

**COPRA Policy Statement**  
**November 17, 2016**

*Based on COPRA decisions made October 2016*

At its October 16-18, 2016 meeting in Columbus, Ohio, the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) held policy discussions and issued interim reports for the 2016-2017 cohort. The following comments build upon previous Policy Statements and provide a window into COPRA's decision-making, as well as continued guidance on the implementation of the 2009 NASPAA Accreditation Standards:

1. **Implementation Schedule for Competency-Based Assessment Conformance on Standard 5.1-Universal Required Competencies:** Unchanged from the expectations for previous cohorts, programs in the 2018-19 and 2019-20 cohorts, whose Self-Study Reports are due August 15 of 2018 and 2019, respectively, should have completed one full cycle of assessment<sup>1</sup> for student learning outcomes in at least three of the universal competency domains. Consistent with previous statements, programs should provide a detailed assessment plan, which includes direct measures as well a timeline for sustainable assessment of the universal competencies moving forward.
2. **Graduation and Persistence Rates:** To enhance the quality and comparability of one of the most critical outcomes of public affairs programs - graduation rates - the Commission will amend student completion data collection to specific collection benchmarks of 2 years, 3 years, and 4 years. To ensure the comprehensive context of students continuing to graduation outside of four years, programs will also be asked to provide a persistence rate<sup>2</sup>. These changes will be effective for self-study reports submitted by the 2017-2018 cohort in August 2017. COPRA expects this change will more closely align with how institutions currently collect completion rates.

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<sup>1</sup> A “full cycle of assessment” means defining a student learning outcome, gathering evidence of learning, analyzing the evidence, and using the analysis to make programmatic decisions.

<sup>2</sup> Student persistence is defined as those students continuing toward completion of the master’s degree, consistent with the program’s institutional policy regarding continuous enrollment.

# COPRA Policy Statement

09.01.15

Based on COPRA decisions made June 2015

At its June 16-18, 2015 meeting in Portland, Oregon, the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) held policy discussions and accreditation actions for the 2014-2015 cohort. The following comments build upon previous Policy Statements and provide a window into COPRA's decision-making, as well as continued guidance on the implementation of the 2009 NASPAA Accreditation Standards:

1. **Implementation Schedule for Competency-Based Assessment Conformance on Standard 5.1-Universal Required Competencies:** Unchanged from the expectations for previous cohorts, programs in the 2016-17 and 2017-18 cohorts, whose Self-Study Reports are due August 15 of 2016 and 2017, respectively, should have completed one full cycle of assessment<sup>3</sup> for student learning outcomes in at least three of the universal competency domains. Consistent with previous statements, programs should provide a detailed assessment plan, which includes direct measures as well a timeline for sustainable assessment of all universal competencies moving forward.
2. **Assessment of specializations and concentrations:** In consultation with the NASPAA Standards Committee, the Self-Study Instructions will be revised to align with a broader, less burdensome approach to Standard 5.3-Mission-Specific Elective Competencies. With a focus on truth-in-advertising, programs will be expected to identify their specializations and concentrations and capacity in offerings. (Programs will have the *option* to provide student learning outcomes information. No formal assessment of specializations/concentrations will be required.)

These revisions will be drafted for approval by the Commission in October 2015, and collected into the NASPAA Data Center for the 2016-17 Cohort Self-Study Report submission August 15, 2016.

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<sup>3</sup> A "full cycle of assessment" means defining a student learning outcome, gathering evidence of learning, analyzing the evidence, and using the analysis to make programmatic decisions.

