# MPA Programs and Internet Education: Validation of Quality and Acceptance Despite Challenges Surrounding Online Delivery

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**ABSTRACT**

Following tenuous beginnings in the 1990s, online education expanded dramatically as students "voted with a mouse," resulting in even the most prestigious American universities adopting online courses. The often overlooked but extensive financial involvement of the U.S. military helped drive rapid growth in enrollment nationwide. This growth has declined significantly since 2009 and as of 2012 appeared to be stagnating. This article reviews the online education journey in detail, examines the U.S. military's impact on the field's growth, and discusses the potential crossroads facing online education. We discuss the ongoing speculation about why the growth in online enrollment may be declining and examine the perhaps pivotal implications of professional accreditation in general and Master of Public Administration programs in particular.

**KEYWORDS**

Online education, professional accreditation, U.S. military financial impact, MPA programs online

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Following auspicious beginnings in the 1990s as the ill-defined "classroom of the future," online education enjoyed an unprecedented proliferation as students "voted with a mouse." The U.S. military's financial involvement facilitated this growth, and even the most prestigious American universities incorporated online offerings. Despite this rapid growth, this trend does not enjoy universal acceptance. Concerns about academic integrity and quality in online education are paramount for each of the three primary stakeholders: faculty, students, and educational administrators (Amirault, 2012; Baggaley, 2014). Faculty concerns center on the time-honored traditions of academic freedom and its derivative, faculty autonomy. Online students, especially adult learners, many of whom have extensive family and career obligations, continue to be frustrated with pragmatic issues, such as the time and financial commitments required to achieve their educational goals online. The daunting task of resolving these critical issues falls to academic administrators, who must operate

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within their own financial and regional accreditation imperatives. Unfortunately, these and other concerns may now be contributing to a decline in the growth of student participation in online education.

Research organizations such as the Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, with their own definitions and research methodologies surrounding online education, have been monitoring the number of students enrolled in at least one online course since the onset of the military-based programs. There is no discernible disagreement that the rapid growth of online enrollment has slowed significantly since 2009, seeming to stagnate since 2012 (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Whether these trends will affect MPA programs is an important question.

Speculation about the reasons for slowed enrollment involves the possible saturation of the online adult-learner marketplace. There is intense competition among colleges and universities for adult learners. Of greater concern, however, is that remedies for declining enrollment may negatively affect the most crucial aspects of online education—namely, academic integrity and quality assurance—because of the financial pressures on schools to recruit and retain students.

Enter the pivotal role of professional accreditation for online Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs. As of 2015, of the 42 Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) member schools that offer full or partial MPA and related programs online, 32 had received professional accreditation from NASPAA, whose stringent standards and rigorous monitoring are widely recognized. The proliferation of online MPA programs seems unlikely to slow. Should that be true, it can be safely predicted that competition for the best and brightest MPA students will also intensify. What is less predictable is whether such competition will ultimately result in a decline in the growth of MPA online enrollments.

Given the decline in enrollments, the increase in competition among programs, and the uncertainty of future growth, online education in general is at a crossroads. Is the same true for online MPA offerings? Enrollment data indicate continuous growth in MPA programs, likely resulting in part from rapidly expanding online availability (NASPAA, 2015). So perhaps online MPA programs are at no such crossroads. Indeed, given the increasing validation of online offerings via NASPAA accreditation, it may be that MPA programs delivered online, either fully or in part, have already successfully navigated a significant challenge: the acceptance of online education by professional accreditors.

This article seeks to examine the current state of online education in general and online MPA programs in particular. We emphasize the endorsement of online delivery offered by professional accreditation as well as the philosophical and pragmatic significance of programs' achieving such accreditation from NASPAA.

## THE EVOLUTION OF DISTANCE LEARNING

### The Early Years: A Fledging but Promising Pedagogy

Educators have debated the use of technology as a teaching tool since the beginning of the 20th century (Jaber & Moore, 1999). Early on, motion pictures were thought to be the cutting-edge technology that could redefine distance learning; but, by the 1930s, it was the skillful use of radio that was deemed critical to the success of distance education in a wireless new world (Kentnor, 2015). Soon, however, television was the technology paving the way for a revolution in teaching and learning, typified by the emergence of "telecourses" and even the mailing of video-taped classes or lectures, sometimes dubbed the "Pony Express" at Troy University. With the logistical aspects of even the most advanced technology becoming increasingly labor-intensive, distance learning was primed for the innovation that would ultimately replace all its predecessors: Internet education.

