Toward a Shared Services Model for the Delivery of Public Affairs Education

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ABSTRACT

This article examines the feasibility of online course sharing among Master of Public Administration (MPA) and Master of Public Policy (MPP) programs accredited by the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA). Our cross-sectional study methodology based on a 2013 NASPAA survey identifies the point-in-time interest in such course sharing among NASPAA-accredited programs. Survey data indicate substantial interest in the idea as well as challenges. This article also describes possible funding models and reports on discussions to implement course sharing in public affairs programs in the University of North Carolina system. We conclude by recommending that online course sharing be planned first through agreements among universities within states and then by building toward collaborations among universities in different states and abroad. We recommend that NASPAA play a central role in creating and managing exchanges within and among states.

KEYWORDS

Small programs, program collaboration, collaborative agreements, transfer agreements, online education

Demands for online course offerings are rising because of constrained state university budgets and increasing expectations among graduate students and employers. This is creating pressure for public affairs graduate programs to provide quality education not just in core course content but also in high-demand specializations. In graduate public affairs education, universities with smaller Master of Public Administration (MPA) and Master of Public Policy (MPP) programs are struggling to provide the breadth of curriculum desired and lack the resources to support specialized faculty in more than only

some areas of instruction. Budget restrictions have also forced state university systems to consider sharing resources among their institutions.

In some states, interuniversity agreements allow students to take courses at other universities. In some states the "university system" is in fact one university with many locations, which facilitates access to courses and credit transfers between campuses. However, other university systems consist of individual institutions, each with its own admissions standards, rules for transferring credits, and financial-aid restrictions, all of

which make it more difficult for students to take courses from another institution. For example, in North Carolina, some institutions have agreements to share courses while others do not. In initial fieldwork among North Carolina MPA/MPP program directors, we identified several barriers to sharing courses. The problem of taking courses and transferring credits across state or international borders (or between private and public institutions) is even more complex because of differences in tuition rates, varied admission standards, concerns (among state-supported universities) that such actions may result in state government policy and financial-support retribution, and worries about losing a finite and limited supply of graduate students to other universities.

Of equal concern to MPA/MPP programs is that courses offered through any online consortium gain approval from the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) and its Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA). Given the extensive nature and importance of national accreditation, it is understandable that MPA/MPP programs would want such assurance. For more than 35 years NASPAA has been the authoritative accrediting body in the field of public affairs (NASPAA, 2015). It sets the standards for graduate MPA/MPP education, seeking to ensure high quality across its nearly 300 member institutions. COPRA is NASPAA's accrediting body and ultimately passes judgment on whether or not an MPA/MPP program should gain or maintain accreditation. Programs seeking accreditation must demonstrate that they meet NASPAA standards. This occurs through a rigorous review process, including a site visit from COPRA-trained evaluators. Once fully accredited, programs must maintain NASPAA standards and undergo an extensive reassessment every seven years.

In 2013 the NASPAA Executive Council approved exploration of a "shared online resources" demonstration project to help programs close curriculum gaps and otherwise provide coursework in specializations that lacked adequate faculty. NASPAA supported creation of a demonstration project within a single state and evaluation of the results, with the aim of replication if practical.

Initial discussions led to interest among institutions in offering courses at other institutions as well as some student interest in taking them. These initial discussions also identified numerous institutional barriers that might necessitate formal interuniversity agreements and the approval of home institutions in order to alter the rules that create such barriers.

This article presents what we have learned from survey data about the benefits and challenges of course sharing across MPA/MPP programs. These data are augmented with recent examples from efforts in North Carolina to create a course-sharing program. Based on these data, we discuss funding models, technology, bureaucratic reforms, and next steps toward implementation, such as a NASPAA-led initiation of a demonstration project in a single state.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Schultz (2015) recently noted that the future of the public affairs classroom is about more than innovative uses of technologies: "It is also about philosophies of teaching, and the different ways to instruct a new generation of students who are facing new challenges that previous generations never had to address" (p. 5). That creativity involves not only the technical means by which instruction is offered but also the nature of institutional structures that produce and deliver that instruction. While it is important that faculty experiment with different teaching approaches, adapting to financial challenges (see Rich, 2013) will likely require that MPA/MPP programs become more entrepreneurial in utilizing constrained faculty and other resources to prepare future generations of public sector professionals.

Such constraints include limited areas of faculty expertise, restrictions on employing qualified adjunct instructors, and/or low student enrollment. In some programs faculty do not have the option of taking a sabbatical, because program quality cannot be sustained without a

core of at least five full-time faculty (one of the NASPAA standards). Even larger programs are constrained in their ability to support multiple concentrations as well as the core curriculum. If we focus primarily on the challenges of using technology to transform public affairs education, we miss the larger challenge of making optimum use of the possibilities of technology. We need to find ways to leverage collective resources among accredited programs while respecting the identities and needs of those programs. There seems not to be existing literature on the design and implementation of course sharing across public affairs institutions, but the following literature can inform such collaborative efforts.

