions:** Effective as of the 2007 fall semester, all PPA 500 students are required to complete an Initial Skills Self-Assessment in PPA 500. The purpose of this self-assessment is to allow students and faculty to assess student skills in each core content area, upon entry into the California State University, Long Beach MPA Program. It is vital that students provide honest and accurate information in this initial assessment.

Please begin by responding to the questions on the following page. Indicate your knowledge in each of these areas by circling the most appropriate number (1 = no knowledge, 5 = a great deal of knowledge). In Part II, please provide a written discussion of any skills and/or experience that you have in the core content areas. Your discussion should include an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses in each content area. For more information on each topic, see the list of core concepts for each of these core content areas on the PPA department Web page at <http://www.csulb.edu/colleges/chhs/departments/ppa/coreconcepts/>. Finally, in Part III, please discuss your reasons for pursuing the MPA degree and what specific skills you expect to acquire upon completion of the degree.

**Format:** There is no mandated length for this assignment. However, it is useful to organize your discussion by core content area. Upon completion, please submit this assignment to your PPA 500 instructor. When the Initial Skills Self-Assessment is returned to you, you are strongly encouraged to place it in your Student Learning Portfolio. It will then be evaluated again by your PPA 697 instructor at the end of the MPA program.

*(See sample form on following page.)*

*How Do We Know What They Know?*  
*Evaluating Student-Learning Outcomes in an MPA Program*

**INITIAL SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT**

**Part I**

Please indicate how much you think you know about each area.  
How much I already know about this area: 1 = nothing; 5 = a great deal

Budgeting/Financial Mgt.	1	2	3	4	5
Decision Making	1	2	3	4	5
Ethics	1	2	3	4	5
Oral Communications	1	2	3	4	5
Organizational Behavior	1	2	3	4	5
Personnel/Human Resources	1	2	3	4	5
Policy Analysis	1	2	3	4	5
Problem Solving	1	2	3	4	5
Research/Statistics	1	2	3	4	5
Working in Teams	1	2	3	4	5
Written Communications	1	2	3	4	5

**Part II**

Please discuss your experience and/or skills in each of the following content areas:

- Budgeting and Finance
- Human Resource Management
- Organization Theory
- Policy Analysis
- Research Methods

**Part III**

Please discuss your reasons for pursuing the MPA degree and what specific skills you hope to acquire in the MPA program.

APPENDIX B.  
EXAMPLE OF FINAL SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT

**GRADUATE CENTER FOR PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION**  
**FINAL SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT**

**Instructions:** Effective as of the 2007 fall semester, all PPA 697 students are required to complete the Final Skills Self-Assessment, as the final requirement of PPA 697. The purpose of this self-assessment is to allow students and faculty to assess student skills in each core content area at the conclusion of studies in the California State University, Long Beach MPA Program. It is vital that students provide honest and accurate information in this final assessment. The purpose of this requirement is to provide an empirical basis for assessing student skill-development as a result of instruction received in the MPA Program. This Final Skills Self-Assessment should be submitted to your PPA 697 advisor, along with the Initial Skills Self-Assessment that you completed in PPA 500. The PPA 697 advisor will compare the Initial and Final Skills Self-Assessments to analyze your growth and development in the field of public administration and policy. If you did not complete an Initial Skills Self-Assessment in PPA 500, the Final Skills Self-Assessment will be submitted in Part IV (if a case study approach was used in PPA 697), or Part I (if a traditional research project was completed).

Please begin by responding to the questions on the following page. Indicate your knowledge in each of these areas by circling the most appropriate number (1 = no knowledge, 5 = a great deal of knowledge). In Part II, please provide a written discussion of any skills and/or experience that you have in the core content areas. Your discussion should include an honest assessment of your strengths and weaknesses in each content area. For more information on each topic, see the list of core concepts for each of these core content areas on the PPA department Web page at <http://www.csulb.edu/colleges/chhs/departments/ppa/coreconcepts/>. The answers provided in Part II of this Final Skills Self-Assessment should be substantially different than those provided on the Initial Skills Self-Assessment, and should demonstrate concrete examples of skill acquisition in each of the core content areas. Use specific examples to illustrate the skills that you have acquired in each core area. Finally, in Part III, please reflect on the skills that you acquired in the program and how well the program met your expectations.

**Format:** There is no mandated length for this assignment. However, it is useful to organize your discussion by core content area. Upon completion, please submit this assignment to your PPA 697 instructor, along with the Initial Skills Self-Assessment that was completed in PPA 500, and the skills-assessment approval form. After approval by your PPA 697 advisor, the skills assessments will be submitted in Part I of the Student Learning Portfolio.

*How Do We Know What They Know?  
Evaluating Student-Learning Outcomes in an MPA Program*

**FINAL SKILLS SELF-ASSESSMENT**

**Part I**

Please indicate how much you think you know about each area.  
How much I already know about this area: 1 = nothing; 5 = a great deal

Budgeting/Financial Mgt.	1	2	3	4	5
Decision Making	1	2	3	4	5
Ethics	1	2	3	4	5
Oral Communications	1	2	3	4	5
Organizational Behavior	1	2	3	4	5
Personnel/Human Resources	1	2	3	4	5
Policy Analysis	1	2	3	4	5
Problem Solving	1	2	3	4	5
Research/Statistics	1	2	3	4	5
Working in Teams	1	2	3	4	5
Written Communications	1	2	3	4	5

**Part II**

Please discuss your experience and/or skills in each of the following content areas:

- Budgeting and Finance
- Human Resource Management
- Organization Theory
- Policy Analysis
- Research Methods

**Part III**

Please reflect on how well the MPA program met your expectations.