# COPRA Policy Statement

10.22.14

Based on COPRA decisions made October 2014

At its October 15-17, 2014 meeting in Washington, D.C., the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) held policy discussions and issued interim reports for the 2014-2015 cohort. The following comments build upon previous Policy Statements and provide a window into COPRA's decision-making, as well as continued guidance on the implementation of the 2009 Accreditation Standards:

1. **Implementation Schedule Competency-Based Assessment Conformance on Standard 5.1: Universal Required Competencies:** Unchanged from the expectations for the 2014-15 cohort, delineated in the December 2013 Policy Statement, programs in the 2015-16 cohort, whose Self-Study Reports are due August 15, 2015, should have completed one full cycle of assessment<sup>4</sup> for student learning outcomes in at least three of the universal competency domains. Consistent with previous statements, programs should provide a detailed assessment plan, which includes direct measures as well a timeline for sustainable assessment of all universal competencies moving forward.

**Conformance on Standard 5.2: Mission-specific Required Competencies:** For those programs whose missions necessitate mission-specific required competencies, the Commission expects programs to exhibit progress with regard to defining and assessing these required competencies, aligned with its assessment plan.

**Conformance on Standard 5.3: Mission-specific Elective Competencies:** Programs in the 2015-16 cohort will not be required to demonstrate a full cycle of assessment on their specialization competencies in order to achieve accreditation status. The Commission will continue to address truth-in-advertising and other aspects of specialization quality (e.g. adequacy of course offerings, quality of faculty).

2. **Diversity:** COPRA affirms and repeats the December 2013 Policy Statement, with respect to its evaluation of diversity:

COPRA continues to evaluate diversity against the context of the program itself, allowing programs based in different geographic locales and regions to be sensitive to local diversity issues and concerns. Programs are expected to provide program- and mission-specific diversity plans that detail strategies to promote faculty, student, and curricular diversity and foster an overall climate of inclusiveness.

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<sup>4</sup> A "full cycle of assessment" means defining a student learning outcome, gathering evidence of learning, analyzing the evidence, and using the analysis to make programmatic decisions.

Programs in recent cohorts have had difficulty articulating to COPRA how the program works to "promote diversity and climate of inclusiveness" without a strategic diversity plan, developed with respect to a program's unique mission and environment.<sup>5</sup> The Commission seeks more substantial evidence regarding programmatic efforts to promote diversity and a climate of inclusiveness, specifically demonstrable evidence of good practice, a framework for evaluating diversity efforts, and the connection to the program's mission and objectives. The requirement of a written diversity plan will be reflected in forthcoming changes to the Self-Study Instructions and expected of the 2015-16 Cohort.

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<sup>5</sup> See COPRA's June 2011 Policy Statement.

# COPRA Policy Statement

12.06.2013

Based on COPRA decisions made October 2013

At its October 7-9, 2013 meeting in Washington, D.C., the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) held policy discussions and issued interim reports for the 2013-2014 cohort. The following comments build upon previous Policy Statements and provide a window into COPRA's decision-making, as well as continued guidance on the implementation of the 2009 accreditation standards:

## 1. Implementation Schedule Slowdown for Competency-Based Assessment

**Conformance on Standard 5.1: Universal Required Competencies:** Based on the performance of programs in recent cohorts and accredited program feedback, the Commission announced at the October 2013 NASPAA Annual Conference that accredited programs will experience some relief in the implementation schedule for the NASPAA 2009 competency-based accreditation standards. Programs in the 2014-15 cohort, whose Self-Study Reports are due August 15, 2014, should have completed one full cycle of assessment<sup>6</sup> for student learning outcomes in at least **three** of the universal competency domains. Consistent with previous statements, programs should provide a detailed assessment plan, which includes direct measures as well a timeline for sustainable assessment of all universal competencies moving forward. This expectation replaces the more optimistic implementation timeline suggested in COPRA's 2012 policy statement.

**Conformance on Standard 5.2: Mission-specific Required Competencies:** For those programs whose missions necessitate mission-specific required competencies, the implementation slowdown will also apply. The Commission expects programs to exhibit progress with regard to defining and assessing these required competencies, aligned with its assessment plan.

