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Transforming Public Affairs Education through Accreditation Standards

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Abstract

In 2006 NASPAA launched an effort to conduct a 10-year review of the standards and the accreditation process amidst a changing world of accreditation, public administration and policy, and global change. This paper outlines the reasons and process for the review, the complex context of the reexamination, and offers the first set of accreditation guiding principles for discussion. There are a number of environmental factors setting the scene for an examination of the NASPAA standards including projections of the future state of the world of public affairs and administration, national accreditation issues, and trends in quality review and assessment. Three issues that have shaped the content of almost every major accreditation reform discussion today: transparency, accountability and comparability. Provisional guiding principles are included for comment. The paper is co-authored by the chair of the NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee and the staff to the committee.

Transforming Public Service Education through Accreditation Standards
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Accreditation is a process of peer review meant to ensure and improve the quality of educational programs. By establishing a set of standards, accreditation bodies can define the content of a professional or academic field as well as the requirements for programs to be judged as accredited, that is reaching a threshold of acceptability and competence. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) has been accrediting public affairs programs in the U.S. at the masters level to "prepare students…for leadership positions in the public sector" for two decades (NASPAA Standards, 2006, p. 6).[1] In 2006 NASPAA launched an effort to conduct a 10-year review of the standards and the accreditation process amidst a changing world of accreditation, public administration and policy, and global change. This paper outlines the reasons and process for the review, the complex context of the reexamination, and offers the first set of accreditation guiding principles for discussion. The paper is co-authored by the chair of the NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee and the staff to the committee.

History of Accreditation in Public Service Education in the U.S.

NASPAA is an institutional membership organization with a twofold mission: to ensure excellence in education and training for public service and promote the ideal of public service. The membership includes 257 university programs in public affairs, public policy and public administration. Of the total number of programs eligible to participate in peer review, currently 158 programs at 151 schools (59% of member institutions) have been accredited by the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA), NASPAA's accrediting arm.

NASPAA serves as the professional accreditor of master's degrees in public administration, public affairs, and public policy in the U.S. In part because public service is not a licensed profession in the United States, the NASPAA accreditation process is entirely voluntary, and not all NASPAA institutional members have sought accreditation from COPRA, although the number of accredited programs has been growing at a rate of approximately four percent for year over the last decade (see Figure 1). All NASPAA accredited programs have successfully met the NASPAA Standards for Professional Master's Degree Programs in Public Affairs, Policy and Administration and have undertaken a rigorous process of peer review. NASPAA does not currently review undergraduate degrees, PhD programs or programs outside of the U.S.

NASPAA-COPRA is formally recognized as a specialized accrediting agency for master's degree programs in public affairs and administration by the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), an association of 3,000 colleges and universities recognizing institutional and programmatic accrediting organizations. Today, NASPAA and 60 other agencies share this recognition, which is the result of a process of evaluation and self-scrutiny similar to accreditation.

NASPAA was founded in 1970 as a satellite of the American Society of Public Administrators (ASPA), a professional society for public service (Henry, 1995). NASPAA institutional

membership grew along with the expanding numbers of public administration programs in the U.S. and in 1977, member institutions of NASPAA voted to adopt a program of voluntary peer review evaluation of master's degrees or degree programs in public affairs and administration. That same year, the association adopted *Standards for Professional Masters Degree Programs in Public Affairs, Policy and Administration.* Peer review was initiated by the member institutions to facilitate the continuing development and quality of public service education.

In 1983, the members of the association voted to apply to the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation (COPA) to become recognized as a specialized accrediting agency to accredit master/masters degrees in public affairs and administration. On October 3, 1986, COPA granted NASPAA recognition as a specialized accrediting agency. NASPAA's Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) was recognized by COPA's successor, the Council on Higher Education Accreditation (CHEA), in 2003 for a period of 10 years.

The NASPAA review/accreditation process combines program self-study, review by COPRA, and a two to three day campus visit by a COPRA-appointed site visit team. (See the 2007 NASPAA accreditation web page for details on the process and the current standards). The review/accreditation cycle begins each year on August 15, with the submission of a self-study report. At the annual NASPAA conference in October, the 12 members of COPRA review the 20-30 self-study reports and write interim reports to the programs which have applied for accreditation or re-accreditation. Programs then write limited replies, often providing new information and clarifying points at issue. Some decide not to continue in the process at that point. Site visit teams typically composed of two academics and one practitioner then visit the programs during the winter and early spring, writing a site visit report describing their findings but not reaching a judgment on accreditation. In June, the Commission meets for a final review session and determines if a program is in conformity with the standards. Subsequently, the Commission publishes an Annual Roster of Accredited Programs. At present little information is released to the public or member institutions about the process or program achievement beyond the resulting accreditation decisions.

While COPRA is responsible for evaluating whether programs meet the standards, NASPAA, as a membership organization, maintains a separate Standards Committee to add or rewrite standards or to alter the scope of accreditation. The Executive Council, or governing board of NASPAA, does not participate in the process of individual program review, yet broadly oversees accreditation goals and development carefully in part because the accreditation process has been identified by member schools and programs as the most significant organizational activity of NASPAA (Reed, 2003). The Executive Council of NASPAA has officially recognized COPRA's autonomy and independence in accreditation decision-making and policy making, while maintaining a significant financial contribution and administrative support. The chair and staff of COPRA report to the Executive Council, and the president of NASPAA appoints members of COPRA, using established selection criteria and recommendations from COPRA. NASPAA supplies staff support for COPRA and its activities but there is a clear distinction among NASPAA, the Standards Committee, and COPRA.

Development of the current accreditation standards

NASPAA accreditation is mission-based, meaning programs must clearly articulate their mission and the process by which the mission was developed. The programs must also assess the extent to which they are meeting their mission and then indicate what changes their program adopted in light of such assessments. Programs must in essence, "close the loop." There are nine substantive areas of focus in the NASPAA review process and all are primarily evaluated with respect to the program's own goals (NASPAA Standards, 2006):

1. Accreditation eligibility
2. Mission process
3. Structure and influence of program
4. Curriculum
5. Faculty
6. Admissions
7. Student services
8. Budget and resources
9. Distance learning

The mission-based evaluation process was not always the key component of the NASPAA accreditation standards. The original NASPAA standards were primarily input-driven, focusing on specifics such as the need for a minimum of five faculty members devoted to the program, core curriculum, and budget of the program. In 1992 the mission-based layer was added to the standards, relaxing some of the rigidity of the original standards, which were seen as more narrowly focused on public administration programs. This was partly to include a broader array of public service programs, including public policy programs, which look more and more like public administration programs in their content, into the fold of accreditation (Ellwood, 2006).

