Core Competencies in Master of Public Administration Programs: Perspectives from Local Government Managers

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ABSTRACT

The Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) recommends that Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs adopt five core competencies as part of the accreditation process. Implementation of a competency-based curriculum may help ensure student learning and career preparedness for public service. This exploratory study examines local government managers' perception of NASPAA's competencies in regard to management practices. Survey results suggest that MPA programs need to emphasize leadership development skills along with a more thorough integration of policy and administration into curricula. Moreover, findings indicate that MPA programs should specifically emphasize application of NASPAA's core competencies in terms of applying critical thinking and analytical skills to the decision-making process.

KEYWORDS

NASPAA core competencies, competency-based curriculum, public managers, MPA

An essential mission of Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs is to prepare students for public service roles (Lazenby, 2010; Raffel, Maser, & Calarusse, 2011). MPA programs require students to acquire knowledge, skills, and abilities—or competencies—needed for the specialized professional field of public administration (Lazenby, 2010). These competencies are critical in articulating specific skill sets needed by public administrators and in creating quality standards for institutions and educators (Aristigueta & Gomes, 2006; Elmore, 2002; Piskulich & Peat, 2014). According to the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) accreditation standards, MPA programs must demonstrate adherence to the following five core competencies to ensure student learning and career preparedness in public service: "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" (NASPAA, Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation, 2014, p. 7).

A critical issue public administration educators must contend with is the relevancy of these core competencies to public management practice. Educators need to bridge the theory-practice gap and prepare students for translating competencies into practice (Battaglio & Scicchitano, 2013; Hatcher, 2015; Radin, 2013; Wang, Bunch, & Stream, 2013). Many scholars have examined the theory-practice chasm and challenged academicians and practitioners to interact in meaningful dialogues. Stated goals of such efforts are to define the necessary competencies for local government managers as well as build curricula and content in support of such development (Battaglio & Scicchitano, 2013; Lazenby, 2010; Wang et al., 2013).

The authors of this article took steps to strengthen relationships between, on one side, faculty at a NASPAA-accredited MPA program at a southeastern state university and, on the other, local government managers in Florida municipalities and counties. We designed a survey to examine local government managers' perception of NASPAA's core competencies and conducted the research during the 2013–2014 school year. Our purpose was to understand how local government managers perceive NASPAA core competencies and subcompetencies developed by our university's MPA program in regard to career and management practice. The findings suggest that most local government managers recognize the importance of NASPAA's competencies to public service. In addition, practitioners highlighted the need to strengthen development of leadership skills, to apply critical thinking to decision making, and to more thoroughly integrate policy into public administration curricula.

COMPETENCY-BASED CURRICULA: LINKING THEORY TO PRACTICE

Higher-education programs fill a unique role in preparing students for public service and meeting the needs of a diverse society (Durant, 2002; Raffel et al., 2011). With pressure from accreditors, legislators, and other funding agencies, MPA programs must build on their values and unique contributions to distinguish them from other disciplines (Kapucu, 2011; Piskulich & Peat, 2014). Given educators' important role in ensuring student learning outcomes, it becomes critical for programs to generate guidelines and assess whether their students are truly prepared, which is an essential goal of the NASPAA accreditation process (Durant, 2002). MPA programs are expected to instill competencies in their students, such that students develop the tool kit needed for success (Aristigueta & Gomes, 2006; McFarland, 2009; Peddle & Thurmaier, 2011). In the history of competency-based program development, NASPAA is a pivotal resource in terms of identifying the knowledge, skills, and abilities students should learn. Specifically, NASPAA (2014) recommends that degree programs adopt five core competencies to align with programs' mission and curriculum development as part of the accreditation process.

