

# Expectations for Student Learning Outcomes Assessment for NASPAA-COPRA Accreditation

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Authors: David Powell, California State University, Long Beach

Michelle Piskulich, Oakland University

Michelle Saint-Germain, California State University, Long Beach

With the implementation of the NASPAA 2009 accreditation standards, the role of assessment, and especially of competencies, in the quality assurance and self-study process was magnified. While the previous NASPAA accreditation standards, and certainly COPRA's understanding of them, required that programs be mission driven, engage in assessment and use assessment results to guide performance, the new standards require an additional focus on student learning outcomes. Previously programs were required to demonstrate they covered core content within the curriculum but they were not required to demonstrate how well students were learning the information the program provided. The current standards require programs to operationalize the universal competencies in a way that is directly related to the program mission. All programs must develop competencies in five domains: leading and managing in public governance; participating in and contributing to the policy process; analyzing, synthesizing, thinking critically, solving problems, and making decisions; articulating and applying a public service perspective; and communicating and interacting productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry. Additional competencies may also be required when programs have mission specific objectives that all students must achieve and for specializations and concentrations. Moving forward the focus will be on the connection between the mission, program content, and specializations offered within the program. Programs have more latitude to design content to meet their mission but more responsibility to demonstrate that those choices lead to student learning. This paper focuses on how to develop and assess mission specific competencies and then use the assessment information to make programmatic changes.

## **Rationale and Explanation:**

The development and assessment of student competencies is part of a holistic process. As such, the development and assessment of these competencies should be linked to the mission of the program. Connecting competencies to the relevant elements of the mission will enable a program to determine which competencies are vital to accomplishing program mission. It is also in the spirit of the mission-based emphasis of the 2009 NASPAA accreditation standards.

In reviewing programmatic approaches to developing and assessing competencies, there are

several aspects of this process that the Commission needs to examine. The basic assumption is that programs have embedded the competencies within the curriculum and developed a system of assessing student mastery of these competencies in a real and tangible manner.

This can be discerned by examining the following factors:

1. The description of the competency and how the competency was defined (e.g. what process was used and what actors were involved in defining this as a necessary competency)
2. The linkage of the competency to the specific mission of the program (e.g. what mission element is highlighted by this competency)
3. The description of how this competency is embedded into the curriculum (e.g. what courses or other curriculum components [such as mandatory internships] prepare students for the competency, how the expectations for competency are communicated to students, etc.)
4. The description of how the competency is assessed by the program. This description should include the following:
  - a. The actors involved in assessment
  - b. The assessment mechanisms used to measure the (learning outcome/)competency
  - c. The frequency of assessment
  - d. The location where assessment occurs (i.e., course-based, program-level)
  - e. How the results of the assessment process are used to inform changes to the curriculum or programmatic requirements

An examination of the aforementioned points should assist the Commission in determining how well assessment of student learning has been embedded into the fabric and culture of the program.

### **Description of the Competency and How the Competency was Defined**

Given the emphasis on universal competencies in the current NASPAA standards, it should not be surprising to see most programs focus their attention on addressing these five competencies. Given the flexibility provided by the universal competency definitions, programs have a great deal of latitude in tailoring competencies to program missions. For example, the universal competency “To analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions” can easily fit into a mission statement that attempts to “To prepare professionals to effectively manage in a complex public sector environment.” However, for these universal competencies, it would be instructive to know how the program defines critical analysis and synthesis. How is critical analysis defined within the context of specific course and programmatic requirements? Therefore, it is imperative that programs devote time and effort to identifying what the competency means for their courses and programs.

The definition of what the competency means for the program should be the result of a collaborative process among stakeholders in the program. Therefore, it is important for programs to identify what actors/groups were involved in the program-specific definition of the competency and to provide a justification for why these actors were involved. Possible stakeholders can include faculty, students, practitioners, alumni, employers, etc. While the current guidelines do require programs to report on the frequency of mission revision and the involvement of stakeholders in this revision, revising a mission may or may not result in a change in the definition of the competency. Therefore, when new competencies are created or existing competency definitions are altered, it is important for programs to document this process.

### **The Linkage of the Competency to the Specific Mission of the Program**

It is logical to assume that programs will devote a great deal of time and effort to discussing the five required universal competencies. These universal competencies should relate to the mission of the program.

However, program missions often have a unique focus or emphasis that would require the definition of required mission-specific competencies. These mission-specific, required competencies should be directly linked to the unique mission of the program as well as the course elements that highlight these competencies

In addition, programs may have elective competencies that are mission-related but only required of some (not all) students. For example, programs with tracks, options, or concentrations will likely have elective competencies to identify. These elective competencies should be directly linked to the unique mission of the program as well as the course elements that highlight these competencies. The mere existence of a track, option, or concentration may not require an elective competency if the anticipated competencies and outcomes are subsumed within the five universal competencies. However, in other cases, it is likely that a concentration (e.g., in non-profit management) would require an elective competency that is more specific than what is found in the five universal competencies.