## Distance Learning Comes of Age

Since its inception as a potentially revolutionary pedagogy, and despite its having yet to achieve universal acceptance, Internet-based education has experienced unprecedented proliferation. Since the 1990s, online offerings have become firmly entrenched among even the most prestigious American universities (Allen & Seaman, 2015). Driven in part by the opportunity to deliver courses and programs to a segment of the academic marketplace, the adult learner, that had become increasingly disenfranchised by the logistical impediments associated with traditional brick-and-mortar campuses, colleges no doubt also considered the lucrative financial implications of acquiring even a small share of this emerging market. And to reap that potential benefit, universities were sorely in need of dependable revenue to jump-start their participation in online education (Kentnor, 2015).

Enter the U.S. military. Recruiting is a significant challenge for the military, and two services created innovative partnerships with institutions of higher education in an effort to use funded education as a recruiting and retention tool. In 2000, the navy launched a program known as the "Sweet Sixteen" (named for the sixteen schools chosen to participate). Not to be outdone, the army scooped the navy initiative by announcing in January 2001 an even more ambitious online education program, the centerpiece of which was the lure of $700 million in funding designed to attract the enthusiastic participation of partner colleges and universities. These high-profile programs, and others soon launched by other branches of the military (e.g., Marine Corps Education and the Community College of the Air Force), had a profound impact on the ultimate proliferation of Internet-based learning in higher education. Well-established, military-focused schools were among the key initial players, and larger and more prominent institutions soon joined as a way to expand their academic programs via increased enrollments and enhanced, tuition-based revenue.

The broader education market took notice of this expanded funding, and the number of institutions competing for military dollars increased dramatically, especially among for-profit institutions. Some schools were even established with a primary focus on the military, such as the American Military University. Vastly increased veterans' benefits enacted after the events of 9/11 further expanded the competition for military-generated education funding. Unfortunately, this fierce competition also eventually led to significant negative results, as evidenced by the recent suspension of tuition assistance benefits to one of the largest private universities in the United States because of alleged predatory practices (Bilodeau, 2015).

As could be expected, MPA programs were directly involved in and affected by the explosive growth of online learning and the increasing competition for students. Troy University seized the opportunity to capitalize on its already well-established reputation as a provider of quality education for military personnel to become one of the largest MPA programs in the United States (NASPAA, 2015).

Ironically, the intense competition among military services to initiate online education may have also contributed to the recent downward trend in online enrollments. That initial competition among military branches first declined due to budgetary constraints associated with rising educational costs and reduced recruiting needs in a defense reduction environment. Then came the increasingly intense competition among schools for a share of the lucrative adult learner demographic. And these factors combined to the slow the growth of online enrollments for many educational institutions.

## The Continuing Evolution of Distance Learning

By the turn of the millennium, the Internet had evolved as the new revolution in educational delivery (Meyen, Tangen, & Lian, 1999). Schools throughout the nation joined in or at least began to consider this rapidly evolving medium as a solution to education delivery

challenges and a way to expand existing education markets. The inherent advantages of online education (e.g., the focus on flexibility) quickly evolved such that some schools began offering courses that could be completed on handheld personal digital devices, such as the once-popular Blackberry, with or without access to the Web (Malecki & Snyder, 2005).

The advent of online learning allowed schools to dramatically extend higher education to nontraditional students, whose previous access to postsecondary education had been limited by logistical issues in general and geographical limitations in particular. Increasingly sophisticated electronic delivery of distance education was characterized by the proactive incorporation of advancing technology, leading to fully online as well as hybrid (online and in-person) offerings. There was a seeming explosion in educationally focused technology, which in turn prompted concerns that this development was driven more by market forces than by what the technology might solve or improve (Bosch, Hartenberger, & Alhamzy, 2015).

Keeping up with the rapid growth of online distance learning generated significant obstacles for colleges and universities, such as technology expansion and online student services support, and these likely escalated with the continuing expansion of this educational delivery method. Questions as to meeting these early challenges remain (Udas, 2008), but they may soon be superseded by new challenges associated with both stagnation in online enrollment and the specter of an actual decline in enrollment.

