



WORKING DRAFT

Curricular Competencies: NASPAA White Paper

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October 2007**

INTRODUCTION

Standard 4.0 of the current NASPAA standards defines common curriculum components that all accredited programs must demonstrate are covered in their program. The eight components are loosely categorized into three main curricular areas: (a) the management of Public Service Organizations; (b) the application of quantitative and qualitative techniques; and (c) the Understanding of Public Policy and Organizational Environment. NASPAA members know that the common curriculum components do not specify courses that must be taught nor do they suggest how much coverage should be given to any specific topic but they do constitute a list that member schools seeking accreditation must address to meet minimum standards.

Employers of NASPAA program graduates emphasize the need for graduates to develop skills and abilities beyond the traditional content knowledge. Public sector employers, in discussions with the standards task force, emphasized skills 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. A survey of ICMA members revealed that they rate decision making as the top management skill and ethics as the top public sector knowledge skill that will be needed in the next five years. It is clear that employers are looking for more than individuals who know their way around a budget process or human resources; they are looking for people who know these things and how to work in a team, lead, manage change and diversity, think globally, speak and write clearly and act ethically.

It is also clear that the environment of the public sector has changed since the last set of standards was adopted. Globalization has relevance to all areas of the curriculum. The increased utilization of privatization as a way of providing services challenges the public sector to articulate, manage, and evaluate contractors. The explosion of technology creates both opportunity for better communication, transparency, information,

and response while at the same time expanding expectations. Our students may begin their careers in a nonprofit, switch to a private enterprise providing public services, and return to the public sector in a job in the government. These are just a few examples of a changing environment that we expect will continue to change.

The Standards 2009 Steering Committee recognized the need to examine this standard and to make changes consistent with the changes we have witnessed in member schools, employer demands, and a changing environment. The key question addressed here is what form, if any, the set of curriculum competencies should take in a new set of standards. In discussing this issue, the Standards 2009 Steering Committee agreed on the following principle:

PRINCIPLE 8: 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.

In addition, a consensus was quickly reached that if a set of curriculum competencies were to remain in a new set of standards, they should include skills and abilities beyond the traditional content knowledge.

ALTERNATIVES

There was somewhat less consensus on the issue of the specificity and extensiveness of the set of curriculum competencies to be developed. At one extreme is the current form in which a set of curriculum competencies to which each program is held has been specified. As noted above, in their current form, the standards do not specify courses that must be taught nor extent of coverage of each topic, but deviations from these curriculum competencies are not permitted. At the other extreme is a minimalist approach in which no curriculum competencies are specified by the Standards Committee. Instead, each program would be expected to specify a set of curriculum competencies that are consistent with its mission. A number of middle ground alternatives can be specified. For example, a small set of curriculum competencies to which each program is held might be specified and each program would be expected to specify *additional* curriculum competencies that are consistent with its mission. As another example, a set of curriculum competencies could be specified by the Standards Committee, with the expectation that each program would be expected to select a subset that are consistent with its mission, perhaps along with a set of additional curriculum competencies that the program specifies. No doubt other variations are available.

GOALS

Guiding Principle 8, cited above, identifies three goals that are critical in considering this issue. The first is the extent to which a collective identity among those engaged in public service education is developed. This is consistent with the work that

the marketing committee of NASPAA has been doing to raise the visibility of the MPA and MPP among employers to make them the degrees of choice in the public sector employment market. There must be something that ties our programs together be they large or small, urban or rural, having a traditional public administration focus, a public policy focus or a nonprofit focus. What does it mean to hold the MPA or the MPP? What differentiates these degrees from such degrees as the MBA, the Master of Arts in Economics, the jurisdoctorate, or the MSW?

A second critical goal here is acknowledging and encouraging the diversity among programs seeking accreditation. This is consistent with NASPAA's mission and recent strategic planning efforts. NASPAA is "an institutional membership organization which exists to promote excellence in public service education". Public service education can take place within a variety of programs, including those that are focused on public administration, public policy, and nonprofit management. Moreover, our rapidly changing environment is likely to produce new types of programs that provide public service education whose focus cannot at the current time be predicted. The set of curriculum competencies adopted should cut across the different types of programs that we believe fit within the NASPAA umbrella and not disadvantage certain types of programs that otherwise would be encouraged to participate in the accreditation process. For example, MPP programs have long argued that the curriculum competencies contained in the current standards do not address their needs and some have opted not to seek accreditation status as a result.

The third goal included in Guiding Principle #8 is ensuring that students will be capable of acting ethically and effectively in pursuit of the public interest. We are tempted to add a fourth goal, namely the burden placed on programs.

TRADEOFFS

As we teach our students, the different alternatives that have been identified present tradeoffs among the goals that have been articulated. Including at least a minimum set of curriculum competencies that reflect employer needs and the changing nature of the public sector discussed above seems to be an important means of establishing a collective identify. However, the more extensive and specific the set of curriculum competencies that are specified, the more difficult it is to ensure a level playing field for different types of current NASPAA members, never mind those that might emerge in response to environmental changes, can be identified. Indeed, experience in developing the guiding principles suggests that it might be difficult to identify even a minimum set of curriculum competencies that ensure a level playing field for different types of NASPAA programs.

We expect that some NASPAA member programs will find what we termed above the "minimalist approach" to be attractive in many respects. Under this approach, no curriculum competencies would be specified by the Standards Committee. Instead, each program would be expected to specify a set of curriculum competencies that are consistent with its mission. However, one respect in which this approach might *not* be

attractive to member programs is the burden placed on them. Identifying curriculum competencies that are consistent with a program's mission is not a trivial task for that program, at least if done correctly.

Establishing a set of curriculum competencies that are consistent with the missions of most NASPAA member programs to be included in the new Standards would considerably reduce the burden placed on NASPAA members and would serve the purpose of creating a common identity for public affairs education as a whole. To the extent that the MPA and MPP degrees serve to indicate preparation to work in public sector organizations or to work on problems confronting public sector organizations, shouldn't there be some "drop dead" competencies that all students achieve in our programs.

However, as noted above, the challenge confronting those engaged in revising the standards is how to strike a balance between maintaining a common identity without limiting the ability for programs to experiment and to respond to perceived changes in the public sector environment. Striking this balance will be essential to allowing the development of new, innovative programs, to accommodating a wide range of program missions, and to creating and expanding the ability to position the MPA and MPP as the degrees of choice for public sector employers.