



THE UNIVERSITY of  
NEW ORLEANS

# A Needs-Based Assessment Plan

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- **A Mission-based Assessment Process:** Our program design is based on a generalist core paired with concentrations that address needs and opportunities in Greater New Orleans. We have developed the following three concentrations. In addition, students may construct other concentrations from courses available throughout the university, e.g. economic development or higher education leadership.
  - *Nonprofit leadership.* The nonprofit leadership track contributes to the program mission of enhancing public service in Greater New Orleans because nonprofit organizations abound in the area and provide many of needed services. Indeed, the number of nonprofits increased after Hurricane Katrina as government agencies proved incapable of meeting or even coordinating services for the many needs of the population. Many of our graduates work in local nonprofits and students gain valuable experience through class or final projects with nonprofits.
  - *Hazard policy.* New Orleans is certainly a laboratory for the way in which communities prepare for and react to hazards, or fail to do so. The goal of the concentration is not to produce emergency managers, but to produce generalist administrators who can integrate hazard management with ongoing operations.
  - *Criminal justice administration.* New Orleans has struggled with both an exceptionally high crime rate and highly publicized problems in the administration of criminal justice. This track focuses on court administration, case management, and an understanding of environmental factors that affect them, e.g., the nature of criminal behavior, public perceptions of crime, and ways in which different levels of government treat criminal justice issues.
- **Assessing the Learning:**
  - We defined learning outcomes for all universal and elective competencies.
  - A faculty committee reviewed capstone experiences in the spring of 2011.
  - We collected data on learning outcomes in two ways.
    - A survey of students and recent graduates. We asked them to rate the MPA program's contribution to their competence on each of the learning outcomes using a 5-point scale. We did not ask the students to rate their level of competence but the program's contribution to their competence. We considered other options, such as a pre- and post- self evaluation, but concluded that each had problems and this seemed to be the most direct way to get student input about the program, not themselves.
    - Faculty assessments. In the SSY we also began a system in which faculty rate student mastery of the competencies according to the following rubric. The methods of assessment for each competency in each course are listed in a Composite Competency Matrix.
      - **Rubric:**
        - Knowledge/understanding
          - 1 - Demonstration of knowledge is insufficient in scope and/or accuracy; uncritical acceptance of sources; limited or no ability to apply knowledge.
          - 2 - Recognizes most concepts; can access and cite relevant information; still limited ability to combine or utilize information
          - 3 - Has command of key concepts and facts; able both to access and to assess relevant information; can reach and defend conclusions.
          - 4 - Understands and critiques arguments. Integrates material across sources. Makes innovative applications.
          - 5 - Has superior understanding of issues; offers new insights; develops strong arguments
        - Skills (writing, speaking, analysis)
          - 1 - Weak or no ability to perform skill and/or determine which skills are appropriate for a given situation.
          - 2 - Able to apply skills but makes frequent errors (in grammar, organization, speech, analytical techniques, etc.) that significantly detract from communication and conclusions
          - 3 - Able to apply skill appropriately in standard situations.
          - 4 - Has command of range of skills and understands strengths and weaknesses of each.
          - 5 - Masterful use of skill; papers or oral presentations are well organized, coherent, and persuasive; analysis is appropriate to the question and data and leads to defensible conclusions.
- **How evidence of learning was analyzed:** The faculty committee, who had supervised the various projects that year, discussed the products and the work that had been necessary to get the writing in an acceptable form. We then rated students' writing abilities as adequate or inadequate and tried to determine the extent to which we could have predicted the writing problems from evidence collected in the admissions process. Neither grades nor GRE scores, including the writing sample, corresponded well with our assessments of student abilities. Even the students' statements of intent were not good predictors. We decided we needed another measure.
- **How the evidence was used for program change:** Having determined that our application materials did not provide reliable information on students' writing abilities, we instituted a short diagnostic essay for each incoming student. Any one whose competency is considered inadequate is required to take a writing instruction from the English department. We implemented this program in the fall of 2011. We found that one student needed such assistance. As noted, we have slowly raised our admission standards, and the fact that we notify prospective students of the writing requirement may stimulate some self-selection. We intend to continue this program for a while to see if the problem recurs.

