

Master of Public Administration Program Assessment Plan and Program Review Report 2015-16

Academic Assessment Plan with Reported Outcomes

DEPARTMENT OF POLITICAL SCIENCE

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Master of Public Administration and Nonprofit Studies (MPA)

MPA Program Goals and Learning Outcomes

The MPA in Political Science is a 42 hour program. The MPA in Political Science may be taken with or without the requirement of a thesis. Students are encouraged to seek out an area of programmatic focus to complement their general course work (such as, environmental policy; public policy; community development; health administration; higher education administration or nonprofit management). The program recently replaced its traditional comprehensive examination with a portfolio approach to encourage greater ownership of students in their own professional and academic development. The MPA typically offers 10 or more organized class sections in each year. Most graduate classes enroll between 5 and 15 students. While the program is not NASPAA¹ accredited, the program offers the majority of the core classes typical for similar programs of its size (5 faculty members). The MPA faculty recently reviewed the program and made further changes to strengthen the students' professional preparation. Among these changes was a further formalization of our nonprofit management specialization, (an area of high demand by our students), with the creation of the graduate certificate "Cross Sector Alliances." This program is unique in the country as it seeks a close collaboration between the MPA and the MBA programs. In addition, the department developed a new *Executive-in-Residence* program that allows students to interact with a senior managers from a variety of fields.

By the end of their course of study students should be able to:

- Outcome 1: understand the link between political, policy and administrative issues facing contemporary public and nonprofit managers
- Outcome 2: apply learned knowledge in analyzing "real world" political and policy issues (through case studies; field work or professional development projects)
- Outcome 3: write, analyze and communicate in a competent manner (suitable for different audiences)
- Outcome 4: be able to understand and respond to the ethical dilemmas public and nonprofit managers might face
- Outcome 5: grasp the role of institutions and organizations in the shaping of politics and policy both in the domestic as well and the international realms
- Outcome 6: understand the impact of public-private collaborations, involving nonprofit organizations as well as private-for-profit organizations, on the work of the public manager.

¹ NASPAA is the national accrediting body for public administration and public affairs programs

Assessment of Student Learning Outcomes

These educational outcomes are evaluated by offering students assignments that advance the above skills and knowledge, by designing meaningful tests, and by supporting students through internships and other professional assignments. Because public administration students can pursue different emphases, a generalization across the student body is not possible. An international student, for example, will be assigned different projects and classes than a student interested in community development or public policy. All students must demonstrate their academic and professional competencies through written and oral assignments, as well as through the ongoing development of their portfolios.

The following provide examples of processes used to determine student competency:

Outcome 1 may be evaluated in reflective essays after reading classics in public administration or nonprofit management that examine the relations of politics and administration, by attending public meetings, or by shadowing a public or nonprofit manager.

Outcome 2 may be evaluated by faculty in two ways: essays that assess students' ability to articulate these links using assigned readings and examples, and by writing substantial research papers in which they demonstrate their ability to establish those connections. In a more experiential fashion, students are presented with decision making cases to help them apply assigned readings to scenarios that simulate actual occurrences. In addition, all students are encouraged to participate in internships or similar professional development projects.

Outcome 3 is assessed by establishing clear expectations of the level of writing and analysis required for a specific class or assignment. Students may be required to repeat an assignment if the expected quality is not achieved. Many classes require that students give oral presentations or groups make presentations of their work.

Outcome 4 is most readily assessed when students participate in internships or other experiential assignments that bring them in contact with ethical dilemmas; in-class use of professional guest speakers and the use of cases that directly confront students with such issues that they might encounter in the workplace are designed to sensitize them to the intractability of some decision making situations and help them think through the potential consequences of their choices. The addition of the *Executive in Residence* program has further strengthened this component.

Outcome 5 is assessed by encouraging students to participate in study abroad programs and reflecting on their experiences in a written paper. Another way some classes assess students' understanding is by offering simulations (e.g. of a legislative body) that requires that student apply their knowledge to that specific setting. Other students may conduct research that involves direct work with local officials, NGOs or other entities.

Outcome 6 is assessed in several ways. As state and local governments search for new ways of service delivery, students must become thoroughly familiar with governmental roles in multi-actor and multi-sectoral decision making arrangements. Issues such as accountability, transparency and communication are essential parts of these seminars. In addition students are encouraged to serve on local boards of nonprofits or undertake research projects that involve parties from different sectors.