In 2004, COPRA made a small alteration in the self-study instructions which represented a larger philosophical change relevant to the current transformation effort. The requirement that programs articulate the extent to which their students were learning a set of student competencies was pushed to a position of greater prominence and programs are now explicitly asked to "identify the general competencies that are consistent with the program mission" (NASPAA Standards, 2006, p. 8). However, this change has not yet had a major impact on programs seeking accreditation, and the standard has much potential for development.

Beyond the mission-based versus input balance, the NASPAA accreditation process faces a number of conflicting objectives, and thus the development of standards is a compromise among several competing forces. The process seeks to designate programs as accredited or not but is also intended to be developmental in its orientation. Thus, there has been a focus on helping programs improve along with a reluctance to make public negative findings or to make the process too high stakes. The accreditation process seeks to attract and maintain both large, elite programs, usually offered in schools of public affairs, and small, local-oriented programs, often offered as part of a political science department. Accreditation is the most significant NASPAA activity but operates under a series of resource constraints; NASPAA staff devoted to the process are limited and the full cost of accreditation is not absorbed by programs seeking or already accredited. As part of the developmental nature of NASPAA accreditation, fees for services have

typically remained low. Finally, the endpoint of the process itself is to signify programs as accredited, giving public recognition and visibility to NASPAA programs. However, the official accreditation process is often criticized for lacking transparency as compared to peer accreditors and public sector norms (McFarland, 2007).

Future of Public Service Education: NASPAA Standards Review

Located purposely 'inside the Beltway', the center of the nation's changing political and public service landscape and accreditation activity, NASPAA recently decided to review its standards and accreditation process. This enterprise represents a significant engagement on the part of NASPAA members and the public sector to determine the competencies and skills public service professionals need for the changing world of public service. As an accreditor, NASPAA is engaged in investigating and employing the best practices in accreditation and program assessment in an attempt to ensure that programs remain relevant and competitive into the future.

In Spring 2006 NASPAA President Daniel Mazmanian, with the support of the NASPAA Executive Council as per an October 2005 vote, appointed the NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee. The Executive Council held a March 2006 retreat in Tucson, Arizona led by well-known strategic planning expert, John Bryson, to consider the future of public service education (NASPAA, The Future). This assessment process is currently scheduled to result in a new draft set of NASPAA Standards to be voted on by accredited members at the 2009 NASPAA Fall Conference (see Figure 2). The NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee includes representatives from the profession and a variety of academic programs. The membership is listed in Figure 3.

NASPAA is committed to thoroughly evaluating and revising the public affairs curriculum and the NASPAA Accreditation Standards to attempt to ensure that public service degrees give graduates the competitive skills they need to lead the public sector.[2] The goal of the endeavor is to deliver a set of NASPAA Accreditation Standards that will attempt to ensure the graduate public service degrees in the next decade serve the needs of the profession. Indeed, the field of public affairs, broadly defined, is now focused on this topic as national associations such as the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) as well as NASPAA have built their recent conferences around the topic of the future of public service education. APPAM, for example, held a conference themed "Charting the Next Twenty Years of Public Policy and Management Education" in June 2006, generating more than a dozen papers on the topic (APPAM, 2006). NASPAA's annual conference themes include: "The Future of the Public Sector" in 2006 and "Embracing the Certainty of Uncertainty: Creating the Future of Public Affairs Education" in 2007.

The NASPAA Standards are not only relevant for accredited programs in the U.S. In fact, these standards are the benchmark used by public affairs graduate programs around the world. (For a discussion of emerging public policy programs and accreditation issues around the world see Geva-May, Nasi, et. al., 2006). Programs participating in the accreditation process will necessarily be interested in new standards. However, many non-accredited programs in the U.S.

and abroad shadow these standards. Any major changes to curriculum expectations or the measurement of competencies will cast a wide impact on public affairs education globally.

The standards process must meet the expectations of CHEA so that NASPAA can continue to be recognized as an accrediting body. Furthermore, NASPAA needs 'buy-in' from its members, who, as noted above, must ultimately vote for and implement the new standards. Thus, the reevaluation of the standards takes place in a complex context.

Context of Accreditation Standards Revision

There are a number of environmental factors setting the scene for an examination of the NASPAA standards including projections of the future state of the world of public affairs and administration, national accreditation issues, and trends in quality review and assessment. Other environmental factors come internally from the public affairs programs themselves, as they adapt to the increasing demand for innovative offerings in several areas. Some of these trends include: attention to mid-career learners as evidenced by the growth in executive programs, leadership offerings and flexible course scheduling (Holmes, 2006); unique program delivery mechanisms like online courses or satellite campus offerings facilitated by improved technologies and electronic information sharing; an understanding of the international context of public affairs in curriculum and in program design, as evidenced by programs contracting to educate entire cohorts of international public servants and opening up campuses overseas; and cooperation with academic programs outside of the traditional "public affairs" fields to develop curricula and offerings that prepare graduates for the multi-sectoral workforce (NAPA, Managing, 2005).

Future of public affairs and administration

There seems to be consensus on the "future" of public administration based mostly on the extrapolation of recent changes that led to the present state of public administration. Some are almost clichés:

- The world is flat, i.e. globalization has leveled the playing field and brought us closer together (Friedman, 2005). The obvious implication for public affairs education is that the international content of our curriculum must increase. (Internationalizing the Public Affairs Core Curriculum, 2004).

- IT is ever expanding its reach; our graduates will work in a world more affected by e-government and more demanding of graduates able to manage information beyond spreadsheets and statistical packages and dealing more with rapid change, IT purchases and subcontractors, and policy issues of privacy and security.