**Conformance on Standard 5.3: Mission-specific Elective Competencies:** A similar implementation slowdown will also be in effect for specialization competencies. Programs in the 2014-15 cohort will not be required to demonstrate a full cycle of assessment on their specialization competencies in order to achieve accreditation status. COPRA will look for some progress in efforts to define specialization competencies and a commitment to assessment of the specializations moving forward, as articulated by the program's assessment plan. The Commission will continue to address truth-in-advertising and other aspects of specialization quality (e.g. adequacy of course offerings, quality of faculty) in the interim period.

- 2. Diversity:** COPRA continues to evaluate diversity against the context of the program itself, allowing programs based in different geographic locales and regions to be sensitive to local diversity issues and concerns. Programs are expected to provide program- and mission-specific

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<sup>6</sup> A "full cycle of assessment" means defining a student learning outcome, gathering evidence of learning, analyzing the evidence, and using the analysis to make programmatic decisions.

diversity plans that detail strategies to promote faculty, student, and curricular diversity and foster an overall climate of inclusiveness.

Programs in recent cohorts have had difficulty articulating to COPRA how the program works to "promote diversity and climate of inclusiveness" without a strategic diversity plan, developed with respect to a program's unique mission and environment.<sup>7</sup> The Commission seeks more substantial evidence regarding programmatic efforts to promote diversity and a climate of inclusiveness, specifically demonstrable evidence of good practice, a framework for evaluating diversity efforts, and the connection to the program's mission and objectives. The requirement of a written diversity plan will be reflected in forthcoming changes to the Self-Study Instructions and expected of the 2014-15 Cohort.

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<sup>7</sup> See COPRA's 2011 Policy Statement.

# COPRA Policy Statement

9.01.13

Based on COPRA decisions made June 2013

At its June 2013 meeting in San Juan, Puerto Rico, the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) made final accreditation conformance decisions on programs in the 2012-2013 cohort, the second cohort to be accredited under the 2009 NASPAA Standards. The following comments build upon previous Policy Statements and provide a window into COPRA's decision-making, as well as continued guidance on the implementation of the 2009 accreditation standards:

- 1. Mission-based Outcomes Assessment:** COPRA expects programs successful in accreditation to show a clear connection between the mission and goals of the program and its overall program and student learning assessment processes. COPRA should clearly observe the relation among the elements of assessment, as well as clearly defined and observable program goals, objectives, and outcomes to guide the evolution of the program's mission, design, and continuous improvement. The program should present formal documentation of how it establishes its goals and outcomes. This should be strategically articulated in a logic model, which explicitly outlines the links between the mission and goals of the program, the curriculum, specifically courses delivering required competencies, the measures, and student learning outcomes.
- 2. Conformance on Standard 5:** COPRA expects programs to provide direct evidence or data to support that its students have achieved the mission-based competencies established by the program. One way to provide evidence of conformance is to implement a direct, competency-based program assessment approach with respect to Standards 1.3 and 5.1. The Commission expects a detailed, concrete plan for implementation of a long-term, sustainable assessment enterprise, appropriate for the program's mission, goals, and structure. A successful program should discuss and document its assessment development and provide an assessment plan, which includes the strategies underlining the assessment of student learning outcomes, as well as its approach to programmatic improvement. The assessment plan should further detail direct (and indirect, as needed) measures, the use of rubrics for evaluation, faculty and stakeholder involvement, analysis procedures, and how analysis is used for overall program improvement. 2012-2013 cohort programs receiving full accreditation demonstrated the completion of at least one cycle of assessment, including the use evidence collected to impact programmatic improvement. COPRA's expectations will continue to increase with each cohort and will depend on the overall nature of the assessment plan and the concrete evidence of its implementation.
- 3. Mission-specific Elective Competencies:** During the ongoing transition period, the Commission expects programs to place emphasis on developing their universal competency assessment. Mission-specific Elective Competencies (Standard 5.3) are expected to be identified.