Many important considerations deserve continued attention. These include the need to embrace design standards (Gibson & Dunning, 2012), the creation and maintenance of transactional presence with distance learners (Naylor & Wilson, 2009), the ability to teach the skills required for modern governance at a distance (Abel, 2009; Austin, 2009), the difficulties of preventing cheating in online environments (Campbell, 2006), support for professors as they transition to online instruction (Ho, Lu, & Thurmaier, 2006), and access to library resources for students at a distance (Feldheim, King, & Sherman, 2004). In a survey of 96 NASPAA-affiliated programs, Ginn and Hammond (2012) found that while both faculty and students are attracted to the flexibility of online offerings, concerns do exist, including faculty concern about teaching workloads. Klay and Maxwell (2009) pointed out that 21 million people work for government in the United States and there is need to reach out to more of them with relevant instructional services.

We are in a period of transition in which some faculty are being asked or required to convert their existing courses for online delivery without professional assistance, while others are being asked to adapt a competencies-based approach to teaching online with the assistance of professional instructional designers. In any resulting scenario, the transition can be difficult for everyone involved, and the outcome may or may not be of high pedagogical quality. Online instruction requires substantial maturity and discipline on the part of learners. Given that many students seeking degrees in public affairs are midcareer professionals with work and family responsibilities, they are likely to be successful in online instructional settings. Some universities have the resources to provide support to faculty members making the transition to online teaching, including instructional designers and technologists. Other universities may simply require that instructors begin teaching courses online, with little or no professional support. Instructors with little or no knowledge of modern strategies for course design are likely to try to simply replicate existing courses within a learning management system shell. At some schools, the implementation of online learning involves recording actual classroom presentations and making the recordings available to distance students. As a consequence of these variations, the nature and quality of online learning is quite variable.

Ehrenberg (2011) has observed that it can be impossible for an institution to fully staff an area of study: "Institutions in close geographic proximity have long realized that sharing academic resources is a way to both hold down cost and improve access to curriculum for their students" (p. 8). He cites the Pioneer Valley of Massachusetts, where students from Amherst, Hampshire, Mount Holyoke, and Smith Colleges and from the University of Massachusetts can take classes at any of the five institutions. A similar opportunity exists in the Tri-College Consortium in the Philadelphia area. Ehrenberg notes that modern technologies remove the constraints of geographic proximity. Teaching collaborations among institutions can allow "classics majors at small liberal arts institutions to get access to the opportunities they would have at a major research university, but without losing the small class feel of a liberal arts college" (Ehrenberg, 2011, p. 9). Another example is the Online Consortium of Independent Colleges and Universities (ocicu.org), a group of over 80 institutions. "Hosted by Regis University, it allows institutions to both provide and subscribe to courses offered by other member institutions in a wide variety of areas" (Ehrenberg, 2011, p. 9).

The idea of virtual collaborations among historically black colleges and universities (HBCUs) began in 2002 (Black Issues, 2002). It sprang in part from a realization that many emerging for-profit virtual universities were successfully marketing their services to black students in the United States. The original V-HBCU consortium had six members, including Alabama A&M, Bethune Cookman, Florida A&M, Grambling State, Morgan State, and North Carolina Central Universities. The modified V-HBCU is a consortium or strategic alliance of HBCUs that pools available resources in order to share costs and revenues. (See "Virtual HBCUs as Strategic Alliances," 2013.) As of 2013, an available description of the alliance was still prospective. The intent was to share online courses across campuses in order to broaden the array of courses available to students enrolled in any of the affiliated universities. Efforts to make effective use of online learning opportunities among leaders of historically black institutions continues, as evidenced by the HBCU Leadership Summit for Online Learning sponsored by the Online Learning Consortium (2014).

The California State University founded Cal State Online in 2012 and set a goal of enrolling 250,000 students. An online enabler, "eCollege," owned by Pearson was a partner in the effort. By July 2014 the Cal State system was replacing its online portal with a shared services model, returning autonomy for online offerings to the respective universities. Cal State University incorporates 23 campuses, almost 447,000 students, and 45,000 faculty and staff. It is the largest, most diverse, and one of the most affordable universities in the United States. Cal State Online originated in 2012 as a system-wide collection of services that supported the delivery of fully online programs (see CSU Historic Milestones, n.d.). Faculty at Cal State Fullerton taught and administered the system's first online degree program in business administration. Also in 2013, the Cal State Concurrent Enrollment Program was created so that full-time students could enroll at any campus and have access to online courses offered at other Cal State campuses. Cal State trustees approved establishing a

maximum of 120 units (or 180 units at a campus on the quarter system) as the requirement to complete an online baccalaureate degree.

In 2014, Cal State Online was folded into the Academic Technology Services Department of the chancellor's office. The intent was to be more successful in supporting campuses by focusing on a shared services strategy (see Straumsheim, 2014b). By 2014, campuses in the system were running more than 100 online programs. Many campuses had already established their own procedures for developing online courses and programs. Jim Postma, a professor of chemistry at Cal State Chico, observed that this made it difficult to standardize distance education across the system; the partnership with Pearson (a for-profit entity) was also not popular among some faculty members (Straumsheim, 2014a).