- Government is increasingly contracting out for services and using privatization options. Our graduates need to be able to move beyond managing governmental bureaucracies to mastering entrepreneurial networking and collaboration, that is, they need to understand more than government but more broadly governance and be able to manage across

boundaries (Berry and Brower, 2005; National Academy of Public Administration, 2005; Salamon, 2005).

- The lines between sectors are blurring and our graduates are more likely to change their "careers" several times. The graduate who begins as a legislative aide is likely to then work for a consulting firm next and then wind up running a nonprofit organization (Boyle and Whitaker, 2001; Light, 1999).

- We live in a post 9-11 world and will have to focus more on security concerns.

- Demographic change is having an impact on governmental policies, revenue, and political forces; as the population ages, immigration impacts are more significant, and the population becomes more diverse, public service leaders will need to respond

- Increasing income inequality is becoming more of a challenge to political and economic policies and policy makers

- Other issues such as civic engagement (Lukensemeyer and Torres, 2006; Armstrong, Larkin, Morse, and Won-Kim, 2005), sprawl, sustainable development

Focusing on the federal government, Abramson, Breul, and Kamensky tried to capture the "Four Trends Transforming Government" in their 2003 work: (1) changing rules, (2) emphasizing performance, (3) improving service delivery, and (4) increasing collaboration. Upon reflection, they "believe the next decade will best be categorized by a topsy-turvy ride for government leaders" as government learns to respond to the four trends. They conclude "Improving government management remains a complex and difficult assignment—both technically and politically." Barbara Nelson, in her NASPAA Conference Plenary address in October 2002, "Education for the Public Interest," suggested that curriculum should encompass problem solving across boundaries, educating students for shared power and shifting alliances, about citizen engagement and diversity, and to the realities of public opinion including declining support for the public sector. Similarly, Astrid Merget, in her 2003 Donald Stone Lecture to ASPA, provided a 'sampler of changes' that the field needs to confront including (1) the globalization of the political economy, (2) technology, (3) the imperative for public, private, and nonprofit partnerships, (4) renewed and amplified view of institution building, (5) challenge to manage complexity and change, and (6) the importance of research while asserting a healthy respect for the political milieu. Jeffrey Straussman, in a discussion paper for the APPAM Spring 2006 conference (2006), cited several of the same trends but also brings an empirical analysis of management and policy process course syllabi to his analysis. Among the topics he addresses as necessary in today's world: (1) globalization; (2) managing across sectors; (3) collaborative management; (4) being reflective yet evidence-based.

While defining the world of public administration today has been the subject of many thoughtful leaders of the field, defining the future of public affairs is a problematic exercise. Are we generals fighting the last war, that is, are these the changes of the last decade and are we able to predict the changes of the next one? Are these changes overstated, that is, will all graduates

really confront a globalized, IT-dominated, multi-sector world or are these trends really at the edge of our field? Will there be a counterforce, as there often is in history and politics, moving the pendulum back to more traditional forms of government?

During the NASPAA retreat on the future of public affairs education, one speaker noted that 10 years ago few, if any, would have predicted the issues that vex us today—post-Katrina disaster planning, 9-11 security concerns, the dominance of the internet in communication, and massive federal deficits on the horizon. The speaker's point was that we live in a fast-paced world and our programs need to catch up. But another way to view this reflection is that the issues vexing our graduates in 10 years may well be quite different than those facing us today so how can we prepare them for the new world which we cannot imagine? While we want to be careful not to jump on 'the world is changing' bandwagon, we also want to be careful not to justify our traditional approaches to public administration education by becoming too cynical about change (NASPAA, The Future, 2006).[3]

Frankly, at this point it appears that predicting the future will be much easier than determining what NASPAA should do about it. The consensus on the future, and our ability to add one more prediction on top of many others, makes this exercise relatively noncontroversial. Once we try to translate these predictions into policies and standards, the difficulties become apparent. Major questions include:

- We may agree on what we will need to add to the core curriculum, but can we agree on what needs to be reduced or eliminated?

- How can we maintain a set of standards in a fast-paced world where the context changes so rapidly? Will our mission-based approach be sufficient?

- Where will programs get the resources to move from traditional public administration to programs incorporating topics such as IT management, security, and contract administration? Many NASPAA programs struggling to meet the 5-faculty minimum and are also struggling to find someone to teach relevant IT courses.

Employer input

One major component of the standards review is to seek and incorporate input from employers of the graduates of public service programs. This is quite a challenge since graduates are hired by a wide range of organizations. The image of all public affairs graduates working in the federal government is certainly inaccurate today. Furthermore, as noted above, graduates are likely to have multiple careers and change sectors fairly readily. Thus, a comprehensive approach to employer input is warranted but difficult to implement.

Fortunately, NASPAA, in part in collaboration with other organizations, recently launched a marketing information campaign and was already in the process of surveying employers in a number of fields. The NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee has been able to piggyback upon this effort and early results have proven helpful in the standards review process.

Over 400 city managers responded to the 2006 NASPAA/ICMA online survey. The city managers were given 15 "types of management knowledge and skills" and asked to consider how important each was for their organization's management needs. Decision making/problem solving was rated as "extremely important" by 82 percent of the respondents. The other items receiving over 70 percent of ratings in the highest category were communications skills (77%), leadership (72%), and teamwork (71%). Those items receiving few ratings of extreme or high importance included statistical analysis and marketing. When asked to check the three most important skills in their organization, respondents added budgeting and financial management to this list but e-governance, information technology, policy analysis, and statistical analysis never made it above ground level. A list of public service knowledge and skills indicated that ethics and integrity topped the city manager's list, although many other topics were also considered as important such as openness to citizen participation and involvement, organization and group behavior, and political/legal institutions. The 2007 federal survey mirrored the city manager survey in the skills most frequently identified, with the addition of program evaluation and accountability to the most significant addition to the list of important topics. The 2007 student survey, which included many practitioners seeking their MPA degrees, indicated that students perceived the most important skills to potential employers were written and oral communication, decision making, leadership, and teamwork, pretty close to the mark (NASPAA Surveys, 2007).