- 4. Diversity:** COPRA expects that student and faculty diversity will be reflected in each aspect of a school's programs. COPRA evaluates diversity against the context of the program itself, allowing programs based in different geographic locales and regions to be sensitive to local diversity issues and concerns. Programs are expected to provide program- and mission-specific diversity plans that detail strategies to promote faculty, student, and curricular diversity and foster an overall climate of inclusiveness.
- 5. Resource Adequacy:** The accreditation process, and ongoing outcomes-assessment, are resource-intensive activities. As such, some programs are having difficulty providing evidence of the adequacy or effective use of resources, including faculty, administrative support, student services, and fiscal, as related to competency-based assessment. In its review, COPRA looks for programs to demonstrate a level of resource sustainability and effectiveness to ensure mission-based student needs and outcomes are being met.
- 6. International Accreditation:** Programs based outside of the United States are accreditable by COPRA. The Standards allow for public service mission-driven, non-American public policy, affairs, and administration programs to seek and achieve accreditation. International programs are subject to the same standards and expectations as programs based within the United States. As with all programs, COPRA considers the program's mission, outcomes, and the context within which the program operates.
- 7. Student Learning Outcomes:** COPRA requires programs to accurately and publicly provide their stakeholders with relevant information regarding student learning outcomes, to include graduation rates and employment placement. Programs should demonstrate to COPRA that their websites reflect current information in these areas.



# COPRA Policy Statement

Based on COPRA decisions made June 2012

At its June 2012 meeting in Savannah, Georgia the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation made final accreditation conformance decisions on programs in the 2011-12 cohort, the first full cohort to use the 2009 NASPAA Standards. The following comments provide some window into COPRA's decision-making and provide continued guidance on the implementation of the 2009 accreditation standards.

1. **Transition period expectations:** In white papers written since the adoption of the 2009 NASPAA Accreditation Standards, COPRA has stated that it expects there to be a phase-in period to full implementation for some of the new accreditation standards, specifically those related to Standard 5 (competencies assessment). Based on the thresholds established by the performance of programs in the current cohort, the normal expectation is that programs in upcoming cohorts will reach the following thresholds in implementation:
  - a. **2013-14:** Programs will have completed one full cycle of assessment for at least **three** of the universal competencies and have made progress on the other universal competencies.
  - b. ~~2014-15: Programs will have completed one full cycle of assessment for all five of the universal competencies, and all of the mission-specific elective competencies.~~<sup>8</sup>
2. **Linking competencies to mission and goals:** COPRA expects to observe a clear link between the program's mission and the competencies expected of its students. Programs should use logic models or other similar illustrations in their Self Study Reports to show the connections between the various aspects of their goals, measurements, and outcomes. Programs should explicitly articulate the linkage between Standard 1.3 and Standard 5.1. Although Standard 1.3 refers to program outcomes more broadly, student learning outcomes should be included in the discussion of Standard 1.3, in terms of how they relate to overall program goals.
3. **Frequency of assessment:** COPRA requests that programs submit within their Self Studies, a written plan or planning template that addresses how they plan to assess each competency, when they will be assessing each competency, who is responsible for assessing each competency, and what measures will be used to assess each competency. The Self Study Instructions currently state, "The program is expected to engage in ongoing assessment of student learning for all universal required competencies, all mission-specific required competencies, and all elective (option, track, specialization, or concentration) competencies. The program does not need to assess student learning for every student, on every competency, every semester. However, the program should have a written plan for assessing each competency on a periodic basis, at least once during the accreditation period. This plan should be available to the COPRA site visit team." COPRA will be amending them in the next iteration to emphasize submission with the Self Study Report.

COPRA further discussed the expected frequency of competency assessment, as the Self Study Instructions are not explicit on this point. The Commission's early sense is that assessing each

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<sup>8</sup> Overwritten by COPRA Policy Statement 12.6.2014.

competency *only* once each accreditation cycle would not be sufficient, and will be developing language for the next iteration of the Self Study Instructions to this effect.