ONLINE CONSORTIUM SURVEY FINDINGS

In July 2013, NASPAA conducted a survey of 285 of its member institutions to identify interest in course sharing and to discover what types of specialty courses different schools offered. Respondents also shared their perceptions and concerns about the benefits and barriers to course sharing. The survey reports feedback from 135 NASPAA programs. As is typical in survey research, some respondents skipped questions, perhaps in this case because such respondents did not envision participating in any future consortium and so skipped questions related to taking part. In any event, this makes it difficult to ascertain the survey's true response rate. The data nevertheless provide an interesting look at the opportunities and challenges that NASPAA and participating schools might face in implementing a national course-sharing program.

Participant Characteristics and Interest in Online Consortium

To elicit the characteristics of the respondent pool, the survey asked participants to identify their program's size by answering yes or no to the question, "Do you consider your program a 'small program?'" Of the 85 respondents that answered this question, 49.4% ($n = 42$) said yes,

and 50.6% (*n*=42) said no. "Small Program" respondents based their classification primarily on their program's faculty size (81%), followed closely by student enrollment (75%) and then budget constraints (50%).

Approximately half (55%, *n*=75) expressed an interest in participating in an online consortium. Given usable respondent feedback, approximately 25% of all NASPAA schools, at a minimum, have an interest in participating in an online course consortium initiative. This interest level is likely understated, given that approximately half of NASPAA member schools did not provide any survey feedback.

The survey was designed to gain valuable "snapshot" information rather than to provide statistically relevant data relating to offering or participating in shared online instruction. One goal was to identify the level of interest among NASPAA schools in order to gauge the feasibility of moving forward. In reviewing the survey data, we also sought to identify possible course content areas as well as areas of instructional content that a future consortium might provide. This could enable the consortium to match "customer demand" with available "vendor supply."

Online Consortium Course "Demand"

The survey offered respondents a brief introductory statement advising that NASPAA was considering creating a consortium to allow the offering of online courses for schools/programs in specializations where local faculty shortages might exist. The survey then asked, "Would your school be interested in participating so that your students could take courses offered by other schools?"

TABLE 1.
Courses of Greatest Interest/Need

	Interested	Somewhat interested	Not interested	Rating average	Total responses
IT Management	41.7% (25)	31.7% (19)	26.7% (16)	1.85	60
Budgeting and Financial Management	33.3% (18)	27.8% (15)	38.9% (21)	2.06	54
Procurement/Acquisitions	38.6% (22)	35.1% (20)	26.3% (15)	1.88	57
Specialized full-semester Human Resource Management courses (Benefits, Compensation, Training/Development, HR/Labor Law, Managing Diversity, etc.)	45.8% (27)	27.1% (16)	27.1% (16)	1.81	59
Local/Urban Government	25.9% (14)	35.2% (19)	38.9% (21)	2.13	54
Comparative/International	36.4% (20)	36.4% (20)	27.3% (15)	1.91	55
Specialized full-semester Nonprofit courses (Grant Development, Financial Oversight, Collaboration, etc.)	52.5% (32)	23.0% (14)	24.6% (15)	1.72	61
Other MPA specializations	—	—	—	—	17

In answer, 78.0% ($n=71$) affirmed their interest while 22.0% ($n=20$) responded no, that is, indicated lack of interest. An additional 48 respondents failed to answer (that is, skipped) the question. It is impossible to ascertain why these member schools did not provide feedback.

Those respondents that indicated an interest in allowing their students to enroll in a NASPAA-sponsored online course were then asked, "What courses would be of greatest interest/need?" Table 1 presents their feedback.

The term *need* was a surrogate for *demand*, assessing the likelihood of participation should a course be offered. Table 1 shows that non-profit-related courses had the highest aggregate demand ranking (e.g., courses in Grant Development, Financial Oversight, and Collaboration/Partnerships). More than 75% of respondents indicated an interest in such courses. Specialized Human Resource Management courses (beyond a traditional introductory course) rated second highest, followed by courses in Information Technology (IT) Management and Procurement/Acquisitions. Courses in Local/Urban Government received the lowest interest rating, followed by Budgeting and Financial Management.

Online Consortium Course "Supply"

The survey also sought to determine the capacity for NASPAA member schools to provide online courses and, if so, in what subject areas. To this end, the survey asked, "Does your school currently have the capacity to offer online courses in the following specialization areas?" Table 2 summarizes the feedback received from the 82 member schools that answered this question.

Respondents indicated the highest capacity for offering courses within the Nonprofit specialization (64.0%, $n=48$), followed by Budgeting and Financial Management (54.1%, $n=40$) and Local/Urban Government (50.7%, $n=37$). The least-capacity specializations were Procurement/Acquisitions (16.9%, $n=11$), IT Management (31.0%, $n=22$), and Comparative/International (32.8%, $n=48$). However, even in these areas, sufficient capacity appears to exist for future course offerings, should demand exist.

Comparing need with capacity provided an interesting result. Ironically, the Nonprofit courses were the area that exhibited both the highest need and the greatest capacity. This inconsistency may not be as puzzling as first appears; it may reflect different respondents' faculty sizes and specialization compositions.