The Committee also has three members who are employers, Sallyanne Harper, chief administrative officer and chief financial officer at GAO, Jonathan , executive director, IBM Governmental Solutions, and Hal Steinberg, Association of Government Accountants and retired KMPG partner, who led the firm's state and local practice for almost a decade. Several members of the Committee have served in the public service including former city manager Sy Murray. The Committee has heard from other employers as well. One speaker at the NASPAA executive council retreat even revealed, confidentially, what kind of people the intelligence community was seeking to employ! (We cannot share this, of course, except to say that many people skills were included on the list and statistics was not.)

The Steering Committee also could draw on works written by employers about their needs in the hiring process. Angela Evans specified the core competencies required by the Congressional Research Service in her 2006 APPAM paper. These included knowledge, skills and abilities to perform analysis, to operate in a public policy community, and work ethic and public service. Among these KSAs were old academic standbys such as "establishes conceptual frameworks," "speaks and communicates effectively," and "conducts public policy analysis" but she also included more organizational abilities such as "leads and tasks effectively," "negotiates and resolves disputes," and "innovates and creates." Value considerations also play a strong role as KSAs include "desires to serve the public," "behaves with honestly and integrity," and "behaves professionally" (Evans, 2006).

At the 2006 NASPAA Meeting Sallyanne Harper summarized a recent GAO study of factors related to success of entry level hires in the GAO. The GAO used the ratings of 534 analysts hired in FY 2002-2004 supplemented by discussions with managing directors. The factors identified as differentiating the highest-rated performers from others included critical thinking,

written and oral communication, and collaborating with others. Other significant factors included showing initiative, demonstrating flexibility, detailed orientation, adapting quickly to GAO, and seeing the "big picture."

Thus, there appears to be a gap in the needs of employers and the current standards—people and leadership skills. The current NASPAA standards begin with the statement that accredited programs prepare leaders for public service but the core curriculum as defined in the current standards does not specifically address leadership. Is the MPA curriculum, for example, strictly a management curriculum or is there a place, indeed, a need for, explicit leadership content and skill development (Fairholm, 2006; Should Leadership be in the Core Curriculum? 2005). Even some policy analysts, whose programs have been primarily focused on methods not process, recognize the need for "people skills" in their curriculum (Mintrom, 2003).

U.S. government accreditation "reforms"

The NASPAA Standards 2009 effort is proceeding during an unsettled time for U.S. accreditation generally. The call for accountability in higher education rang with force in 2006 as the U.S. Secretary of Education Margaret Spellings commissioned a blue-ribbon panel to investigate public concerns related to higher education. The Commission on the Future of Higher Education asserted in its final report, *A Test of Leadership*, that "As other nations rapidly improve their higher education systems, we are disturbed by evidence that the quality of student learning at U.S. colleges and universities is inadequate and, in some cases, declining" (Commission on the Future of Higher Education, 2007, p. 3). In addition, the report states, "Accreditation reviews are typically kept private, and those that are made public still focus on process reviews more than bottom-line results for learning or costs. The growing public demand for increased accountability, quality and transparency coupled with the changing structure and globalization of higher education requires a transformation of accreditation (p. 15)." Further criticism stemmed from the fact that accreditation is perceived as not being consumer-friendly, as the public has little access to comparability data based on student learning. Analogies from subsequent meetings have included the comparison of a college decision to buying a car; a consumer needs all the facts on what went into the final manufactured product in order to make an informed decision.

What is of great concern to the accreditation community is that this push for accountability has now developed from a call for attention into a negotiated rulemaking process. Historically, the accreditation agencies in the U.S. operate independently from any government entity. There is no Ministry of Education that approves academic and assessment goals and procedures, as there are in many other countries. This has generally been seen as a strength of the American higher education system, especially in professional education where the profession itself has been the source of standards for accreditation.

The ends of the negotiated rulemaking process are still under heated debate but the loudest call has been for consistent outcomes measures across accreditors in order to force public comparability across institutions. The debate may seem in the public to be focused on the

problems of undergraduate education and not professional education, but the Secretary has made no such distinction in the various action plans that have been presented by the Department.

For clarification, while the Department of Education does not grant accreditors the authority to operate, it does recognize many accreditors for purposes of accessing Title IV and other public funding streams. The Department's evaluation arm (National Advisory Committee on Institutional Quality and Integrity or NACIQI) has used these policy imperatives in its latest review as a lever to move programs on the accountability issues, questioning the evaluation of outcomes in absence of "bright line" or clearly defined minimum thresholds for compliance (Lederman, 2006). This has faced harsh criticism from mission-based voluntary accreditors that sense that moving too far in this direction could jeopardize diversity for comparability. Some professional fields, like public affairs, business, and library sciences, do not seek Department recognition as they are not gatekeepers for federal funding and are not technically subject to any type of review. However, as stated, the NASPAA process is recognized by CHEA voluntarily. Whatever the Department ultimately decides with regard to the programs it recognizes, CHEA may follow suit.

Accreditation themes

Independently of the U.S. federal government-led efforts, there are three issues that have shaped the content of almost every major accreditation reform discussion today: transparency, accountability and comparability. Arguably, improving on all three parameters should be important to NASPAA programs because of our commitment not only to the profession and the students, but because of our special mission of ensuring excellence in the training for public service. The very "publicness" of NASPAA's own mission presents a special challenge to us on all three fronts.

Accountability is a centerpiece of any accreditation improvement effort. Without the accountability piece, transparency and comparability questions could be in danger of ending up as marketing questions, not genuine matters related quality assurance. In this case we are talking about demonstrating accountability through the assessment of student learning outcomes, a subject near and dear to the accreditation community for nearly a quarter century. Accreditors across the board still struggle with this issue, despite the attention paid to this matter and the time spent in debate. The science has improved generally but assessment still remains problematic to voluntary specialized professional accreditors like NASPAA.

What is a "student learning outcome"? The response given by the Commission on Higher Education Accreditation is as follows (CHEA, 2006):

> An "outcome is something that happens to an individual student as a result of his or her attendance at a higher education institution or participation in a particular course of study…A "student learning outcome," in contrast, is properly defined in terms of the particular levels of knowledge, skills and abilities that a student has attained at the end (or as a result) of his or her engagement in a particular set of collegiate experiences."