## The Military and Online Education: Some Functional and Dysfunctional Consequences

Despite misgivings, students, especially those in the military, initially accepted online pedagogy. For example, a start-up distance learning effort at Troy University that had accounted for fewer than 124 enrollments per year at the turn of the 20th century grew to over 17,000 per year just five years later (Meine, 2002, 2005), a

growth in line with or even exceeding national trends (Allen & Seaman, 2008). However, while the growth appeared to be unending, there were already indications that the playing field was changing (Meine, 2008). A similar phenomenon occurred at the University of Maryland's University College, which through distance learning evolved to become one of the largest schools in the world, serving some 90,000 students (Maryland.Gov, 2016).

A sizable portion of enrollments at these and other schools came from and continue to come from military personnel (Allen & Seaman, 2015), including many students who once attended on-base classes but made the transition to Web-based education. Of note at Troy University, the student migration to online settings resulted in the elimination of most in-class, off-campus, and on-base MPA programs, as these offerings became financially unfeasible due to the dwindling number of students. Although the reasons for this migration are speculative, the convenience and lure of asynchronous education likely had much to do with the shift; in addition, Troy's efforts to offer its entire curriculum online every term may have also attracted students.

A negative side effect of the distance learning phenomenon was the difficulty of maintaining viable on-base education programs in the face of the exodus to online classes. Not only did most colleges with on-base programs see their own students choose online coursework, in part or in full, but on-base programs concurrently faced competition from numerous distance learning programs offered by schools without an on-base presence. Education officials on military bases frequently voiced concerns about military education dollars going to 60, 70, even 80 colleges or technical schools while there were typically only a handful of on-base education providers (M. F. Meine, personal communication with U.S. Air Force education officials and at meetings of the Advisory Councils on Military Education and the Council of College and Military Educators).

As of 2015, more than 2,700 schools that managed over 14,000 teaching locations were approved for Department of Defense tuition dollars (Department of Defense, 2015). By this time, the ramifications of distance learning on higher education had also begun to affect traditional on-campus delivery. Specifically, it was not uncommon for resident students, especially undergraduates matriculating on traditional campuses, to sit in their dorms or fraternity houses and take online courses. This practice has persisted and become a cause for concern among colleges and universities.

Until recently, and perhaps most important, officials from colleges and universities with on-base programs frequently raised concerns about being held to strict guidelines and being subject to accreditation-like reviews through the Military Installation Voluntary Education Review process; off-base schools offering distance learning, however, are not held to the same standards. The military review process, managed by the American Council on Education, is akin to a regional accreditation review; it concentrates on installation-based military education officials and examines on-base education programs using teams of visitors. Responding to the concerns of on-base schools, the Department of Defense assembled a task force to examine establishing rules and standards for off-base education providers, including those primarily offering distance learning programs. The resulting policy, or memorandum of understanding, requires schools to meet certain conditions and standards to be eligible for military tuition dollars (Department of Defense, 2015). This memorandum is how the Department of Defense suspended the University of Phoenix in 2015 from on-base efforts and from receiving tuition dollars, a controversial move to some lawmakers (Altman, 2015; Dickstein, 2015) and one remedied by early 2016 (Associated Press, 2016).

***Military-assisted MPA Programs.*** MPA programs that risked offering courses online also saw growth in enrollments. Troy University's MPA program, which through its long-standing focus on supporting military students and offering on-base programs had already become one of the largest such programs in the United States, also grew with the influx of military-funded students. Unfortunately, that growth was short-lived.

Many military-friendly or military-focused schools continue to operate in the military education marketplace, but they are increasingly challenged by the military's effort to seek college credits and degrees for service members. The military's stated focus in this effort is on quality, but the military also expects programs to be short-term and low-cost while providing maximum experiential credit. Not surprisingly, this emphasis might conflict with the stringent requirements of professional accreditation.

Military funding continues to be a lure motivating schools to participate in online instruction. But the lucrative financial aspects of Internet-based distance learning have become more than sufficient to attract schools not directly focused on providing online education for military personnel, thus expanding competition for students. The proliferation of institutions attracted to online delivery also brought schools that had not undergone the military's stringent quality control review, thereby fostering not only an increasingly competitive playing field but an increasingly uneven one as well. This was true especially because a number of NASPAA member and NASPAA-accredited schools—such as Bowie State, Central Michigan University, Golden Gate University, the University of Oklahoma, Troy University, and others operating in the military environment—were subject to and underwent the additional military review process.

## CONTINUING ISSUES, CONCERNS, AND CHALLENGES

### Technology: The Ultimate Challenge

For online delivery of academic information to have become not only a viable but highly

regarded and widely utilized pedagogy, the technology had to be affordable, efficient, and user-friendly for all stakeholders. As a result, and by necessity, initial concerns focused on the efficacy of such entrepreneurial systems as WebCT and Blackboard. Once most concerns regarding delivery technology were resolved, significant logistical and academic questions began to emerge.