Students interested in public affairs issues outside the public sector now have the opportunity to participate in the “Cross Sector Alliance” graduate certificate that becomes part of their program.

Results of the Assessment of Level of Achievement of Program Learning Outcomes

As a result of the assessment by students during the pursuit of their degree we have identified following areas for continuous improvement:

1. Continued curricular integration

The program is moving to a more outcomes-based method of assessment. As the University of Kansas’ MPA program has demonstrated, the use of portfolios greatly aids in this process at the level of the individual student.

- The introduction of the portfolio approach in fall 2014 will allow the entire faculty to monitor a student’s progress across individual classes. The portfolio makes the student a partner in their own learning journey and encourages them to become what Schön called “reflective practitioners”, in other words, professionals who are aware of the complex professional, political, policy and managerial environments in which they must exercise their craft. The first cohort using the portfolio graduated in a timely manner with excellent portfolio presentations in the spring of 2016. Both faculty and students identified areas of improvement that will be instituted with the next cohort. Completed portfolios will be accessible in an archive with permission of the graduate. Faculty also underwent a learning process as we became more familiar with teaching approaches used in our seminars.
- The introduction of the *Executive-in-Residence* program also advances this goal. Having experienced senior managers sharing their professional insights with the students allows them to gain a better perspective on career development.
- Students focusing on nonprofit management have additional opportunities through the newly created Cross-Sector Alliance certificate as well as the conversion of several seminars into service-learning classes. The MPA program offers at least 4 service learning classes on a regular basis.

2. Improvements in our technology instruction:

- Through careful program assessment, we determined that the students needed a more complex understanding of technological issues and adopted a new pedagogy attributable to an adjunct faculty’s advanced capabilities in management information systems (That instructor holds a PhD from the Public Policy PhD program and is an ideal match for our students). The MPA is one of few programs in the country which has been able to offer a class of this sophistication. One of the challenges will be to retain or replace the services of this individual after a few years.

3. Internationalization of our curriculum

While the number of MPA students interested in pursuing careers in international affairs is small, the presence of international students in the program has been steady over the years, forcing adaptation in our pedagogy to meet the needs of those students. Many MPA programs in the country struggle with this issue and we are looking for cost-effective ways to address the need for an international exposure of our students.

To help address this issue, a new class that will span the comparative and international affairs areas and will be offered in 2017. We are also looking for meaningful study abroad opportunities.

4. Continue to strengthen career preparation

The MPA has done well in preparing our students, but has opportunities, especially in the public policy and nonprofit management fields, to further enhance student learning and professional opportunities.

To help fulfill this goal, the faculty and graduate coordinator will continue to identify new public and nonprofit sector high-quality internships and to provide multiple service learning opportunities by expanding the number of our service learning classes.

Changes to MPA Program Made or Planned on the Basis of Results

1. Continued search for affiliation with other programs

- Strengthening the Cross Sector Alliance graduate certificate is one of our clear priorities. A possible collaboration with the Intersector Project in New York (<http://intersector.com/>) may offer additional opportunities to increase the reach of this program and does the collaboration with an incipient *Initiative in Resilient Philanthropy and Public Policy* (spearheaded by one of the MPA faculty).
- Our dual degree program with the UA Law School is also a high priority in showcasing the value of the program beyond just the department.
- Intercollegiate collaboration around food issues will hopefully lead to the creation of a Food Policy Master's program in the near future. New efforts to revise this initiative are underway with colleagues across multiple units on the campus.

2. To further address the internationalization of the MPA program faculty have attended sessions at recent NASPAA (Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration) meetings to share experiences with other small programs across the country. However, without infusion of additional faculty, this issue cannot be effectively addressed long term.

3. Career Development: Skill enhancement

Possessing high-level methodological and policy analytical skills is critical to increase competitiveness of our students with those from larger programs. Faculty now work with their students in either their own offices or in the (departmental) Blair Library as that space has been renovated and is available for workshops, student teams loaning computers with pre-loaded software.

We hope to slowly build an area of skill around political geography (GIS skills are in high demand across all public affairs areas).

Cross Sector Alliances Graduate Certificate (CSAL)

In 2014 the MPA program developed its first graduate certificate in the department in collaboration the MBA program. The program has graduated a few students all from the MPA program as the MBA program underwent restructuring. The curriculum includes classes from the Walton College's MBA program suitable for inclusion and the MPA program which already has had a nonprofit track for many years.

The program is too new to have any defined outcomes as yet as they involve the participation of several units. This will be the focus of fall 2016.