There is not much debate in the field that best practices in accreditation now include the evaluation of student learning. The debate, rather, is about how the assessment systems are designed, how the accreditor or program demonstrates that the achieved outcome or indicator is related to quality, and how the accreditor ensures consistency in the rigor of its review without jeopardizing the diversity of its programs. In fact, the recognition standards for CHEA, state that, "To be recognized, the accrediting organization provides evidence that it has implemented:…accreditation standards or policies that require institutions or programs routinely to provide reliable information to the public on their performance, including student achievement as determined by the institution or program." (CHEA, 2007)

The concept of requiring student learning assessments is still new to many accrediting bodies that may have encouraged this type of assessment in the past but have never required extensive assessment in this area. Comprehensive surveys or lists of the current practices in accreditation are lacking, so most data is anecdotal from conversations with other accreditors and some website surveys. The most common path for specialized accreditors appears to be to either establish, or have the program establish, a set of competencies for student achievement based on the needs of the profession. The programs are then expected to demonstrate that students are in fact achieving those competencies in order to be accredited. Typically, it is up to the program to determine the method of student assessment, usually within some parameters (Kershenstein, 2002).

NASPAA is not currently at the front of these trends. NASPAA accreditation has served the field well with its developmental purpose and it has matured considerably with the adoption of the mission-focused process in the early 1990s. However, the NASPAA standards continue to focus on bright line input standards without much attention to outcomes, student learning or otherwise. The input standards can be limiting as COPRA evaluation evolves, especially with regard to programs with unique or alternative structures. NASPAA will need to take a look at all of its current and proposed requirements with respect to their impact on program quality.

Which outcomes should NASPAA include in its assessment enterprise? NASPAA has a variety of options, but they all come with some conceptual challenges. One of the primary tasks will be to determine which of these challenges can be overcome during the review process. Some of the key conceptual and policy challenges will be:

- Which outcomes are correlated to quality in public affairs education?
- How will NASPAA determine a threshold for noncompliance?
- Should NASPAA prescribe specific competencies or allow the programs to choose the competencies they will measure based on individual program mission? Or a mixture of both?
- Which outcomes does NASPAA really want to measure, knowing that these accreditation requirements will shift the entire field of public service education towards improvement in these areas? What is the most important?
- What is possible for programs? Is NASPAA willing to lose some programs from the accreditation process to make the assessment more modern and rigorous? How many?

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- Do these assessments need to be externally validated?
- How will NASPAA avoid focusing on too many outcomes and diluting its core strengths?

There are many ideas as to how this enterprise might manifest itself and to which general program outcomes NASPAA would assess. Since these are professional, public service degrees, NASPAA could look at measures like employment information or some measure of student contribution to public service. As a voluntary accreditor, NASPAA has no licensure exam for public servants to make its job easier. Nor is salary necessarily one of the best indicators of success for many of its programs, as it is for business schools. NASPAA will need to be creative in its measures, keeping in mind that it does not have to include the kitchen sink. NASPAA has other data efforts progressing independently of the accreditation process; outcomes assessment in accreditation should be based on parameters that are (or are perceived to be) most related to quality.

Student learning outcomes requirements could be left largely up to programs, or NASPAA could suggest some acceptable options. Many programs already use the capstone enterprise to assess student competencies; some are already externally validated. NASPAA could expand on this at a larger scale. A few other programs use electronic portfolios to track student learning and achievements. These are common in undergraduate programs where the push for measures is currently stronger, but their usage is growing. Other programs make use of comprehensive exams; paired with an entry exam, this could be a valuable tool for an individual program to assess value added. Clearly there are some creative options, and NASPAA should tap member programs for more information on what they are doing to innovate in this area.

In order to move forward towards outcomes assessment a few critical needs are evident:

- A review of NASPAA schools to assess the state of outcomes assessment in the field
- Academic basis for choosing outcomes and determining decision thresholds
- Better information on the state of outcomes in accreditation generally and how the science can be best applied to public service education

While accountability forms the centerpiece of the academic portion of the NASPAA Standards 2009 enterprise, it is the goal of transparency that guides the revision of the NASPAA accreditation process. As stated previously, NASPAA review results in very little published information on accredited programs. The final decisions are published on the NASPAA website as well as a roster of currently accredited programs that includes the names of accredited programs and the year their accreditation terms expire. Providing so little information to the public on program quality appears to be inconsistent with NASPAA's overall goal of educating leaders for public service. The irony of the public service accreditor having one of the most secretive accreditation processes was so noted by CHEA in NASPAA's last recognition review (McFarland, 2007).

The origin of NASPAA accreditation's tendency towards a closed process appears to come from its traditionally developmental focus. One suggestion is that public affairs education was not

seen as a mature field at the time peer review was initiated and fears existed that releasing information would expose weaknesses in the maturing field, especially as programs sought to distinguish public management from business management in the 1970s. Early attempts at openness in the precursors to accreditation are reported to have caused problems as NASPAA struggled for consistency in the early reviews. Laurin Henry, NASPAA President 1971-72, noted in a NASPAA history report, "After a couple years of struggle with the materials, the Committee gave up the idea of publishing individual reports and reader comments (as anyone familiar with academic sensitivity might have anticipated); NASPAA had learned the importance of confidentiality" (Henry, 1995).

While it can be argued that the protection of information may have been important during the development of the field and the accreditation process, maintaining that argument would be difficult today given the transparency expected of public institutions. NASPAA has not kept pace with the public provision of information required of most governmental entities. Tension still remains between the developmental nature of NASPAA's accreditation process and the need for a more transparent process and it will be important to strike the appropriate balance between the two. Although the peer review process may call for some private space in order to ensure candor, important information on program performance should be readily accessible to the general public.

It is likely that the general lack of information on program performance currently offered from the accreditation process now hurts the field of public affairs education it once was designed to protect. NASPAA collects large quantities of data from programs on characteristics and performance that are never used to promote or advertise the strengths of either the individual programs or public service degrees aggregately. The self-study reports, site visit reports, and program performance data are all privately collected and embedded in large narrative reports. Some of these data would be tremendously useful, not only for quality improvement, but for marketing public service degrees to employers, providing institutions with benchmarking data and helping students to make important life choices. Unlike other fields that may have a number of outlets for program information, for public affairs there are very few, if any, comprehensive sources of data beyond NASPAA. In most cases, if NASPAA does not present information in the public domain, it does not exist.