TABLE 2.
Capacity to Offer Online Courses

	Yes	No	Total responses
IT Management	31.0 % (22)	69.0% (49)	71
Budgeting and Financial Management	54.1% (40)	45.9% (34)	74
Procurement/Acquisitions	16.9% (11)	83.1% (54)	65
Specialized full-semester Human Resource Management courses (Benefits, Compensation, Training/Development, HR/Labor Law, Managing Diversity, etc.)	38.0% (27)	62.0% (44)	71
Local/Urban Government	50.7% (37)	49.3% (36)	73
Comparative/International	32.8% (22)	67.2% (45)	67
Specialized full-semester Nonprofit courses (Grant Development, Financial Oversight, Collaboration, etc.)	64.0% (48)	36.0% (27)	75
Other MPA specializations	---	---	48

These results are encouraging as NASPAA explores creative ways to augment MPA/MPP graduates' skill sets. An online consortium could also strengthen smaller programs. Diversity in course offerings could boost graduates' employment potential better prepare them for changes in the public and nonprofit sector marketplace.

Barriers to Students Taking Courses from Other Universities

Respondents also indicated some challenges and concerns about course sharing. In response to an open-ended question about their students taking courses from other programs, respondents were most concerned with the following (in no particular order): limits to transferring credits or restricted use of online courses, loss of revenue to the university and loss of credit hours to the program, tuition differences, quality control and course rigor, accreditation issues, and administrative logistics and the approval of the university administration.

Program representatives noted the existence of internal university rules that limit the number of transfer credits allowed from other programs. Of those who reported this issue, the limit ranged from 3 to 12 allowable credits. This limit includes programs within a state's own university system. Programs with low caps on transferable credit hours could limit the usefulness of an online consortium program; such low caps also might limit the demand for courses offered by other schools. There is an understandable interest in ensuring that students earn a degree by taking a significant number of courses from the institution in which they are enrolled.

Rules that limit credit transfers are also driven by revenue and cost concerns. Institutions may lose money if a significant number of course hours are taken from other universities. Loss of revenue/tuition dollars was a significant concern among respondents. Some programs were also concerned that courses (especially electives) have enough students in them to be financially feasible to offer. Students taking electives outside a program at smaller institutions could lead to lower enrollment in elective offerings at the home institution. However, if the courses are offered online, these institutions might take advantage of enrollment from other schools (a benefit). Of course, this raises an additional concern (not listed by respondents) that a course-sharing consortium could drive programs in the direction of online classes more quickly than previously planned.

Regarding tuition differences, they of course exist between universities: private versus public, in-state versus out of state, online versus on-site courses. Differences in tuitions and fees even exist among universities in the same state system. The concern is that such tuition differences might deter students from enrolling. Later in the article, we explore some possible tuition arrangements that might allow an online consortium to tackle this issue in advance.

Course quality and rigor were also listed as potential barriers. Some program directors expressed that they could not easily police the rigor of courses outside their universities and that online courses may not be equivalent to in-person courses. To mitigate this problem, program directors or student advisors could maintain control over which courses a program deems acceptable. One program director noted, "We do not offer or accept online coursework unless from a NASPAA accredited or AACSB accredited program." Consortium members could demand that the courses offered are from accredited institutions. Without such options, or others, course quality and rigor may suffer, which feeds into concerns raised by some respondents about the impact on their program's accreditation. One respondent listed regional accreditation issues and another noted concerns that course sharing might be problematic for NASPAA accreditation. If the consortium courses are primarily limited to electives, this concern may be less significant for accrediting bodies, but questions of course quality, instructor qualifications, and how to measure the impact of a course on student learning could still be problematic.

Respondents further raised "administrative logistics" as a challenge for a course-sharing consortium. Students might need to apply to the other, non-home institutions and pay additional application fees; they might face different rules for financial aid and encounter different course technologies. The home institutions, meanwhile, would incur time spent in administrative procedures to approve the earning and transferring of credits, as well as perhaps significant administrative and political changes needed to facilitate course sharing. These additional layers of administrative approval would also create additional opportunities for such approval to be vetoed. Finally, there are financial-aid concerns that are administrative in nature. Some universities require students to take a certain number of credit hours to be approved for financial aid. For example, at one university, a student needs 6 hours to qualify for financial aid as a part-time graduate student. If the student takes 3 hours at the university and 3 hours elsewhere, the student does not reach the required 6 hours. This is true even if the student takes a course from a sister institution within the university system. The ability to qualify for financial aid must be addressed in any consortium effort, or it would be a significant burden on students to take courses from other institutions.

Barriers to Offering Courses to Students at Other Universities

The survey also asked an open-ended question about whether respondents have concerns about offering courses to students from other universities. Some respondents indicated that they do not offer online courses at all or offer a limited number of them, either in summer or regular semesters. Apart from availability, respondents were most concerned with maintaining quality, faculty capacity, class-size limitations, student quality (admissions standards), the home program's students being the first priority, non-English speakers' language proficiency, and which institution gets the tuition.

Some programs may not have space in their classes for outside students or enough faculty or other capacity to handle additional students. There may also be mission-oriented reasons for not allowing outside students into a program's courses. For example, one respondent mentioned that such students would "need to realize that they will be taught from a faith-based perspective." Colleges with a specific regional focus might also be concerned about students taking courses without sufficient knowledge or background about issues within the region. Several respondents also mentioned accreditation concerns, which also hinted at worries about maintaining quality.