4. **Modalities:** Programs that have more than one modality for delivering their program (online cohort, executive education, multiple campuses, etc.) should provide numerical data in the online self-study report form in the aggregate for the degree as a whole. The program should attach as a PDF file the data requested broken down by modalities within the degree. This guidance will be added to the next iteration of the Self Study Instructions.
  
5. **Faculty Qualifications:** The Commission approved updated language to the definitions for Academically Qualified Faculty and Professionally Qualified Faculty, in addition to clarifying the faculty rules in the Self Study Instructions. You can view the changes to the definitions and instructions [here](#). Some highlighted changes include:
  - Emphasizing the maintenance of scholarship activities in the Academically Qualified definition
  - Clarifying the definition of Professionally Qualified to call for a “graduate” degree, instead of a “terminal” degree.
  - Adding “nucleus” to the basis of judgment statement that suggests 75% of [nucleus] faculty should be academically qualified.

# COPRA Policy Statement

Based on COPRA decisions made June 2011

At its June 2011 meeting in Utah, the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation made final accreditation conformance decisions on five programs that agreed to pilot the new NASPAA 2009 accreditation standards. After an initial Self-Study review and a site visit, all five programs were reaccredited for the maximum term available. The following comments provide some window into COPRA's decision-making and provide early guidance on the implementation of the 2009 accreditation standards.

**1. Thresholds for conformance** on some issues have not yet been established, as there was significant variability in the pilot group, especially when it comes to the nuanced review of student learning outcomes. A pilot group of five programs is a small sample, and not an unbiased one, either, as all programs voluntarily sought to review their programs under the new requirements. Additionally, the pilot programs only had the new requirements less than a year before their accreditation cycle began. It will take another round or so of reviews for COPRA to get a better understanding of where the true baseline is for conformance on some of the newer requirements. For now, all programs appear to have defined the universal competencies with respect to their missions and are at some level assessing that learning and using those results for decision-making. Not all programs in the first round had defined competencies for advertised specializations, but COPRA's expectations in this area will grow over time.

**2. Competencies:** COPRA's expects to observe a clear link between the program's mission and the competencies expected of its students. Programs are encouraged to use logic models or other similar illustrations in their Self Study Reports to show the connections between the various aspects of their goals, measurements, and outcomes.

**3. White papers.** Two new concepts in the 2009 accreditation standards merited additional explanation and guidance after the first round of reviews. COPRA will be releasing two white papers in Fall 2011, one on competency assessment and COPRA's implementation expectations, and the other on faculty qualifications, including how to articulate which faculty members are academically and professionally qualified. (*Available in the COPRA Interpretations Section*)

**4. Faculty Diversity.** While the 2009 accreditation standards do not explicitly ask for a diversity plan, it is very difficult to articulate how the program works to "promote diversity and climate of inclusiveness" without a strategic diversity plan, or demonstrable program strategies, developed with respect to a program's unique mission and environment.

**5. Executive Education.** This remains an area of continuing policy development for COPRA. Under the 2009 accreditation standards, it remains possible in exceptional cases for a program to articulate that an Executive MPA program exists as a track or component of the MPA, when both programs are served by a single mission and a single set of competencies, even if some "inputs" are different. While this gives programs additional options for articulating conformance, this does not negate, and remains consistent with, COPRA's 2008-09 Policy Statement: Executive MPA's a. COPRA Policy Statement: In most instances Executive MPA (E-MPA) programs are no longer appropriately considered a track or option within a MPA degree program, but rather separate programs with a unique mission and a distinct student population. Accordingly, COPRA considers it appropriate for these E-MPAs to be recognized as distinct degrees

requiring separate Self-Study Reports. If a program seeks accreditation of a single degree program that includes both traditional MPA and E-MPA components, the burden will be on the program to demonstrate that a single mission, admission criteria, faculty, curriculum, etc. apply to all students in the program. Programs must still make the argument that viewing the Executive program as a track is appropriate in their case, and that a "single set of competencies" and a "single mission" is also appropriate in their context.