Whether the program is discussing a universal required, a mission-specific required, or an elective competency, it is imperative that the program clearly identify the linkage between the mission and that competency. The identification of this linkage can be a formative, iterative, and ongoing process. If a program identifies a competency that is not linked to the program mission, this is evidence that it may be time to revisit the program mission.

### **The Description of How the Competency is Embedded in the Curriculum**

The identification of competencies is merely rhetoric unless these competencies are embedded into the curriculum in a systematic fashion. For universal competencies, the competencies should be embedded in the curriculum that all students are exposed to during their time in the program. This is most likely accomplished by embedding the universal competencies in core/required courses (or other required elements, e.g., internships).

Evidence of embedding these competencies must be found within the syllabi and assignments for these core courses. It is doubtful that traditional student evaluations of instruction will be sufficient to document how these competencies are embedded into courses.

### **The Description of How the Competency is Measured by the Program**

While there are no proscriptions or panaceas when it comes to assessing student learning of competencies, it is important for programs to clearly describe how a particular competency is assessed. There are several elements involved in this discussion including: the type of mechanism used, the actors involved in developing and implementing the mechanism, the frequency of applying the mechanism, the location where the assessment occurs, and how the information developed by the process is used for curricular or programmatic changes.

### Type of assessment mechanism used

Programs should be capable of clearly describing the assessment mechanism they are using to measure outcomes.

Again, while there is no perfect mechanism, the assessment mechanism should be valid and reliable and programs should document attempts to demonstrate how the measure relates to the mission based competency. For example, if a program is using a comprehensive examination to measure outcomes at the programmatic level, the program should document how the results of the examination are correlated with student performance in the program. Regardless of the mechanism used, the program should describe attempts to demonstrate the relationship between the measure and the competency.

The mechanism should be clearly described and its linkage to the outcome to be assessed should be unambiguous. If a program wishes to assess the ability of students to create a simple line-item budget, the course based assessment mechanism should directly measure this ability. Rubrics should exist to document the level of competency acquisition with all assessment mechanisms.

### Actors involved in developing and implementing the mechanism

As is the case with all programmatic and curricular decisions, shared governance is important. All stakeholders with a vested interest in the outcome of the process should have input in the development of the assessment mechanism. It is reasonable to assume that the initial development of the assessment mechanism will be the primary responsibility of faculty who teach in and govern the program. Ideally, both full and part-time faculty will have the opportunity to participate in the development of these mechanisms. The types and extent of their involvement should be documented by the program. Programs should also seek and receive external feedback on the mechanisms from advisory boards, college/university level assessment officers, alumni, and/or local employers. Again, the extent and frequency of participation should be documented by the program.

Assessment mechanisms are dynamic living documents that need to be revisited and modified as appropriate. The program should document how feedback was used to modify these mechanisms as necessary.

### The location where assessment occurs

Assessment may occur at multiple points in a student's career in the program. As is true with most systematic inquiry, questions of cause and effect are best addressed with longitudinal analyses. Therefore, programs should be able to document an on-going assessment process through a student's tenure in the program.

Ideally, programs will have initial assessments that are conducted upon a student's entry into the program, interim assessments such as course based assessments while students are in the program, and final assessments at the end of a student's career. Initial and final assessments tend to be programmatic in nature while interim assessments often measure skill acquisition on a course by course basis. Obviously, the purpose of the assessment will depend upon when the assessment occurs and if the assessment is course based or programmatic in nature. Programs that have truly embraced the movement toward competencies will be able to document assessment activities that occur at multiple points in a student's career. This is evidence that the assessment of student learning outcomes has truly been embedded into the program's culture. As was the case with the development of the assessment

mechanism, validity and reliability are essential so programs should provide evidence of their efforts to measure the integrity of the processes of both program and course based assessments.

When both course based and programmatic assessments are used, programs should demonstrate how the more specific course based assessments fit into the larger mission based competencies for the program. For example, a course based research methods assessment may examine how well students can articulate the appropriate methodology for solving a problem, under the universal required competency of “to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions”. Programs should be able to show how this links to the broader mission based competency (either universal or elective in nature).

*How the results of the assessment process are used to inform changes to the curriculum or programmatic requirements*

As discussed previously, the assessment of student learning outcomes contains both summative and formative elements. The summative aspect of assessment provides programs with an aggregate level picture of how well the program is achieving its goals. However, a good assessment system will also be formative in nature and focus on utilizing the results of the assessment process for curricular and programmatic improvements. The feedback provided from the assessment process essentially “closes the loop”. Programs need to document how they utilized the results of the assessment process to improve the program. For example, programs may revise course content, course delivery, or exit requirements as a result of their assessment findings. These changes need to be clearly documented by the program.