Concerning student academic preparation and prioritizing an institution's own students, several respondent said things like "as long as they [outside students] are qualified" or "meet admissions standards." This reflects a concern that the quality of outside students may not match that of the home institution's and might thus hinder the learning experience overall. This implies that outside students must apply to take the class and be accepted, which would be a tremendous barrier to overcome. The very nature of an additional application, and perhaps fee, could minimize the number of students that participate. That institutions want to serve their own students first is understandable but also presents a hidden administrative challenge: a program may not know how many seats are free to other students until late in the registration period. This suggests the necessity of a centralized online system among consortium members for offering and finding shared courses. Institutions could post seats "free" throughout the period of registration, and students and advisors from other programs could look there for offerings. In North Carolina, UNC-Online is a system that allows students from all universities to see offerings, but many of the administrative challenges still exist.

Regarding students' English-speaking ability, most institutions have a process to ensure proficiency, but this implies the need for an application or transfer of this information from one institution to the other. This is not an

insurmountable barrier but could complicate course sharing.

Finally, there was the question of who gets the tuition from outside-student enrollment. On the surface, the easiest solution is that the institution offering the course gets the tuition, but vast tuition differences among universities make this problematic. Some respondents suggested that the institution providing the student would be losing tuition and providing revenue for others. Thus, should the institution that provides the student get something in return? Some study-abroad consortia negotiate tuition prices different from those of any one home institution. For example, some institutions are able to offer study-abroad programs to U.S. cities or world destinations at home-institution prices.

These concerns expressed by survey respondents present barriers to course sharing among institutions. The stated challenges, however, can help those who want to create consortia identify what issues to negotiate or include in interuniversity agreements. This would help achieve successful course sharing between MPA/MPP programs.

FINANCIAL FEASIBILITY: POTENTIAL FUNDING MODELS

The feasibility of course sharing must address funding models. The determination of benefits and costs must be clearly understood as well as carefully planned, coordinated, and operationalized. All parties must believe they will benefit by joining the venture or there will be little incentive to participate.

In our judgment, NASPAA's involvement as a trusted and neutral third party is essential to creating a successful and sustainable online consortium. Trusting relationships among partners will be crucial, as will ensuring equity in decision making, risk taking, and rewards allocation. NASPAA would function in the consortium with little to no financial gain, so it is best equipped to serve as a conduit among

participants, resolving disputes and fostering trust, cooperation, and equity. As the central link among public affairs programs, NASPAA is also best positioned to disseminate information about the consortium among NASPAA members. Its service as a central node for broadcasting consortium offerings will be instrumental in the effort's success and growth. Last of all, NASPAA's involvement as an expert evaluator can help ensure that consortium courses meet NASPAA accreditation standards, which will be critical to the acceptance of offerings across university settings.

In summer 2013, NASPAA's Online Shared Resources Committee explored potential models for funding and financing a consortium. The committee developed three approaches: the Pooled Resource Model (Model 1), the Market-Driven Bid Model (Model 2), and the Technology Fee Model (Model 3). NASPAA's financial director, Peter Green, and executive director, Laurel McFarland, assisted the committee through further modeling refinement.

The discussion of the models below provides insights about their potential use as funding mechanisms as well as about participant roles: that of NASPAA, the school offering the course (the PROVIDING school), the schools allowing their students to enroll in consortium offerings SEEKING or HOME school), and the students enrolling in the courses (SEEKING students). The models assume enrollments of 100 students in three semester-credit-hour courses. This course size is purely hypothetical, for the purpose of model demonstration only. In reality, course size would likely be lower (i.e., 30–35 participants). We believe smaller course sizes would be needed to ensure and sustain instructor-student involvement and interaction.

Model 1: The Pooled Resource Model
In the Pooled Resource Model (Table 3), NASPAA identifies each course to be offered, the general information relating to course content, and likely the number of students participating in the class. Announcement of the

TABLE 3.

Model 1: Pooled Resource Model

	NASPAA role	Role of school PROVIDING course	Role of school SEEKING provider in shortage area	Role of student
Tuition	Puts shortage course out to bid (perhaps with a fixed cost and then a variable cost over some minimum number of students). NASPAA asks interested schools to have students sign up for the course (at a cost equal to the students' HOME tuition rate).	Bids on courses it can provide at a fixed cost, plus per student variation above a minimum. Receives one payment from NASPAA equal to bid price or is notified that no bids were low enough.	Receives no tuition for course unless the winning bid is less than the HOME tuition rate. In that case, NASPAA rebates the difference back to SEEKING schools (and/or students)	Pays the credit hour tuition of HOME school.
100 students/3 credits	High: $6,900 x 100 = $690,000			$6,900 x 100 = $690,000
100 students/3 credits	Low: $695 x 100 = $69,500			$695 x 100 = $69,500
100 students/3 credits	Average: $1,942 x 100 = $194,200	Sample bid: $190,000	Sample rebate: $4,200	$1,942 x 100 = $194,200
Per student	High: $6,900			$6,900
Per student	Low: $695			$695
Per student	Average: $1,942	Sample bid: $1,900	Sample rebate: $42	$1,942
Administration	Awards winning bid based on cost and quality/competency criteria. It pools tuition revenue received from all HOME schools, and if at least one bidder is lower than the pooled amount, NASPAA signs a contract for that course to take place. All tuition must be prepaid to NASPAA.			
Content	Stipulates course competencies consistent with NASPAA specialization competencies, universal competencies, and overall standards.	Agrees to deliver course likely to achieve NASPAA competencies in the specialization area.		
Credit	For smooth credit transfer, NASPAA will probably need to limit participation to regionally accredited universities and, ideally, to NASPAA-accredited programs.	Grants credit to students passing the course.	Accepts students' earned credits from PROVIDER school toward MPA/MPP degree.	Requests HOME school to accept credit and apply toward graduation.