NASPAA's five core competencies begin with students' ability to lead and manage in public governance. Students are expected to develop leadership and management skills as they learn about government operations and how to interact with a diverse network of stakeholders. The second core competency refers to participation in and contribution to the policy-making process, followed by the third competency of critical and analytical thinking and problem solving. Through building public service perspectives, a student is better able to articulate and apply his or her knowledge through ethical reasoning and democratic participation. Lastly, the fifth competency of effective communication hinges on a student's ability to interact with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry (Lazenby, 2010; NASPAA, 2014; Raffel et al., 2011).

Leading and Managing in Public Governance

Leading and managing within multiple networks of stakeholders are intrinsic elements in government management practice (Archer & Cameron, 2008; Kerrigan, 2013; Raffel et al., 2011). To advance this core competency, students in MPA programs not only learn how to apply leadership skills and principles of public management, but also develop expertise about local government and learn how to resolve conflicts and build consensus among diverse stakeholders.

As current and future public service leaders, students will not only help shape their communities but engage in developing and implementing policies that uphold democratic values (Ansell & Gash, 2007; Morse, 2010; Thach & Thompson, 2007; Van Wart, 2013; Zhang, Lee, & Yang, 2012). It is important that students reflect and learn about their roles as leaders within government management to ensure the quality and equal distribution of services and programs as well as full inclusion of the community (Brintnall, 2008).

Contributing to Public Policy-Making

In terms of participation in and contribution to the public policy-making process, MPA students are expected to develop the ability to analyze policy issues, understand policy development and implementation, and engage in policy-making and implementation processes. Public policy-making and the administration of those policies have a complex relationship and cannot be separated from each other. However, public administration scholarship tends to treat policy as a given and often does not pay sufficient attention to the interplay between policy and administration (Moynihan, 2014). In fact, policies affect the organizational environment, culture, and employee motivation, all of which are fundamental to daily management practices. By demonstrating knowledge of governmental institutions, powers, and relationships, a public administrator can thoroughly understand cultural and social mores and patterns on local, state, national, and global levels (Holzer & Lin, 2007; Perry 2005).

Furthermore, understanding the policy process adds to an administrator's practical knowledge of various aspects of management and strengthens the ability to act as a community leader and facilitate dialogues related to community needs (Cunningham, 2010; Lazenby, 2010; Zhang & Feiock, 2010). On a practical level, public administration influences development and implementation of public policy through involvement in the design process and execution of management discretion. It is paramount for MPA programs to emphasize the role students will have in the policy-making and implementation process.

Problem Solving and Decision Making

The most basic nature of a public administrator is as a professional practitioner engaged in solving complex issues and making decisions accordingly; thus it is critical that students develop competency in analyzing, synthesizing, thinking critically, solving problems, and making decisions. Complexity captures the nature of most public management and policy issues, which requires public administrators to navigate and connect to a foundational knowledge base (Kasdan, 2015). MPA programs need to challenge students to become independent thinkers to address such complexity.

Connecting the competency of problem solving and decision making to the tool of statistics, MPA students are required to apply analytical skills to examine their environment and contextualize potential applications. By applying theoretical frameworks to social problems, students can develop comprehensive points of view and translate them into practical applications. This translation into implementation is a crucial component of both public management practice and the administrator's role (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000).

Applying a Public Service Perspective

The competency of applying a public service perspective is an attribute that differentiates the public administration profession from others (Raffel, 2010). Through a holistic, service-based approach, public administrators enhance community relationships, build trust, and develop

their ability to provide service (Wang & Van Wart, 2007). Public administrators integrate their public service perspectives into decision-making processes to serve the interests of citizens and communities (Denhardt, 2001; Moynihan, 2014; Zhang et al., 2012).

Community conflicts often arise due to ineffective communication. By emphasizing the competency of communicating public interests based on ethical reasoning and democratic participation, MPA programs can prepare students to transform negative conflicts into positive changes (Carrizales, 2010; Johnson & Rivera, 2007). This is visibly seen in the actions of public service practitioners who seek to build their communities through determining needs, providing services, and embarking on continuous relationship building (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000). It is imperative for educators to encourage MPA students to develop a public service perspective: "In a world of active citizenship, public officials will increasingly play more than a service delivery role—they will play a conciliating, a mediating, or even an adjudicating role" (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000, p. 554). Moreover, public administration practitioners are expected to pursue fairness and to incorporate and value principles of democracy and public transparency within their decision-making process.