To make Internet-based education in general, and specific programs like the MPA, viable included garnering faculty acceptance. And to achieve acceptance, courses had to be secure from both an academic perspective (e.g., ensuring testing integrity) and a student privacy perspective (e.g., ensuring protection of personal information), while still offering seamless access from anywhere, at any time. Course delivery systems also needed to maintain compatibility with ever-changing technology. The need for academic integrity in general and testing integrity in particular were paramount. When initial efforts to solve the problem of testing integrity via a mandate for human proctoring proved logistically problematic, if not prohibitive, the search for a technological solution became the order of the day.

As an example, recognizing the need for a new methodology that would be compatible with the online testing environment, Troy University, an institution already involved in online program delivery, committed to combining nontraditional students with cutting-edge technology. To that end, Troy partnered with the Securexam Corporation to develop the Remote Proctor. This device was designed to resolve the two most crucial issues in online testing: ensuring that the person being tested is in fact the appropriate student; and ensuring that the student being tested does not have access to unauthorized resources. Other innovative technological solutions that enable the use of remote human proctoring, such as those provided by ProctorU (Troy University, 2017), have since gained tacit, if not enthusiastic, acceptance.

## Faculty Concerns: Academic Freedom and Faculty Autonomy

Faculty reluctance remains among the most contentious and crucial challenges for colleges and universities involved in online education. The reluctance of many faculty (especially senior faculty) to accept online delivery as a credible, much less a viable, academic approach is not yet fully resolved. Indeed, this issue is further complicated by the concern that there is "little good research on what constitutes the best approaches to online learning" (Baggaley, 2014, p. 133). In addition, many faculty object to the intrusions on academic freedom and faculty autonomy that have resulted from specialized oversight processes and course design efforts.

During the transition to online delivery, administrative scrutiny of the online environment led to faculty being pressured to engage in more frequent and time-consuming communication with students than in traditional classroom instruction, contributing to an "always at work" mentality for faculty and staff. A 2008–2009 survey of more than 10,000 faculty members confirmed this perception ("Faculty views," 2010). Increased workload and scrutiny in the online environment, as well as pressure for courses to conform to externally imposed designs or standards, added credible substance to faculty apprehension about the incremental loss of academic freedom and autonomy.

Additional faculty concerns included differential criteria for evaluating instructors, developing syllabi, and establishing exam parameters; difficulty in obtaining an adequate number of student evaluations, resulting in inequities in evaluating faculty performance; differential processes for handling student complaints and for academic advising; administrative influence on course content (e.g., requiring group projects and attempts at mandating the process and content of class discussion); and the arguably unresolvable debate about quality differences between online and face-to-face courses.

## Administrative Issues: Financial Parameters and Accreditation Imperatives

In addition to dealing with the seemingly endless academic concerns surrounding the growth of distance learning, administrators must also confront questions of financial viability and accreditation imperatives. The increasingly competitive education environment began to negatively affect the growth of academic programs, which intensified the search for new marketing strategies to improve student recruitment and retention. The pressure to ensure comparable quality of all courses, regardless of delivery format, in order to satisfy regional and specialized accreditation criteria and increasingly proactive scrutiny from funding sources resulted in rising administrative oversight of online courses. There was also extensive pressure to standardize course format and content, especially among universities that employ large numbers of adjunct faculty to teach online courses. Finally, the online delivery format raised administrative concerns about faculty compensation, class size, and overhead costs.

## Student Issues: Pedagogical, Technological, and Financial

Students' initial resistance to online formats quickly faded in light of the conveniences associated with asynchronous online course-work. This expanded acceptance by students no doubt contributed to the explosion in the growth of online enrollment nationwide, but it is possible that student concerns previously masked by asynchronous convenience might now be reemerging owing to unanticipated frustrations. Indeed, this could be a contributing factor to the declining growth in the number of online students.

Unresolved issues include the expense of online testing options, such as equipment purchases (e.g., Remote Proctor devices) or testing fees at commercial testing centers (e.g., Sylvan Learning Centers, ProctorU, etc.); frustrations with inevitable technical problems (lockouts, loss of data) that may occur during testing, to the extent that some students have to retake exams; and, perhaps most important, the realization that online courses may well require more effort and self-motivation than anticipated, in part due to required and documented student-faculty and student-student interaction.