Source. NASPAA

TABLE 4.
Model 2: Market-Driven Bid Model

	NASPAA role	Role of school PROVIDING course	Role of school SEEKING provider in shortage area	Role of Student
Tuition	Puts shortage course out to bid, looking for the lowest bid that meets quality requirements. Tuition rate = 1/*N*.	Receives lump sum (or lump sum plus per student above a minimum).	Receives no tuition for course.	Pays tuition (1/*N*) to NASPAA regardless HOME tuition rate is.
100 students/3 credits		High: $700,000	$0	$700,000
100 students/3 credits		Low: $50,000	$0	$50,000
100 Students/3 credits		Average: $200,000	$0	$200,000
Per student		High: $7,000	$0	$7,000
Per student		Low: $500	$0	$500
Per student		Average: $2,000	$0	$2,000
Administration	Advertises course to member schools; selects winning bid; writes lump sum contract; collects *N* student enrollments for course; calculates tuition at 1/*N*; collects payments from students; pays PROVIDING school.			
Content	Stipulates course competencies consistent with NASPAA's specialization competencies, universal competencies, and overall standards.	Agrees to deliver course likely to achieve NASPAA competencies in the specialization area.		
Credit	For smooth credit transfer, NASPAA will probably need to limit participation to regionally accredited universities and, ideally, to NASPAA-accredited programs	Grants credit to students passing the course.	Accepts students' earned credits from PROVIDER school toward MPA/MPP degree.	Requests HOME school to accept credit and apply toward graduation.

Source. NASPAA

TABLE 5.
Model 3: Technology Fee Model

	NASPAA role	Role of school PROVIDING course	Role of school SEEKING provider in shortage area	Role of student
Tuition		Receives online course supplement ("technology") fee from individual students.	Collects credit hour tuition from students.	Pays tuition to HOME school plus online course supplement ("technology") fee to PROVIDER school.
100 students/ 3 credits		High: $300 x 100 = $30,000	$6,900 x 100 = $690,000	$720,000
100 students/ 3 credits		Low: $15 x 100 = $1,500	$695 x 100 = $69,500	$71,000
100 students/ 3 credits		Average: $105 x 100 = $10,500	$1,942 x 100 = $194,200	$204,700
Per student		High: $300	$6,900	$7,200
Per student		Low: $15	$695	$710
Per student		Average: $105	$1,942	$2,047
Administration	Circulates RFI (request for information) to member schools; selects PROVIDER through bid process.			
Content	Stipulates course competencies consistent with NASPAA's specialization competencies, universal competencies, and overall standards.	Agrees to deliver course likely to achieve NASPAA competencies in the specialization area.		
Credit	For smooth credit transfer, NASPAA will probably need to limit participation to regionally accredited universities and, ideally, to NASPAA-accredited programs	Grants credit to students passing the course.	Accepts students' earned credits from PROVIDER school toward MPA/MPP degree.	Requests HOME school to accept credit and apply toward graduation.

Source. NASPAA

course offering is placed with all regionally accredited NASPAA members. PROVIDING institution bidders then react to this call for instructional offering by submitting a bid to conduct the consortium course. Subsequently, NASPAA reviews all bids and selects the institution that will offer the course. Judgment in selection is based on cost considerations. Preference is given to the lowest bidder provided that the bidder demonstrates the ability to achieve the desired level of quality in instruction, which is that which sustains NASPAA specialization course competencies and reinforces NASPAA standards and universal competencies.

In this model, SEEKING students pay their home institution's tuition rate for enrollment in the course. These funds are then transferred to the PROVIDING institution. The schools that provide SEEKING students notify NASPAA of their students' intention to enroll. Revenues in excess of the cost bid by the PROVIDER are rebated back to the SEEKING schools.

In this model, students at lower-cost institutions would not experience "sticker shock." But as seen in Table 3, this model creates substantial tuition cost variances for students across different institutions. Overcoming concerns about the inequity of tuition is a primary factor that would have to be worked through with the SEEKING institutions.

Model 2: The Market-Driven Bid Model

The Market-Driven Bid Model (Table 4) employs a standard course tuition cost paid by all enrollees regardless of their home institution's tuition rate. In some instances, the tuition cost will be lower for students who are coming from higher-tuition universities, while it will be higher for students coming from from lower-tuition institutions.

Course tuition costs are identified once PROVIDER institutions have responded to NASPAA's request for proposals. In this model, NASPAA requests bids from PROVIDERS. Once proposals are received and reviewed, NASPAA negotiates a contract with the lowest acceptable bidder as determined by total bid costs and course quality. Once such costs from the winning PROVIDER bid are known, NASPAA announces the course offering and secures commitments for course participation from SEEKER institutions. Ultimate course tuition costs are derived by calculating the winning bid costs divided by the number of enrollees participating in the course.