Interacting Productively with a Diverse Citizenry and Workforce

A critical learning outcome for MPA students is to understand government structures and their influence on citizens' active participation in governance, which connects to the competency of interacting productively with a diverse citizenry and within the workplace. As Perry (2005) suggests, administrators must think globally and act locally. These global perspectives challenge administrators to acknowledge "the particular realities of the cultures and communities in which we work, without the imposition of preconceived frameworks" (Brinkerhoff & Brinkerhoff, 2005, p. 74). Moreover, educators need to enhance students' ability to communicate with various individuals from government, nonprofit and for-profit organizations, and the

community (Archer & Cameron, 2008; Sun & Anderson, 2012). Understanding diverse cultures begins with basic interactions between groups of individuals within the current societal context (Carrizales, 2010; Primo, 2013). Although seemingly basic, this critical element is a major daily challenge facing public management practice, which requires clear, coherent articulation of public needs along with recommendations and decision-making strategies for action (Berman, 1997; Stout & Holmes, 2013).

The inclusion of diversity in MPA education is challenging because of this principle's connection to all aspects of an MPA program, such as recruitment and retention of faculty and students, development of curricula content, and implementation within courses (Johnson & Rivera, 2007). Some programs acknowledge diversity only in terms of equity and access within a human resources management course. In its diversity standards, NASPAA is leading the effort to increase awareness and action concerning diversity within accredited programs, while acknowledging areas of disparity (Primo, 2013). This call for action is just the beginning of developing more culturally competent practitioners who can navigate the changing demographics of their communities and produce positive growth (Carrizales, 2010).

Competency-Based MPA Curricula and Reflective Practitioners

Educational competencies consist of the essential knowledge, skills, and abilities needed for students to provide guidance to their communities (Aristigueta & Gomes, 2006). Ideally, students engage with a competency-based curriculum that supports their development and offers opportunities to enhance reflective, critical, and reflexive capacities as well as technical and administrative proficiency (Lazenby, 2010; Raffel, 2009). As a result, students are better able to meet the demands of their roles and responsibilities while also promoting community growth and development.

When comparing competency-based education of MPA programs to other disciplines, one finds similar mind-sets. Disciplines such as

psychology, public health, student affairs, education, and medicine use competency-based education to identify and describe the necessary skills each graduate will attain as well as assessment measures to determine the quality of this skill development (Carrizales, 2010; Curran et al., 2012; Hatcher et al., 2013). The first question, then, is whether practitioners and academicians similarly value these competencies. Debatably, the divide between practitioners and academicians revolves around differences in audiences, interests, methods, discourses, and viewpoints (Battaglio & Scicchitano, 2013). For some, it simply is a difference between knowing and doing (Brintnall, 2008). This difference highlights the importance of competencies because they bridge the gap between the theoretical or academic world and the practicing world. The next question concerns the effectiveness of competencies in assessing goals, training exercises, tasks, roles, objectives, skills, and performance statements (Bawane & Spector, 2009; Kuk & Banning, 2009). In sum, does the accreditation process and core competencies diminish the gap between theory and practice?

Raffel, Maser, and Calarusse (2011) answer this summary question in the affirmative, because the accreditation process establishes expectations for MPA programs and adapts curricula to the societal climate. These adaptations maintain the relevancy and legitimacy of MPA programs. This does not mean the process of accreditation is easy. In fact, accreditation in public service education is "a work in progress with many substantive challenges and opportunities [that] invigorate the profession" (Raffel et al., 2011, p. 85).