## EMERGING ISSUES

### Online Course Design, Adult Learners, Student Recruiting, and National Accreditation

Because initial online courses tended to feature written exchanges between students and with their instructors (not unlike the increasingly devalued correspondence-course concept), a cottage industry focusing on course design soon evolved. This included proactive efforts to "spruce up" courses using audiovisual bells and whistles, and live interaction was often strongly encouraged despite its potentially negative impact on the asynchronous approach.

Another emerging issue is the increasing prominence and influence of contemporary adult learners. Historically these students have been a sufficiently distinct minority, earning the designation "nontraditional." But their rapidly expanding numbers in online courses has shifted that view: they are the "traditional" students in Internet-based instruction. Successful marketing of online higher education to these potential students, especially adult learners, regardless of their physical location, is critical for enrollment growth, or at least to prevent a decline in enrollment. Online enrollment can prove especially lucrative by attracting large numbers of students who pay higher out-of-state tuition. The importance of this phenomenon is reflected in the University of Florida's terminating (or renegotiating) its contract with its "enabler" Pearson, which failed to attract sufficient out-of-state students into the University of Florida Online (Jaschik, 2015).

Enrollment growth in and financing of the future of distance learning are also tied to federal

student-aid policies that have greatly expanded financial-aid eligibility beyond the previously required regional accreditation. This led to additional accrediting bodies, the "national accreditors," which include specialized accreditation bodies for distance education that allow schools to operate under arguably less stringent requirements so they can enter the increasingly competitive higher-education marketplace.

### Availability, Quality, and Tradition

The ultimate goal of making higher education available to as large a constituency as possible is admirable. But educational institutions must ensure that students, both military and civilian, are receiving the quality of education they deserve. The fierce competition for students and education dollars should not preclude academic institutions from working in unison to ensure that quality education is widely available and that the interests of students and institutions are recognized and systematically protected.

In addition, to protect and enhance the quality of distance education, colleges and universities need to prepare students to use emerging technologies and to undertake their education without the more immersive environment of the traditional brick-and-mortar university. While ensuring that online students receive a top-quality education, providers of that education should also strive to create an experience equal to the one delivered on campus. The dramatic expansion of distance learning has meant recruitment of numerous new faculty for online teaching. Often, professors are not adequately prepared to make use of the latest educational technology, resulting in the need for increased training and participation incentives (Smith, 1999). Troy University now requires online faculty to complete a training course and pass an examination to ensure at least basic knowledge of how to successfully teach online and provide proper support for online students.

Thousands of years of face-to-face interaction between teacher and student is a tradition not easily modified. Nelson's (1998) preliminary assertion, however, has likely come to pass: distance learning programs will never replace the traditional classroom but will serve those otherwise unable to continue their education. Even in light of the recent declines in online enrollment, there is reason believe that this prediction will continue to be true.

### Logistics: Erasing Geographical Boundaries

The expansion of distance learning has challenged governmental entities. Federal financial-aid policies had a significant impact on distance learning, though the states have traditionally retained the authority to regulate educational institutions within their boundaries. Unfortunately for state regulatory bodies, the growth of Internet-based education created a new problem: the elimination of state boundaries and the declining importance of a school's geographical location (Amirault, 2012).

It became difficult if not impossible for states to fully control schools that had no physical presence within their boundaries. More specifically, an uneven playing field developed when schools were able to enroll online students and "beam in" their course work without being required to adhere to various state policies. States have tried several methods to bring online institutions under their control. Washington State, for example, requires any institution advertising educational offerings in the state to submit all programs for review. However, such policies are difficult to enforce, as the growth of for-profit institutions demonstrates. To make the situation even more complex, regulatory agencies in at least one state (Florida) raised "nonattribution" complaints that some institutions intentionally located offices or headquarters in certain states to shop for the most lenient regional accrediting bodies.

### Continuing Developments in Technology

As technology in general continues to advance, educational technology will most certainly do

so as well, especially as regards making online courses more appealing to students. While such "bells and whistles" modifications may not serve to improve academic quality *per se*, they might have a significant influence on student interest in and the attractiveness of online courses vis-à-vis their in-class counterparts.

One area that continues to evolve is Massive Open Online Courses. These allow thousands of people to enroll for both credit and noncredit offerings, sometimes at no cost to the student, creating another competitive challenge for educational institutions (Amirault, 2012).

