

## Developing an MPA Core Curriculum: The Importance of NASPAA Standards and Benchmarking

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### Abstract

*With increasing emphasis being placed on preparing students for the marketplace, it is extremely important that universities develop Master in Public Administration (MPA) programs that both cover the essential components of the discipline as well as address the wishes of employers. Balancing those twin goals while providing a program that attracts students can be challenging. Fortunately, there are two accessible sources that universities can turn to for help. The first is the concept of best practices or benchmarking. By examining how other successful universities structure their programs, universities who are considering their own program can gain insights into what courses they should be offering and what approaches they should be using. Additionally, external accrediting institutions offer guidance. In this paper, I examine 14 MPA in Michigan and Ohio as well as consider the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and its standards in an attempt to suggest what a core MPA degree should look like. I suggest that an MPA core curriculum that is well thought out and structured will be able to meet the needs of the students, employers, and the university.*

In developing a Masters of Public Administration program, the key component of the program will always be its core curriculum. Not only is it the heart of the program but it will be the part of the program that will remain in place even as other parts of the program (such as concentrations or electives offered) may change. Because these classes are, by definition, the essential component of the program, it is important that great care is given in considering what courses should be included.

While a university's program needs to distinguish itself from other MPA programs so as to draw students and make the university's program an attractive and viable choice, university educators also need to be aware of what the best practices are in the discipline are. To begin to determine the best practices, I examine two sources. The first source is the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and its

standards for a core curriculum. And the second source of information is various MPA programs that currently exist throughout the states of Michigan and Ohio (i.e. benchmarking).

The reason I chose those two states is that they are familiar to the researcher, and their websites provide a great deal of information regarding their various programs. Even so, I believe the 14 programs to be typical examples of MPA programs from across the United States.

NASPAA is the accrediting organization for graduate programs in public administration, which makes the NASPAA standards a good starting point for setting the core curriculum of any MPA program. Even if universities ultimately choose not to immediately pursue NASPAA accreditation, there is great value to the program and to the university in structuring its core curriculum along NASPAA standards.

There are a number of reasons why this is so.

First, it provides instant legitimacy for the courses that are included in the core curriculum. If there are questions regarding why a particular course is included in the core, the program's administrators and faculty can simply appeal to NASPAA standards as proof that this is a best-practice correct to do so. Nevertheless, the concept of leadership is a fairly ambiguous one that sounds fine and yet is lacking in real substance. Combining the concepts of leadership with knowledge and skills provides the substance that leadership, by itself, seems to lack.

Additionally, this would nicely reflect NASPAA's curriculum statement: "The purpose of the curriculum shall be to prepare students for professional leadership in public

service" (Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation 2008, 9). Whether or not the theme of leadership is best addressed by the core curriculum or by a concentration or specialization is a question that is beyond the purview of this present study. In this section, I examine the NASPAA core curriculum standards and then I compare that with data from MPA programs in Michigan and Ohio.

The core curriculum that NASPAA emphasizes is divided into three categories, with sub-categories.

To be specific, according to NASPAA, the core components of any MPA program should address the following:

- Management of Public Service Organizations
  - Human Resources
  - Budgeting and financial processes
  - Information management, technology applications, and policy
- Application of Quantitative and Qualitative Techniques of Analysis
  - Policy and program formulation, implementation, and evaluation
  - Decision-making and problem solving
- An understanding of the Public Policy and Organizational Environment
  - Political and legal institutions and processes
  - Economic and social institutions and processes
  - Organization and management concepts and behavior

For the data on the MPA programs, I simply chose 14 MPA programs in Michigan and Ohio. All of the information was gathered by examining the universities' websites. Those programs are the following:

- Bowling Green State University
- Central Michigan University
- Cleveland State University
- Eastern Michigan University
- Grand Valley State University
- Kent State University
- Oakland University
- University of Akron

- University of Dayton
- University of Michigan-Dearborn
- University of Toledo
- Wayne State University
- Western Michigan University
- Wright State University

After choosing the 14 programs, I then looked at a number of categories related to the various programs. The information that I gathered included the following:

- Admissions requirements
  - Minimum GPA required.
  - GRE required or not.
- When are classes offered and if the university highlights offering web-based classes.
- Required hours for the MPA degree
  - Number of hour required for the core curriculum.
  - Does the program offer a concentration and how many hours or classes are required for the concentration.
- How the university markets its MPA program at its website (if discernable).
- Is the program NASPAA accredited?
- Does the program offer some type of certificate program?
- Does the website have an online brochure for the program that is downloadable as a PDF?
- What core classes does each program include?

All of the above information along with the various universities' requirements is summarized in Excel spreadsheets, which are found in Appendices A and B. In what follows, I provide a brief narrative summary of select portions of the data, highlighting the points that seem most relevant to the question of the core courses that should be offered.