Lazenby (2010) surveyed MPA programs regarding the content of their curricula compared to 118 competencies deemed important for local government. The results suggested that the MPA programs, which concentrated specifically on local government, were not adequately covering the following areas: leadership, interpersonal communication, human relations, and community building (Lazenby, 2010). In another study, Zhang, Lee, and Yang (2012) interviewed local managers in Florida and found that managers rely more on their work experience than on formal education to build the knowledge and skills needed for policy-making. Zhang et al. (2012) further suggested the need to enhance practical components in formal MPA curricula and education.

To meet future needs for qualified practitioners in local government, MPA programs need to nurture strong relationships with local governments (Gabris, Davis, & Nelson, 2010). To bridge the theory-practice gap, MPA programs can invite practitioner speakers from government and work with government to design and implement internship programs. MPA programs can engage practitioners in the accreditation process and ask them to review and evaluate their curricula. Feedback and input from practitioners can help MPA programs identify strengths and service gaps, which would be valuable in producing administrators who "are readily employable and are effective public managers" (Peddle & Thurmaier, 2011, p. 536).

Lazenby (2010) also suggested that the practice of reflection is critical when integrating leadership, interpersonal communication, and motivations within professional competencies. As Raffel (2009) stated, MPA programs "must offer students opportunities to enhance their reflective, critical, and reflexive capacities, and to share and debate views with one another and their faculty" (p. 137). In that vein, the study described here used a survey to elicit professional reflection, the aim being to bridge the gap between the academic and professional arenas of public administration.

METHODS

To understand local government managers' perception of NASPAA's core competencies and their integration within public service positions, we created a survey to address the five core competencies as well as related subcategories. For each competency, faculty in the School of Public Administration at a southeastern state university developed subcategories of competencies for implementation purposes. The process included multiple iterations and

collaborative efforts with a diverse group of stakeholders, including advisory board members and student representatives. The MPA program incorporates a capstone course that requires students to build on previously learned competencies while focusing on the connection between theory and practice. As part of the 2013–2014 course, students helped distribute survey questionnaires to 81 local city and county managers from Florida's 411 municipalities and 76 counties. Of the 81, 62 (77%) responded, including 39 city managers and 23 county managers. The population size of the cities and counties was as small as 252 and as large as 1,397,710 (U.S. Census Bureau, 2014). The

average population size was 133,544. In addition, 86% of respondents identified as male, and 83% were 45 years or older.

The survey instrument included closed- and open-ended questions. In the closed-ended questions, managers rated familiarity with and perceived importance of the NASPAA core competencies and related subcategories using a 5-point Likert scale (1 = strongly disagree, 5 = strongly agree). The closed-ended questions also asked about managers' educational backgrounds, to connect curricula and career preparation. The open-ended questions sought to obtain respondents' perceptions of NASPAA'S

TABLE 1.

Local Government Managers' Assessments of NASPAA Core Competencies and Subcompetencies

	SD	D	NAD	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
Lead and manage in public governance	0	4	8	29	8	3.86	.82
Develop expertise on local government	0	6	11	30	3	3.60	.78
Develop an ability to lead and manage within multiple networks of stakeholders	0	6	8	30	6	3.71	.83
Reinforce democratic principles and practices	0	3	12	26	9	3.82	.80
Produce consensus or consent among diverse stakeholders	0	5	10	29	6	3.72	.81
Model the skills and power of leadership and utilize principles of public management	0	5	17	20	7	3.60	.86
Participate in and contribute to the policy process	0	2	6	28	11	4.02	.74
Develop capacity to analyze political theory, policy process, and implementation	0	4	6	26	13	3.98	.85
Analyze policy issues/problems using different methodologies	0	3	7	28	11	3.96	.79
Identify, evaluate, and communicate evidence-based policy	0	6	8	22	12	3.85	.97
Design policy-implementation methodology and actively engage	0	3	7	33	5	3.83	.69
Analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions	0	1	4	24	16	4.22	.70
Develop expertise in techniques used in managing government operations	0	4	8	25	12	3.94	.85
Appraise the concepts of social science research methods, statistical analysis/techniques; apply the skills	0	4	11	25	9	3.76	.84
Create networked/collaboration solution to complex problems	0	5	11	25	7	3.75	.89
Identify, evaluate, and model best practices	0	2	10	27	9	3.92	.77
Develop professional capacity in basic skills	0	1	7	21	19	4.17	.75