Given this context, at the March 2007 NASPAA Standards Steering Committee meeting, Laurel McFarland, NASPAA Executive Director, articulated a number of propositions for thought related to transparency and NASPAA accreditation, based on the assumption that transparency should be the starting point in public affairs education and the argument should center on what the justification is for deviation from that position:
1. Make public what you most want to improve.
2. Make public what is highly correlated with quality and improvement.
3. Preserve privacy where candor is most valuable, or where legal issues dictate it, but not for secrecy's sake to prevent program embarrassment.
4. Don't feature everything publicly. Be judicious in the collection and dissemination of data; information overload can be as harmful as secrecy.
5. Remember that transparency creates its own incentives for improvement and for gaming.

Principles before standards

Faced with the complexity of accreditation issues, the changing world of public service, and the challenges noted above, the Steering Committee made an early decision to generate principles rather than standards for discussion for several reasons. First, basing the review on the current standards was deemed too conservative an approach. For example, if the Steering Committee had begun there, the debate may have stalled at whether the 5-faculty minimum should be changed to 4 or 6 rather whether this should even be a standard. Second, discussing "principles" encourages consideration of higher level issues than considering standards. The former allows for consideration of goals and objectives; the latter leads to a focus on wordsmithing and copy editing. The latter also is more likely to get bogged down in minutiae. Finally, discussion of principles allows a two-step process to develop acceptance and ownership by NASPAA members rather than jumping immediately into a debate over specific standards on which there may be great disagreement. This approach has also been taken by other accreditors in some form, namely the Council of Health Management Education (CAHME), the Council for Accreditation of Counseling and Related Educational Programs (CACREP), and the Accreditation Board for Engineering and Technology, Inc. (ABET) (for more information see ABET, 2007; CACREP, 2007; ABET, 2007).

To date, the Committee has found the following the most difficult issues to address:

- input versus output/outcomes, e.g. 5-faculty minimum-Should a minimum be set and on what grounds?;
- student learning competencies-What are good measures of student learning in leadership in public service?;
- international-Should NASPAA be an international accreditor, resource, or consultant?;
- core curriculum versus mission-based accreditation-What is the best balance between defining the core of the field and encouraging mission-based programs?;
- assessment-Which measures and methods will be acceptable for compliance? How will they be validated? How will NASPAA determine a minimum threshold?

In brief, the Committee has taken the first step in outlining a set of principles, presented as Appendix 1, to guide education for public service leaders for the next decade.[4] To what extent will these principles serve to focus debate among NASPAA members, for those concerned about public service education in the U.S. more generally, and among those in other nations who also seek to prepare leaders and managers of public service in the next decade and beyond?

Endnotes

1. NASPAA is an association of programs of "public affairs and administration;" the current standards refer to preparing students for leadership positions in "the public sector;" its journal is the *Journal of Public Affairs Education*, and as noted in the text, the accreditation process increasingly involves "public policy" programs and preparing students for leadership in the nonprofit sector (see NASPAA Guidelines, 2006 and Nonprofit Academic Centers Council, 2003). This paper refers to education for the "public service" and standards to be inclusive of the fields of public affairs, public administration, and public policy.

2. NASPAA is in good company. A number of prestigious national associations/organizations have been examining their accreditation standards and the future of education in their fields to strategically plan for the future.

For example, the National Academy of Engineering established a task force, commissioned briefing papers and future scenarios, published a book-length report on the future of engineering in the U.S (National Academy of Engineering, 2004) and a second volume on the implications for engineering education in the U.S. (National Academy of Engineering, 2005). Among their conclusions: undergraduate engineering education may no longer be sufficient and engineers need to know more than engineering to be successful, thus they recommended that the B.S. be considered as the pre-engineering degree.

Other associations have put forward lists of knowledge, skills, and abilities that their constituencies should master. For example, ICMA revised its list of University Practices for Effective Local Management (Hansel, 2002, 190-192) including 18 core content areas in staff effectiveness, policy facilitation, functional and operational expertise and planning, and budgeting. A report from the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education & America's Promise of the Association of American Colleges and Universities recently specified three essential learning outcomes for college students beyond knowledge:

Intellectual and practical skills including

- Inquiry and analysis
- Critical and creative thinking
- Written and oral communication
- Quantitative literacy
- Information literacy
- Teamwork and problem solving

Personal and social responsibility, including

- Civic knowledge and engagement--local and global
- Intercultural knowledge and competence
- Ethical reasoning and action
- Foundations and skills for lifelong learning

Integrative learning, including

Synthesis and advanced accomplishment across general and specialized studies (Association of American Colleges and Universities, 2007, p. 3).

3. One approach may be focus on problem-based learning, where students learn how to approach a problem not the specifics of the day. See Spoormans and Vanboonacker, 2005. For example, they note, "…the knowledge students acquire during their education will become outdated during their professional practice. Therefore changes in society and in their profession will make self-directed learning throughout their life a sine qua non. …(This) requires the development of a number of competencies, such as the skills of communication, critical reasoning, a logical and analytical approach to problem solving, reasoned decision making, and self-evaluation (p. 96)."

4. For more information on the NASPAA Standards 2009 transformation, please contact either Jeff Raffel (University of Delaware), Chair of NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee, or Crystal Calarusse, NASPAA Academic Director. The authors thank Hilary Kimball and Laurel McFarland for their extensive assistance on this paper.

Please submit any comments or feedback regarding new NASPAA Standards directly to the NASPAA national office at copra@naspaa.org

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APPENDIX 1

WORKING DRAFT 3.24.2007

This preliminary set of guidelines is a draft that has not yet been approved by the entire

NASPAA Standards Steering Committee. Input is sought as the Committee further develops this

document.

Provisional Guiding Principles for Revising NASPAA Accreditation Standards

Foundational Principles for Accreditation Standards

1. **To recognize the great variety of programs, missions, constituencies, and processes among NASPAA programs educating public affairs leaders, mission-based accreditation should be maintained.**

   Rationale: NASPAA programs range from traditional public administration programs through policy programs, offered in quite different settings with diverse student bodies (e.g., part-time U.S., full-time international) and various missions. Mission-based accreditation has been successful and allows for the accreditation of a great diversity of programs under the NASPAA umbrella, all focused on preparing leaders in public service.

