



**NASPAA Standards 2009:  
Public Service Values, Mission-Based Accreditation  
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September 12, 2007**

Now is the time to craft a third generation of NASPAA accreditation standards. Our challenge is to go beyond the contributions of the previous NASPAA standards in establishing the mission-based tradition, to assert a more central role for public service values and competencies within that mission-based process. The original NASPAA accreditation standards were focused on program inputs. They asked programs to demonstrate that they applied resources believed to be necessary and sufficient to produce a high quality education. Such program resources included the number of faculty, budget, and courses offered. With the rewriting of the standards in the 1990s, a layer of mission-based requirements was added to the input standards. Mission-based accreditation recognized the wide range of NASPAA programs and focused on program processes. They asked programs to demonstrate that they engaged in continuous improvement—developing a mission based on engaging constituencies, assessing the extent to which mission objectives were accomplished, and then revising the program based on this feedback and analysis.

The 21<sup>st</sup> century has brought a set of challenges to NASPAA's accreditation philosophy. Performance measures, in part advocated by our own graduates, are increasingly viewed as critical to governmental and nonprofit organizational success. Colleges are under increasing pressure to explicitly demonstrate their added value, usually through showing that their students have mastered their educational goals. In addition our field is buffeted by competitors and we are increasingly pressed to demonstrate our value-added and distinctiveness. After all, if our accreditation process is simply mission-based, what programs would not qualify for accreditation if they had processes in place to meet their mission, regardless of how they defined it? As one member of our committee asked during a meeting, "what makes our programs distinctive—how would our curriculum look different from that of a business school?" So we were faced with the question of whether the mixed model of inputs and mission-based accreditation was passé and whether we should recommend a model focused on outputs, or performance. Should accreditation standards ask programs to demonstrate that their graduates and faculty achieve measurable objectives with respect to learning, scholarship and service?

Developing a pure outcomes-based set of standards is premature and incomplete. First, the technology of outcomes measurement is not well developed in our field, and schools are using all different vehicles for measuring outcomes. Second, such an approach ignores the fact that we care about the learning environment as well what is learned. Third, like missions, not all outcomes are acceptable. Still, creating the expectation that programs will measure performance, whenever feasible, on acceptable outcomes should become part of accreditation.

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<sup>1</sup> This is a discussion document for NASPAA Standards 2009: Transforming Education for Public Service. Steering Committee authored by Jeff Raffel, chairman of the NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee; Steve Maser, chairman of the NASPAA Standards Committee; and Laurel McFarland, Executive Director of NASPAA. This document is meant to promote discussion and exchange.

The Committee is proposing a new model for accreditation:

**Public Service Values-driven, Mission-based Accreditation.**

Those values give rise to a set of principles rooted in public service. We have reasoned that a "pure" mission-based approach is not appropriate. We cannot and should not ignore that public administration and public policy programs, whatever the differences among them, share a distinctive mission: promoting values in community governance such as accountability, responsibility, justice, transparency, and improving welfare. A values-driven approach helps to define the range of acceptable program outcomes.

What are the legacy features in our proposed accreditation? We will need to keep in mind inputs believed to contribute to high quality education, and thus we have reaffirmed the significance of the learning environment. While a wide range of processes can promote success, we reaffirm that some processes, like defining a mission, measuring performance, continuous improvement, and faculty governance, contribute to success more than others and should be common to all programs accredited by NASPAA. Finally, while we understand that program curriculum will be related to mission, we have identified common competencies we believe all students in NASPAA-accredited programs should demonstrate. The core of our approach is values-driven, mission-based accreditation but we are proposing a process that incorporates outcome measures, such as student competencies for public service, within it.

The distinction is that NASPAA's set of accreditation standards should be focused on programs improving community governance, public service and public welfare. We are moving beyond mission-based accreditation by insisting that public service be a distinctive component in each program's mission; by specifying common student competencies that all programs shall demonstrate contribute to success in public service whatever the specifics of the program mission; and by insisting that programs model in their own governance the values they are teaching their students. These elements are also the key to ensuring the collective survival and growth of our schools by emphasizing their unique and potent impact on "making a difference" and "changing the world." In short, we are proposing a set of principles reflecting and supporting the public service foundation of our field. In sum, we are standing up for public service!