core competencies and managers' assessments of their own career preparedness. More specifically, the open-ended questions focused on critical competencies for success, integration of these competencies into educational programs, and recommendations for program development.

Once we gathered the information, we cleaned the data using an Excel spreadsheet before performing analysis using SPSS (Statistical Package for the Social Sciences) software. We calculated descriptive statistics such as frequency, mean, and standard deviation to measure how local government mangers perceive NASPAA's core competencies and subcategories. We reviewed

and analyzed the qualitative data using open-ended coding strategy to identify themes and patterns (Babbie, 2013; Creswell, 2014).

RESULTS

Table 1 displays the results of our survey. Approximately 60% of respondents said they were familiar or very familiar with NASPAA's core competencies and other competencies related to the field of public administration. Approximately 30% of respondents stated they were unfamiliar with the core competencies, and 10% selected "neither agree or disagree." This was not unexpected, as the respondents varied in their educational degrees, which

TABLE 1. (continued)

Local Government Managers' Assessments of NASPAA Core Competencies and Subcompetencies

	SD	D	NAD	A	SA	Mean	Std. Dev.
Articulate and apply a public service perspective	0	4	9	26	9	3.83	.84
Develop respect and demonstrate methods for authentic interaction	0	3	13	20	13	3.88	.88
Value and demonstrate commitment to professionalism and integrity in serving the public	0	3	7	20	19	4.12	.88
Communicate public interest based on ethical reasoning and democratic participation	0	3	9	22	15	4.00	.87
Critique instrumental reasoning in order to promote social and economic equity and justice	1	5	9	27	7	3.69	.92
Incorporate and value principles of democracy, public transparency, and consensus building	0	6	10	28	5	3.65	.83
Communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry	0	3	10	25	9	3.85	.81
Incorporate various communication tools and strategies in the management of public organizations	0	3	12	24	10	3.86	.82
Incorporate major concepts, skills, processes, and policies in public service management	0	4	8	28	9	3.88	81
Develop cultural competency and appreciation of diversity for collaborating	0	4	9	26	10	3.86	.84
Negotiate interest-based resolutions with stakeholders experiencing conflict	0	4	11	26	8	3.78	.82
Critique existing partnerships and promote engagement and interaction with citizens, nonprofit organizations, and other entities	1	6	12	22	8	3.61	.98

Note. Respondents ranked familiarity with public administration's core competencies and subcompetencies (questions were shortened for presentation in this table). SD = strongly disagree, D = disagree, NAD = neither agree nor disagree, A = agree, SA = strongly agree.

ranged from public administration (28%), business administration (22%), political science (17%), accounting/finance (12%), to urban studies or planning (8%).

Although there was some divergence, there was strong agreement as to the overall importance of NASPAA's core competencies. For the managers who agreed and strongly agreed with the importance of each competency, the aspect of analyzing, synthesizing, thinking critically, solving problems, and making decisions received the highest value (89%). Second was participating in and contributing to the policy process (83%), followed by the ability to lead and manage in public governance (76%). Articulating and applying a public service perspective received 73%; and communicating and interacting productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry received 72%.

Leading and Managing in Public Governance

Concerning the competency of leading and managing in public governance, local government managers agreed (76%) on the importance of developing expertise in local government and the ability to navigate the "people side" of public administration. Among the subcategories of this core competency, "Reinforce democratic principles and practices" scored the highest (mean = 3.82). For some managers, leadership is not a technical skill to be taught but a value that enhances other important qualities. As one respondent stated, "Programs need more leadership training. As society changes, leadership is more important than process. Spend the most time on dealing with stakeholders [rather] than process or how and why. You can hire technical skills but not leadership skills."