2. **The mission of every program should include having a positive impact on public service in a way that is demonstrable to prospective students, peers, and external audiences.**

   Rationale: NASPAA accredits master's degrees with an explicit orientation towards preparing capable professionals for the public service and improving the quality of public service education.   The aggregate outcome of master's education is presumably to

improve the public service activities. Programs should be able to document the impacts of their efforts on their communities, at the scope appropriate to the program.

3. **NASPAA Standards should include multiple dimensions of quality, including the learning environment.**

    Rationale: The movement to performance measures and accountability has led to a focus on outputs and outcomes over inputs and processes. This "correction" was necessary and appropriate. However, the quality of education is determined in part by the way that students are educated and treated within the context of their program. For example, typically programs require a minimum of five faculty to offer an adequate learning environment built upon a diversity of disciplines and personal factors and a critical mass of faculty devoted to the program, Other learning environment factors include quality advising, the quality of teaching, and the quality of program management.

4. **NASPAA Standards should allow for innovation, including neutrality with respect to pedagogy.**

    Rationale: Just as the public sector changes, the needs of students preparing for public service also change. NASPAA accreditation should ensure that a threshold level of quality exists in a program and should serve to maintain a recognizable degree and cohesiveness nationally. However, these goals should not be pursued at the price of hindering innovation when appropriate to improve quality of education for public service professionals.

5. **[Under construction] Programs should demonstrate responsiveness to changing needs in public service.**

    Rationale: A decade ago the role of the internet, homeland security, and emergency preparedness were not on the front burner of public service organizations. It is difficult to predict what topics and even what specific knowledge and skills graduates in 10 years may need. The pace of change is rapid. Therefore, programs need to prepare graduates who can master a new topic quickly by accessing available and valid sources of information, applying theories, concepts, knowledge from related areas, and develop viable responses. All programs need to prepare their students for the rapidly changing context of their work. To do so, programs need to respond rapidly to the changing context. This heightens the need for stakeholder information and environmental scanning mechanisms and program response mechanisms.

6. **Programs should meet a "truth in advertising standard."**

    Rationale: Accreditation demonstrates to a variety of stakeholders (faculty, employers, students, etc.) that a program complies with a set of expectations about the quality of the

education. Programs should establish those expectations in their mission statements and promotional materials and be accountable for the representations they make.

7. **Identifying and measuring student competencies, in order to ensure students will be capable of acting ethically and effectively in pursuit of the public interest, and based on the mission of the program and selected by the program, should be a major focus of accreditation.   The following should be included explicitly among the competencies:**

- **Leadership and decision making**
- **Communications**
- **Awareness of the values and tradeoffs in public service, including sustainability, citizen engagement, democratic values, transparency…**
- **Role of financial, human, information, technology, and other resources**
- **Knowledge of the policy process, including assessment**
- **Problem-solving, including the use of evidence.**

Additional competencies should be developed by the program in accordance with its mission.

The set of competencies used by each program shall reflect the following environmental characteristics of the public service:
- **Multi-sectoral**
- **Diversity**
- **Globalization**
- **Rapid technological change**

Rationale: CHEA, Congress, State Legislators, and members of the public are calling for the measurement of student competencies. The "science" of such measurement has advanced in recent years. Programs need to be more aware that curriculum is not equivalent to learning. Yet there are no accepted national examinations or measures in the field of public affairs. Measures of student competencies are expected to vary across programs but should reflect program mission, professional levels of achievement, and valid measures.

8. **In those areas of specialization and concentration, where professional associations have defined guidelines for curriculum for masters programs and where the NASPAA Executive Council has approved the guidelines, programs claiming to offer the area should specifically and publicly indicate the extent and means by which they address the guidelines.**

Rationale: Most areas of specialization are not subject to national guidelines and are shaped to meet the program's mission. Therefore there should not be a requirement that programs meet national standards. Nor can NASPAA define all possible standards for all

possible areas. However, programs should appropriately describe their areas of specialization and the resources available to implement these areas. Where such guidelines have been established, NASPAA should not require that program offering this area meet the guidelines as if they were standards. However, the program should specifically inform its potential applicants and students how it addresses such guidelines. The standards should address the adequacy of program resources, including but not limited to faculty and courses, to meet program areas of specialization.

Principles for the Accreditation Process

9. **At this time, accreditation for U.S. programs only should be maintained, although NASPAA should increase its work in collaborating with non-U.S. programs to reach higher levels of quality and should collaborate with regional accrediting agencies to improve accreditation standards and processes.**

   Rationale: While some programs outside the U.S. have sought NASPAA accreditation, the NASPAA standards and the COPRA accreditation process are designed for U.S. programs. The NASPAA site visit of a non-U.S. program resulted in a reaffirmation that the non-U.S. context would require a different set of standards for this different context. Regional accrediting agencies seek NASPAA help but not NASPAA accreditation. NASPAA should work collaboratively with others outside the U.S. to improve the quality of programs and the accreditation process in the U.S. and other nations.

10. **The NASPAA accreditation process itself should become more transparent to provide a clear demonstration of public accountability.**

    Rationale: Confidentiality remains important to some aspects of the peer review process. However, accreditation norms on privacy are changing, just as public and private institutions are facing increased pressure to demonstrate increased accountability to the public. One aspect of this trend is to provide more documentation on the accreditation process and release more reports and evaluations into the public domain. This will necessitate changes in the nature of the current self study report. In part because of NASPAA programs' unique commitment to public service, maintaining best practices in public accountability is imperative.

11. **In the interest of promoting public service and affirming a commitment to public accountability, the NASPAA accreditation process should publicly communicate achieved student learning outcomes.**

    Rationale: NASPAA accreditation is the primary source of quality information on MPP/MPA programs in the U.S. Currently, that information is not collected in a manner that would facilitate aggregate analysis or the development of benchmarking information. At the same time, the higher education community and the public are demanding more information on student learning outcomes for individual programs and aggregate fields.