One significant disadvantage of this model is that the tuition cost for courses could vary considerably over time, based on the PROVIDER costs of offering the courses and the level of interest from SEEKING institutions' students. A second barrier in this model is that SEEKING institutions will not receive any funding remittance (as could be the case in the Pooled Resource Model). This disincentive may limit SEEKER institutions' willingness to allow their students to participate.

Model 3: The Technology Fee Model

The Technology Fee Model (Table 5) allows SEEKING institutions to register their students as for any other course offered at the home institution, but students enrolling in an online consortium course pay an additional technology fee. Revenues from the technology fee are collected by the SEEKING institutions and remitted to the PROVIDER institution. As in Models 1 and 2, NASPAA seeks bids and judge which PROVIDER is most acceptable, based on cost and course quality.

A clear advantage for SEEKING institutions in the Technology Fee Model is that they would receive the student credit hours, which often factor into annual departmental budgets. There would thus be no SEEKER disincentive to allowing students to enroll in a consortium course, because such enrollees would still be considered students of the home institution, that is, these students would remain part of the home department's student head count and semester credit hour totals.

Nonetheless, significant issues exist in this model. One concern is whether there would be sufficient revenues generated to meet PRO-VIDER bid requirements. A second concern relates to the technology fee structure. Should students pay the technology fee mandated by the PROVIDER institutions? Or should there be a standardized technology fee for all online consortium courses, no matter the institution? A final consideration (and possibly a disincentive to participate) relates to the ability of universities to remit portions of tuition—even if identified as a technology fee that is above the "normal" tuition cost paid by a student—to the PROVIDER institution. Factors associated with student loans, tuition cost waivers, or even state laws might prohibit or limit the ability of an institution to remit tuition-related costs to an "outside" vendor.

Each of these three models has its advantages and drawbacks: "the devil is in the details," as the saying goes. There will likely be hidden and unintended consequences that accrue to any online course collaboration, no matter which model is employed. The challenge becomes even more daunting when we consider that, as bureaucracies, universities and their associated state legislative bodies apply their own rule structures and may not be willing or allowed to "bend."

A FEASIBILITY PROJECT IN NORTH CAROLINA

In December 2013, NASPAA launched an effort to test the feasibility of an online consortium initiative in a single state, among public universities offering degrees in public policy, administration, and affairs. NASPAA had already conducted the aforementioned survey to identify areas of critical faculty shortages and to identify locations with faculty and online capacity to provide coursework in these critical areas. The goals at this stage were to test the feasibility of a particular state for the demonstration, and then to identify at least one appropriate course to test (i.e., with both sufficient student demand and sufficient faculty and platform capacity at a program to offer it).

The NASPAA Executive Council identified North Carolina as the first test state. NASPAA examined several factors in discussion with the state's MPA/MPP program directors:

- State-level interest in a course-sharing project and potential to enter into a consortium agreement.

- State-level regulations regarding intra- and interstate provision of online courses for credit.

- University-level restrictions on credit transfer and faculty teaching loads (including online loads).

- Institutional and other issues regarding minimum and maximum class/section enrollment for an online course.

- The capacity of one or more MPA/MPP programs in North Carolina to offer an online course in a shortage specialization area.

Discussions between North Carolina program directors and NASPAA began by e-mail in December 2013 and then expanded to more MPA/MPP program directors in the state. The idea was placed on the agenda of the February 2014 annual meeting of North Carolina MPA/MPP program directors, held as part of the North Carolina City and County Management Association meetings in Durham. At that meeting it became clear that some universities near Raleigh, Durham, and Greensboro already had a course-sharing consortium but that other programs in the state were not part of that agreement. There was general interest in the advantages of the idea, but a number of the concerns expressed in NASPAA's national survey also emerged in North Carolina, including those related to financial aid, limits on credit transfer or types of outside courses, and institutional capacity (some programs did not offer online courses). The program directors expressed interest in testing the idea if students were interested and if there was interest in extending the consortium that already existed.

After the February 2014 meeting, program directors shared their scheduled fall 2014 online course offerings with each other, and in some instances a few students attempted to take courses in fall 2014 from other schools. The students were able to enroll but administrative barriers arose (e.g., application fees, non–degree candidate applications, financial aid eligibility). The program directors met again at the February 2015 North Carolina City and County Management Association meeting and shared their experiences from the prior year. Several program directors agreed to work on a plan to extend the course-sharing consortium to all programs in the state and to work out the details of how to decrease administrative barriers.

DISCUSSION OF RESULTS AND NEXT STEPS

Survey results indicate interest among a number of NASPAA member schools to develop an online course-sharing consortium. Some intra- and interuniversity institutional arrangements already exist nationally. But most survey respondents were not aware if (or how) they might contract out for services within their state systems. While high interest appears to exist, gaining cross-institutional cooperation among competitive MPA/MPP programs may prove too burdensome for the investment. This seems to be the case among the North Carolina NASPAA member schools. Course-sharing efforts in North Carolina demonstrate program-to-program barriers to entry that would necessitate extension of a consortium agreement. However, the experience there does indicate that course sharing might be feasible within states.