Some managers highlighted that public administration coursework needs to emphasize leadership, because this skill relates to effective communication. Moreover, the important principles of transparency and accountability in leadership enable managers, as one respondent stated, to "use [their] power for good. As a good leader, you represent more than yourself. What the people see should transform them." An-

other manager reported that their educational experience did not emphasize the people side of things:

> Most of what I took [in school] was advanced mathematics, accounting, quantitative methods, and these were used very little [in my work]. Other people can do that and give you the results. It is good to understand how to ask the questions and apply it [the result], but seldom have I done this myself. Sometimes the link between the education skill set and the practical skill set is not there, but leadership is.

These responses confirm previous studies that deem communication, critical thinking, and collaboration to be critical skills for entry-level public service employees (Kerrigan, 2013; Lazenby, 2010; Raffel et al., 2011). Overemphasis on technical competencies negatively affects students' ability to integrate fully into a practitioner role and effectively lead and manage within the various aspects of local government positions. The people-oriented competency, however, is somewhat intangible and the challenge is to translate it into an assessable format (Lazenby, 2010).

To better incorporate competency in leadership and management, MPA programs can be more proactive. For instance, programs might design and offer dedicated courses on leadership and management that include ample opportunities for students to reflect on work and life experience. Programs might develop scholarships for students to attend leadership workshops and institutes and to promote leadership roles within student, professional, and community organizations (e.g., the International City/County Management Association and associated local versions, such as the Florida County and City Management Association). Programs might provide mentorship opportunities between students, faculty, and practitioners.

Contributing to Public Policy-Making

In terms of contributing to the policy-making process, 83% (mean = 4.02) of local govern-

ment managers agreed developing the capacity to analyze political theory, participate in the policy process, and implement policies on a community level. Past researchers note a disconnect in MPA programs related to teaching the policy-making process (Lazenby, 2010; Moynihan, 2014). Some debate whether MPA programs should even incorporate policy analysis along with the contrasting idea of whether policy analysts should be studying public management (Raffel et al., 2011). However, public administration is inseparable from policy-making, so MPA programs cannot ignore this competency. As one manager noted in the open-ended comments, students must have "a good understanding of [the public] policy process overall, because that [the public] is whom public managers and administrators work for."

Such perspectives only strengthen the connection between policy analysis and public administration (Raffel et al., 2011). For instance, a local manager reported changes that had been made in the aftermath of Hurricane Charlie and economic fluctuations:

> We've been making a lot of policy decisions in this county and are trying to move forward. Now, we are moving forward as far as workforce and public service. We are looking forward to growth. Participating in and contributing to the policy process is a major focus. However, if this were one year ago, it would be the last competency on our list.

These practitioners' insights are critical to maintaining the legitimacy and relevancy of the MPA degree. Inclusion of a topic-specific seminar for MPA students could encourage dialogue and applications focusing on current issues through service-learning projects with local practitioners. MPA programs might also consider the following measures to highlight the relevancy of policy-making to public administration students: including a course on policy analysis and public management; including management course topics related to the institutional contexts in which public organizations operate;

connecting with local practitioners to discuss policies that affect their communities; and developing class projects or focused internships about policy research and implementation.

Problem Solving and Decision Making

As previously stated, the aspect of analyzing, synthesizing, thinking critically, solving problems, and making decisions received the highest value (89%). More specifically, there was a spike (mean = 4.17) for the subcompetency of developing professional capacity in basic skills. This supports the connection between contributing to the policy process through diverse methodologies (mean = 3.94) and the ability to solve problems and make decisions while modeling best practices (mean = 3.92). According to one respondent:

> For any management position, the first component to being paid for your services is the ability to make a decision. To maintain your management position you next have to be able to consistently make good decisions. Therefore the ability to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions is the most critical for success in my position. The variable will not always be solved in the equation for the period of time allotted to make your decision; however, based on the MPA core curriculum you stand a better chance of making the right decision under time and multiple priority constraints.