**6. Student retention.** For both the pre and post-2009 accreditation standards, COPRA continues its focus on ensuring the connection between mission and goals, admissions, student tracking, retention, graduation, and student services. Tracking student success and retention is critical to ensuring consistency between the mission, admissions practices, student services, and graduation placement. Programs that have difficulty tracking students tend to struggle to meet accreditation requirements in many of these areas.

**7.** COPRA substantially revised its Policies and Procedures for Accreditation document. All programs seeking accreditation should be familiar with these requirements. This document is posted on the NASPAA website.

**The guidance contained below refers to the old NASPAA Standards (pre-2009) it is for programs using the old standards. As COPRA establishes new guidance and precedents through its work with the pilot programs and throughout the full implementation of the standards this page will be updated.**

## **COPRA Policies and Clarifications 2008-2009**

### **POLICIES**

#### **1. Executive MPA's**

a. COPRA Policy Statement: In most instances Executive MPA (E-MPA) programs are no longer appropriately considered a track or option within a MPA degree program, but rather separate programs with a unique mission and a distinct student population. Accordingly, COPRA considers it appropriate for these E-MPA's to be recognized as distinct degrees requiring separate Self-Study Reports. If a program seeks accreditation of a single degree program that includes both traditional MPA and E-MPA components, the burden will be on the program to demonstrate that a single mission, admission criteria, faculty, curriculum, etc. apply to all students in the program.

#### **2. Credit for Experience or Nontraditional Coursework**

a. COPRA Policy Statement: Programs that grant academic credit for work experience or coursework taken outside of traditional university graduate coursework must articulate a mission-based rationale for this practice and demonstrate that the Program has developed and consistently applies appropriate criteria for evaluating the quality and relevance of the work.

#### **3. Limits on Undergraduate Coursework**

a. COPRA Policy Statement: Programs accredited by COPRA under usual circumstances should

not allow any more than 2 courses of undergraduate coursework to count toward the professional graduate degree. In most cases, undergraduate credit should not count toward common curriculum (core) coursework or as a substitute for a common curriculum course. When undergraduate courses are permitted as elective coursework, the burden is on the Program to demonstrate that appropriate levels of oversight are provided in student advising and evaluating the quality, rigor, and relevance of the undergraduate courses.

#### **4. Defining “significant professional experience”**

a. COPRA Policy Statement: For programs that grant waivers of internship requirements or specific courses within the curriculum on the basis of “significant professional experience,” the burden is on the Program to demonstrate that it has a mission-based rationale for the practice as well as a clear and consistently applied policy to assess the length, relevance and level of responsibility associated with that experience.

## **CLARIFICATIONS**

### **1. Standard 4.21 Information Management and Technology**

a. Over the past few cohorts, COPRA has seen programs struggling with Standard 4.21 IT. The Commission is looking for evidence that all students are exposed to information management, technology applications and policy in the core curriculum. The evidence should include examples of how students are exposed to issues such as privacy, security, accessibility of technologies, and policies regarding the collection, use and dissemination of information, or other information management and policy topics related to the program’s unique mission.

### **2. Standard 5.5 Faculty Diversity**

a. The Commission has also seen programs struggling with Standard 5.5. The Commission is looking for evidence that program-specific plans are in place and are being implemented to promote faculty diversity with regard to faculty recruitment, supplemental diversity efforts (such as diversifying adjuncts and guest speakers), and providing a positive and supportive atmosphere for women, minorities, and persons with disabilities. Solely discussing a university-wide affirmative action plan for hiring is not sufficient to meet this standard.

### **3. Standard 6.3 Admission Factors/ 7.1 Advisement and Appraisal**

a. For programs with relatively open admissions policies, the Commission is looking for evidence that the program has a mission-based rationale for its admission policies, is limiting admission to applicants showing good potential for success, and is able to demonstrate a link between the relatively open admission policy and the program’s advisement and appraisal structure.