**An Example**

Competency: To analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions.

Competency Development: Participants involved in developing the competency included full-time faculty and part-time faculty in annual retreats. The Advisory Board reviewed the current competencies and contributed to the development of new competencies at annual Board meetings.

Linkage to Mission Element: *To prepare professionals to effectively manage in a complex public sector environment.* Effective management is predicated on the ability to critically analyze situations to develop realistic solutions to problems.

How the Competency is Embedded in the Program: The competency is part of the syllabus for the core courses of Research Methods, Public Budgeting, Organization Theory, and Public Policy courses. All students complete pre and post instructional assignments in each of these courses. These assignments measure the competencies of the students at the beginning and end of each course.

Type of Assessment Mechanism Used: There are several mechanisms used to assess the competency. Course based assignments are used in each of the aforementioned courses. Faculty members involved in teaching and governance of these courses review a sample of the assignments using a faculty approved grading rubric to determine competency demonstration. On a programmatic level, students complete an initial and final skills self-assessment that measures the student’s skills in each of the core competency areas. Differences from entry to exit are assessed by the MPA program director and reported to faculty each semester. Students also compile a student learning portfolio that consists of their skills

assessments and assessment assignments for each course. Nucleus faculty members review a sample of portfolios at the end of each semester and report the findings to the entire faculty group.

**Actors Involved in the Development and Implementation of the Assessment Mechanism:** Participants involved in developing the mechanisms included full-time faculty and part-time faculty in annual retreats. The Advisory Board reviewed the mechanisms and contributed to the revision of the mechanisms at annual Board meetings. Faculty members review the course-based assessments in courses in their respective fields using a faculty approved grading rubric. One set of course assessments is selected each semester for review by the entire full-time faculty. A random sample of student portfolios is reviewed by full-time faculty at the annual faculty retreat and by Alumni Board and Advisory Board members at the annual board meeting.

**Location Where Assessment Occurs:**

As mentioned earlier, course based and program level assessments are used. Course based assessments are used in each require course (course level) and all students are required to complete an approved student portfolio (programmatic level).

**How Results Are Used:**

The course based pre and post instructional assignments are reviewed each semester by course instructors and one set is reviewed each semester by all full-time faculty members. These reviews resulted in substantial changes to the content of the research methods course. One of the deficiencies noted in the pre and post instructional assignments in the research methods course was that students were unable critically analyze problems of direct relevance to public organizations. Faculty redesigned the research methods course to represent a program evaluation orientation to better afford students the opportunity to apply their analytical skills to pertinent public sector oriented problems.

## Frequently Asked Questions

What are COPRA's expectations for demonstrating how assessment results inform program change?

NASPAA Self Study Instructions (pp. 31-32, 2011 version) require that programs present one completed assessment cycle for ONE universal competency, ONE mission specific competency, and ONE elective competency. Therefore, COPRA does not expect that programs will describe the entire assessment cycle for every competency for the self study. Programs merely need to describe other competencies and the stage of assessment for each competency (pp.30-31, 2011 version). The state of assessment on additional competencies will be discussed in depth with the site visit team.

Does assessment evidence need to be presented for all students?

COPRA does not expect specific assessment documentation for each student in the program. Universal competencies will be incorporated into courses and program elements that all students experience. Elective competencies will be incorporated into those relevant tracks and courses for students in those specific elective concentrations. Programs are not expected to present documentation of assessments for each individual student.

What minimum standards are expected of students?

Performance expectations should be directly tied to program mission. COPRA realizes that program missions vary and learning outcomes and competencies should be referenced to program missions rather than absolute performance measures that apply to all programs.

How fully developed do assessment measures need to be?

While programs must demonstrate a completed assessment cycle for one required, mission-specific, and elective competency, guidelines allow programs to document the stage of assessment for each additional competency. Therefore, it is possible to have well developed assessment measures for some competencies and less developed measures for others. COPRA expects that the sophistication of assessment measures and the integration of the competencies into program management will mature over time. Each year, COPRA will assess the programs in a cohort and establish a baseline moving forward. As programs become more familiar with the new expectations and best practices in the field begin to emerge, COPRA's expectations for minimum thresholds of conformance will increase accordingly. Programs in Year 1 would be expected to have some level of implementation of these practices; programs in later years should have full implementation of these practices.

Can team projects be used as evidence of student learning?

Team projects may be appropriate especially for competencies that focus on the ability to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce (e.g. Universal Required Competency #5) and other competencies as appropriate.