One manager believes there should be "more focus on critical thinking—anticipate the 'train wreck' and avoid it versus respond[ing] to it [along with] understanding the leader's role, leadership styles, and how to build a highly functioning team." In addition to being responsible for making informed decisions, administrators must develop the ability to analyze the influx of information and determine relevancy. This study speaks to critical thinking and analytical skills as important for public administrations' ability to engage in policy-making and public service provision and supports a previous study by Zhang et al. (2012).

Critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making should continue as central objectives for many MPA core courses, such as analytical methods, budget and financial management, and policy analysis. Furthermore, emphasis should be placed not only on the application side but the technical side, teaching students how to apply critical thinking and analytical skills to the decision-making process through creative hands-on class projects.

Applying a Public Service Perspective

Articulating and applying a public service perspective received 73% agreement from respondents, and managers rated the following aspects higher: value and demonstrate commitment to professionalism and integrity in serving the public (mean = 4.12) and communicate public interest based on ethical reasoning and democratic participation (mean = 4.00). Through articulating a public service perspective, local government managers increase positive collaborations and are better able "to take those skills and apply leadership to set the culture and deal with external stakeholders and provide the bridge between politicians and stakeholders," according to one manager.

One way to develop related skills is to focus on topical issues, as one manager suggested: "Diverse course offerings provide a broad spectrum of topics to prepare students for a career in public sector management." Another respondent supported this opinion, detailing important areas for public administration education:

> Specific topical issues on which there is a need to come up to a quick understanding—not to subject matter expert level but at least to become conversant on community issues. Tools for quick distillation of information and prioritizing knowledge bases. Organizational design—not the management but ensuring as Jim Collins [an American business consultant] opines that the right people are in the right seat and being agile enough to design around that.

The next step is to apply this knowledge within the community through opportunities such as fieldwork and service-learning projects (Hatcher, 2015). It is imperative to move students out of the classroom and into the community settings in which they will practice. Moreover, strategic community partnerships can benefit students as well as the university and community in regard to enhancing student learning and having meaningful impacts on local communities.

Interacting Productively with a Diverse Citizenry and Workforce

Next, there was 72% agreement as to the importance of productive interaction with a diverse citizenry, there is an emphasis on the sub-competency of incorporating major concepts, skills, process, and policies in public service management (mean = 3.88), followed closely by communication strategies and appreciation of diversity for collaboration (mean = 3.86). Viewing overall educational experience from a different perspective, one manager discussed wishing their MPA program had offered a class in applied psychology. "In the end," this manager said, "public administration is a 'people business' and it is critically important to understand human behavior and motivation as it occurs within a political environment." If administrators are unable to interact productively with the diverse citizens of their communities, then they are at a disadvantage when attempting to bring about positive change.

Holzer and Lin (2007) investigated a similar gap when they examined NASPAA's competency matrix in conjunction with MPA programs. They discovered that only 26% of MPA programs incorporated courses on cultural and social mores. One way to address this gap is to increase the teaching and inclusion of knowledge, skills, and abilities connected to cultural competency (Carrizales, 2010). Although this requires another layer in the MPA educational process, cultural competency helps practitioners and academicians to understand the relationship between their own identities and those of others as well as to acknowledge the differences between cultural groups. Some additional re-

commendations include establishing a required diversity-focused course; actively recruiting and retaining minorities among the student body and faculty; convening workshops with local practitioners who identify as minorities within their communities; and using table-top, simulation, or case-study exercises to integrate all core competencies while relating specifically to a diversity issue in the United States (Carrizales, 2010; Hatcher, 2015; Johnson & Rivera, 2007; NASPAA, 2014).