To create a project on a national scale, it may prove easier and more acceptable for NASPAA to broker an online pilot course through a bidding process similar to that described in the Market-Driven Bid Model (Model 2). Using this approach, NASPAA would put out a request for proposal seeking suppliers who could offer a course in the Nonprofit specialization, as this was identified as a shortage area. The selected vendor could then develop the pilot course while NASPAA markets the course to its member schools. This would also allow program directors and interested students the opportunity to determine strategies for course and credit transfer within their home institutions.

It is clear to us, based on efforts in North Carolina, that there needs to be a centralized and recognized neutral clearinghouse for the project, one that can develop the plans and make neutral decisions needed for this initiative to become a reality. NASPAA is in the best position to be this party, as there appear to be significant barriers to entry to the formalization of an agreement across North Carolina MPA/MPP programs. Even when program-to-program cooperation exists, as is also the case across North Carolina MPA/MPP programs, many difficult hurdles remain in gaining approval up the administrative chains of these universities. Program directors likely will not have sufficient clout to gain interuniversity approval at the state level without investing considerable time in seeking university-wide acceptance of such a course-sharing initiative at their home schools.

CONCLUSIONS AND RECOMMENDATIONS

The survey data reported here, combined with the discussions among North Carolina MPA/MPP program directors, suggest that there is potential in the idea of NASPAA-accredited programs sharing quality online courses with one another under carefully constructed agreements. Survey respondents indicated that specialized course offerings in the Nonprofit, Human Resources, and IT Management subject areas would be in highest demand. The survey results also suggest that some programs have a capacity to provide online courses in the Nonprofit, Budgeting and Financial Management, and Local/Urban Government specializations. The sharing of tuition across "providing" and "seeking" schools presents challenges. Of the three models discussed in this article, the best fit for testing within North Carolina may be the Market-Driven Bid Model (Model 2). Greater understanding of the application and implementation of shared online initiatives is needed.

We recommend incremental planning and implementation of course sharing among interested NASPAA-accredited programs. First, agreements can be developed among universities within states. Then collaborative agreements can be negotiated among groups of universities in different states and with NASPAA-accredited programs in other nations. There should be participation opportunities for NASPAA-accredited programs that are not part of state systems.

A NASPAA online collaboration would provide multiple benefits for public affairs programs and their students. It would allow students in smaller NASPAA programs access to course content otherwise unavailable from their home programs. This would allow for better alignment of student educational goals and would better prepare students for their desired career fields in public service. Smaller programs could also benefit by using NASPAA-approved "online shared" faculty on a short-term basis to maintain compliance within NASPAA's "five nucleus faculty" minimum standard. Online course offerings could provide a transitional bridge when faculty retire or move to other institutions. This might allow faculty to take sabbatical leaves in smaller programs, where even the short-term absence of one faculty member can be critical. Larger programs might benefit by giving faculty members opportunities to teach specialty courses that would not otherwise be financially feasible to offer locally because of low enrollments. It may even be possible to create innovative new concentrations by leveraging the collaborations of faculty members with similar interests employed by different universities.

In our opinion, NASPAA should be the central node for policy making and implementation of any course-sharing collaboration. NASPAA is the most logical organization for marketing, coordinating, and assessing collaborative activities. It is best placed to understand the needs of MPA/MPP programs and to evaluate any collaboration against accreditation standards. While NASPAA and COPRA do not assess

individual courses at this time, together they could ensure that the sharing of online courses strengthens programs rather than compromises the quality of educational services provided.

There are financial and other reasons why public affairs programs and their university administrations might want to enter into online collaborations brokered by NASPAA. Competition for qualified students is fierce, particularly in the presence of for-profit universities with aggressive recruitment strategies. By sharing online courses administered by NASPAA, provider universities might be able to collect some tuitions not otherwise available to them. Through online collaboration, new concentrations may become available by leveraging the interests and abilities of faculty who share an expertise but are geographically distant from each other. Courses that cannot "make it" (i.e., are not financially viable because of low enrollment) on any one campus may become feasible through strategic course sharing. "Designer" courses (involving the paid services of professional instructional designers and technologists and costly multimedia production studios) that individual programs and their universities cannot afford alone may become possible when costs are shared. Finally, an online consortium may help programs achieve their diversity goals, in terms of both professors and students.

There is need for additional research to identify and assess business cases for shared courses and program collaborations coordinated by NASPAA, from the perspectives of programs and university administrations. Such research can be grounded in the literatures of strategic planning, environmental scanning, computer-mediated learning, creative destruction, organizational networking, strategic alliances, and electronically mediated service oriented architectures. An online course-sharing consortium is not just about creating new administrative relationships among universities. It is also about a fundamental rethinking of instructional design of both courses and entire programs of study, as well as the role of computers in adapting

precision education to individual students. A substantial downsizing of higher education as we know it, and the transformation of traditional instructional roles, may be in play. Viewed from a variety of considerations, collaborative initiatives such as described here are both a response to opportunities and a preemptive adaptation to possible major changes in the fabric of higher education.

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