Accreditation standards should require that programs make certain types of outcomes information available to the public. Student outcomes, especially student learning measures, should be externally validated, that is, include judgments by members of the profession as well as academics. Any centralized comparability systems should be explicitly designed to avoid unintended consequences of homogenization by sacrificing the unique characteristics or diversity of programs.

12. Accreditation delivery mechanisms should be designed to minimize potential reporting burdens to programs seeking accreditation.

Rationale: Reporting processes that are redundant, superfluous or time-consuming can reduce confidence in and commitment to the accreditation process. The accreditation process should collect information when it serves as an aid to improvement of the individual program and the field, but should balance reporting requirements with the potential burden on the program. Delivery methods should be designed to ensure effective communication and ease of use to all parties.

13. [Under development] The accreditation process should promote continuous improvement exercises and planning for excellence while reducing the reliance on an intensive 7-year accreditation process.

Rationale: The Annual Report from accredited programs has become a more important assessment tool to COPRA over the past few years. Many programs have experienced significant changes and a seven year interval is proving inadequate to deal with the pace of change. Alternatively, some programs demonstrate limited commitment to assessment and improvement in the interim period between the accreditation cycles. Accreditation should be not only a stamp of quality, but a commitment to continuous improvement. Reducing the reporting burden during the primary cycle could allow for more continuous improvement processes.

FIGURE 1

Growth in NASPAA Accredited Degree Programs, 1980-2006
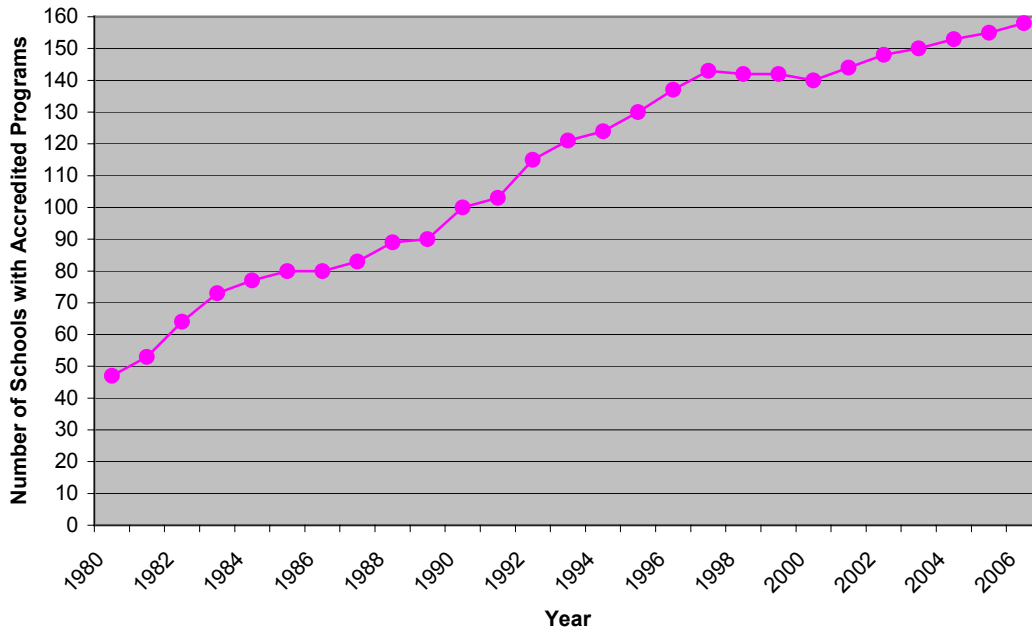
Figure 2
Proposed Development Approach

- **PHASE ONE: Development of Guiding Principles**
                         (October 2006-October 2007)

The revision begins with the development of a set of initial **<u>Guiding Principles</u>** to steer the revision process. These principles will address substantive goals related to the future needs of public service professionals and procedural aspects of accreditation.   The inputs will derive from COPRA experiences, the anticipated future of public administration, evidence based trends, needs/resources of programs, alternative accreditation approaches and the political/national/international context of accreditation.

- **PHASE TWO: Development of NASPAA Standards-First Draft**
                         (October 2007-October 2008) *(projected)*

The second phase of the project will be the development of concrete, interpretable standards from the Guiding Principles. The Standards Committee will oversee the writing of the new standards and present a **<u>first draft</u>** to the public affairs community and the general public for feedback.

- **PHASE THREE: Development of NASPAA Standards-Voting Draft**
(October 2008-October 2009) *(projected)*

The third year of the project will be devoted to the incorporation of the feedback into a **<u>final set of standards</u>** to be presented for a vote at the Fall 2009 NASPAA Conference.

- **IMPLEMENTATION:**
First Option for Programs to Review under New Standards: 2009-2010 *(projected)*
Required Review under New Standards: 2010-2011 *(projected)*

Figure 3

NASPAA Standards 2009 Steering Committee

Name	Affiliation
Jeff Raffel	Chair Director of School of Urban Affairs & Public Policy Professor of Public Administration University of Delaware
Steve Maser	Professor of Public Management and Public Policy Atkinson Graduate School of Management Willamette University
Kathy Newcomer	NASPAA President Director, School of Public Policy and Administration George Washington University
Sallyanne Harper	Chief Administrative Officer and Chief Financial Officer U.S. Government Accountability Office
BJ Reed	Dean, College of Public Affairs and Community Service University of Nebraska at Omaha
Marv Mandell	Chair, Department of Public Policy University of Maryland Baltimore County
Sylvester Murray	Professor, College of Urban Affairs Cleveland State University
Michelle Saint Germain	Professor, Department of Public Policy and Administration California State University at Long Beach
Dan Mazmanian	Director, The Judith and John Bedrosian Center on Governance and the Public Enterprise School of Policy, Planning, and Development University of Southern California
Jonathan Breul	Executive Director, IBM Government Solutions
Michelle Piskulich	Associate Dean, College of Arts and Sciences Associate Professor, Department of Political Science Oakland University
Hal Steinberg	Association of Government Accountants
Laurel McFarland	Staff, NASPAA Executive Director
Crystal Calarusse	Staff, NASPAA Academic Director