## LOOKING AHEAD:
## IMPLICATIONS FOR MPA PROGRAMS

What does the declining growth in online enrollment mean for MPA programs? Troy University's experience is again instructive. It has been 20 years since overall university online enrollments began their rapid expansion, which led to offering entire graduate programs online, including Troy's MPA program. That initiative has been validated, the online program having met NASPAA's stringent criteria for accreditation. All the same, the university's move to offer its MPA program online initially prompted skepticism.

Of the 42 NASPAA member schools that offer full or partial MPA and related programs online, 32 have NASPAA accreditation (NASPAA, 2015). As such, while the growth of online education may have slowed, the proliferation of online MPA programs seems unlikely to follow suit. Competition for the best and brightest MPA students will also likely intensify.

A review of NASPAA survey data shows that in 2002, 195 schools reported 16,358 students enrolled in MPA programs and 5,314 MPA degrees awarded. By 2010, 176 schools reported 17,460 enrolled students and 5,621 MPA degrees awarded. For 2002, these numbers reflect an average student population of 83 and an average of 27 MPA degrees awarded. For 2010, the average student population was 99

and each school averaged awarding 31 degrees (NASPAA, 2015).

Although informative, such averages are not conclusive because of the wide fluctuation in student numbers and degrees awarded between schools. Consider that the 274 MPA degrees awarded by Troy University's Public Administration Department in 2004 was the largest number in the United States among reporting schools. By 2009, however, Troy University ranked third, with 267 degrees awarded, behind Harvard (361) and NYU (269), which were not included in the 2004 list of reporting schools (NASPAA, 2015).

NASPAA accreditation remains critical for the success of MPA programs, both traditional and online, but the significance of professional accreditation for online programs is not limited to MPA programs. For example, in business education, 2015 data provided by the Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) website show that of 535 business schools reporting, 465 have AACSB accreditation. Furthermore, as of 2012, of these 465 accredited schools, 127 provided online business programs, and 93 of those programs were offered at the Master of Business Administration level. By 2017, the number of accredited schools worldwide had risen to 778, with 270 reporting online offerings (AACSB, 2017).

Given the decline in enrollments, the increase in competition among programs, and the uncertainty of future growth, online education in general is at a crossroads. Is the same true for online MPA offerings? Enrollment data indicate continuous growth in MPA programs, likely resulting in part from rapidly expanding online availability. So perhaps online MPA programs are at no such crossroads. Indeed, given the increasing validation of online offerings via NASPAA accreditation, it may be that MPA programs delivered online, either fully or in part, have already successfully navigated a significant challenge: the acceptance of online education by professional accreditors.

Owing to the leveling off of online enrollment, to competitive factors, and to the uncertainty of future growth, it appears that online education in general is at a crossroads. MPA online offerings, however, are experiencing continued enrollment growth, and NASPAA accreditation continues to validate the shift to online instruction. Accreditation by such bodies as AACSB and NASPAA suggests that perhaps the major quality questions surrounding online instruction have been resolved. This bodes well for future online MPA enrollment growth, although it remains to be seen if MPA online enrollment will fall off as in the general trend for online instruction.

## A FINAL THOUGHT

The primary focus of this article has been to evaluate the current state of online MPA programs. We conclude that NASPAA accreditation may contribute substantially to settling the quality questions around online MPA instruction and that MPA programs are well postured to withstand the stagnation in overall online enrollment trends. That said, we must still ask, how would MPA programs cope with the disruptive development of decreased online enrollment? And perhaps of greater importance, how might those programs begin to prepare for such challenges should they arise, especially in light of the increasingly competitive higher-education environment?

The relevant activities of military-related higher-education organizations may provide helpful insights for developing a strategy to deal with a worst-case enrollment scenario for MPA programs. For example, the National Association for Institutions for Military Education Services and the Council of College and Military Educators provide models of "friendly competition" and cooperation toward the common goal of promoting educational opportunities. The organizations also fight predatory and inappropriate practices in student recruiting and program delivery. The key for MPA programs will be to sustain crucial gains in program quality and accessibility while recruiting and retaining the best and brightest students to meet the demands of public service well into the future.

## NOTE

Much of the information in this article is based on the authors' personal involvement in negotiating education agreements with military education officials and senior administrators at other educational institutions, as well as in providing leadership in establishing and expanding online offerings for Troy University. (The largest of the military online offerings at Troy was the eArmyU program negotiated in 2000 to 2001 with the U.S. Army and PricewaterhouseCoopers. It developed distance learning programs for army soldiers throughout the world, with a potential $700 million budget.)

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