The Theory-Practice Gap

Although some managers felt their educational degree programs adequately prepared them for their future leadership roles, there were some noted deficiencies. These included lack of coverage of political science and budgeting or finance, focused on technical skill sets that could transfer to local government positions. For example, in speaking about their overall degree program, one manager noted, "You touched on analytical, but you have to have a strong background in finance. You're constantly in the marketplace to borrow money. Everything gets down to numbers and probability."

In addition, one respondent spoke to the multidimensionality of public administration, saying that NASPAA's core competencies provide a foundation for students to gain the knowledge, skills, and abilities to understand and navigate these dimensions and lessen the gap between theory and practice. If an MPA program does not discuss the issues involved in translating from theory to practice, then the gap persists and grows wider. As one respondent said, "Sometimes there is disconnect between academia and actual practice; [there] should be a class about elected officials and governance, as experience is different than what you read about."

One of the most critical dialogues for an MPA program is whether its curriculum covers core competencies and whether changes are needed. Dialogue between academics and practitioners might result in changes in seminar topics, course instruction, curricula, and content, perhaps even assessment of incoming students to determine benchmarks for knowledge, skills,

and abilities. One practitioner reported, "My program places a strong emphasis on critical thinking and public policy through statistics and other research methodologies. Likewise, we had [a] practitioner in residence that provided actual on-the-job knowledge of public professional managers."

This leads to a recommendation that academicians and practitioners continue to attend professional conferences and organize dialogues with their community stakeholders (Battaglio & Scicchitano, 2013). In addition, both sides should exchange perspectives and collaborate on research projects to build theoretical and practical knowledge bases. Even more, such engagements allow MPA students to interact with both theory and practice and to learn from role models who practice what they speak.

CONCLUSION

This study contributes to previous research on competency-based educational programs by examining how local government managers perceive NASPAA's competencies based on their public management practice. This study highlights the importance of integrating NASPAA's five core competencies into MPA programs to prepare students for future careers. Results from our survey of local government managers stress that MPA programs need to emphasize the development of leadership skills. This study suggests that building leadership and management competencies continues to be crucial and challenging for MPA programs. These programs might take more proactive steps to design leadership and management courses and incorporate more interactive learning projects to build students' leadership skills.

This study also highlights the importance of integrating policy and administration into curricula. It is important for MPA programs to cover the interdependent relationship between public policy and administration. Students need to understand the institutional contexts in which organizations operate and public administrators' role in policy-making and implementation. Furthermore, critical thinking and analytical skills are crucial for public

administration positions. Critical thinking, problem solving, and decision making should continue to be central objections of MPA core courses. It is crucial for MPA programs to teach students how to apply critical thinking and analytical skills to the decision-making process.

Another overarching recommendation from this study is to incorporate continuous, intentional dialogues between faculty and local government managers in order to identify needed competencies, evaluate competency development, and strengthen relationships between academicians and practitioners. Venues for continuous reflection on public administration issues enable academicians and practitioners to stay abreast of what competencies need development, generation, and assessment. Public administration educators need to routinely update the curricula and content of their programs. One way to achieve this is through NASPAA accreditation renewal, as that process involves peer review and reflection in defining content and maintaining the quality, relevancy, and legitimacy of public administration programs. During the accreditation process, schools or departments should invite local managers and community leaders to participate, to provide practical insights about building or enhancing competency-based curricula and to generate innovative methods for instruction, such as service-learning and internship opportunities or adjunct professorships specifically for local practitioners (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2000; NASPAA, 2014).

Finally, this study provides a snapshot of the interesting dialogues taking place between academicians and practitioners in Florida. At the same time, this study is exploratory and has some limitations. The sample in this study is relatively small and not randomly selected, though the included cities and counties are diverse. Future studies might expand to conduct comparative research and examine the perception of local government managers on a national and international scale. In addition, with the growing presence of online MPA programs, future research is needed on integrating the practitioner into the virtual arena.

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