In surveying the MPA programs in Michigan and Ohio, it is clearly evident that the current programs are addressing the NASPAA standards for core components, even if, at times, somewhat inconsistently, leaving gaps that a new program could possibly take advantage of. Examining the first NASPAA category of Management and Public Service Organization, one sees that the first two sub-categories and covered by a clear majority of MPA programs. For example, 12 out of the 14 programs require a class related to Human Resources or Public Personnel Management.

Additionally, 9 out of the 14 programs require Public Budgeting or Administration of Financial Resources as a core class. Nevertheless, the sub-category of information management and technology appears to be neglected, with only Oakland University seeming to offer a class in this area. This is the first area in which a new program could begin to distinguish itself as well as take advantage of some strengths that we may have. Focusing on information technology seems a natural fit to today's world, which requires extensive knowledge of technology and the skills to use that technology.

Additionally, this is one area that a new program could invoke the concept of leadership inasmuch as the program would be training leaders for the information technology age.

Turning to the second NASPAA standard of Quantitative and Qualitative Techniques of Analysis and its sub-categories, one finds that these categories are adequately covered by all MPA programs. Not only do all MPA programs require some type of research methods class, some universities have multiple requirements within this category by also requiring separate statistics courses. In devising a methods class, a new program needs to consider seriously how the methods course will differ from any current course that are offered at the undergraduate level. An additional concern is how quantitative the new course should be.

While an MPA program should have sufficient rigor, it remains the case that many students bristle at the thought of taking more statistics and being required to know quantitative data analysis that they only see a marginal connection with their daily lives or prospective employment. Of course, this point has more to do with structuring the actual course content, course objectives, and learning outcomes than it does with devising a core curriculum. The point, however, that does need to be decided is if one or two courses on research methods should be required. The data seem to suggest that MPA programs are content to require only a single methods course. The third NASPAA standard—an understanding of the Public Policy and Organizational Environment—is the most interesting.

A clear majority of MPA courses require some type of organizational theory class, highlighting its importance to the core curriculum. What appears to be overlooked, however, is one of the subcategories to this standard: political and legal institutions and processes. This area would seem to provide a clear opportunity for any new MPA program.

In a section below, I also address this aspect of opportunity by discussing how a program can use area emphases or concentrations to distinguish itself. A recent article by Roberts (2008) argues that current MPA programs do a fairly poor job is addressing the legal framework within which public administrators operate. Certainly, MPA programs do offer courses that touch upon legal matters. Nevertheless, these courses are typically administrative law classes that are insufficient in providing students with the understanding that they need for the present environment.

Roberts argues that “courses on the legal environment of public administration should be restructured to include subjects such as the management of government ethics, public contracts, and public employment law” (p. 361). Within the core curriculum, this is an area that a new MPA program could carve out a niche and set itself apart from other MPA programs. Indeed, in Michigan and Ohio, only three universities require any type of law or legal class (Bowling Green University requires Administrative Law; the University of Akron and Western Michigan University require Legal Foundations of Public Administration).

In creating a core curriculum, I believe that there are three basic aspects to it that need to be considered. First, how many classes or credits are going to be required in the program (both in the core as well as in the total)?

As one can see from Appendix A, some current programs require as few as 5 courses or 15 credit hours for their core programs, while other programs require as many as 10 courses or 30 credit hours. Similarly, one sees a considerable amount of difference in the total number of credits required. Still, it appears that most programs require around 39 credits or 13 classes.

It would seem that a core program of at least 5 classes is absolutely necessary, with 8 courses being more ideal. New programs need to consider, however, what value there is to requiring many more classes above that number (i.e. 8 courses). In devising a core program, a second aspect that needs to be considered is what the best practices are in determining the substance of those classes. Here, we can use other universities as a guide. Examining the practices of others as well as the NASPAA standards should be a priority.

Even so, one needs to also consider what other universities are not offering. As alluded to earlier, by focusing on gaps in what is offered by other universities, this potentially provides new programs with a competitive edge as they seek to distinguish their program from currently existing programs and thereby attract students. At some point, the viability of a program does come down to whether or not the program can attract quality students. Having a solid core helps to achieve that. Nevertheless, the university still needs to distinguish itself from other offerings that may be equally rigorous and attractive.

A third, and final, aspect is that new programs need to consider is how the core program requirements will impact the potential concentrations or specializations that students may be able to choose. Simply put, if the core course requirements are fewer in number, then that provides the student with the possibility of having more than one concentration.

- Information Technology in Public Administration
- Introduction to Public Administration
- Legal Foundations of Public Administration
- Personnel Management/Human Resources
- Public Budgeting

Area emphases or a concentration allows a program to brand itself, setting it apart from other programs. Having a specific brand for the program would seem a crucial element in any marketing strategy.

As one can easily see, an MPA program can most likely meet the NASPAA standards with as few as 5 classes, even if that seems a bit of a stretch. If the total number of courses required for the program is approximately 11 to 13 courses, then a student could easily pick up a concentration. This is true even if the core were to be 8 courses, which is probably a preferable number for the core. As mentioned above, this could help in marketing the program as well as making the student more marketable once he or she graduates from the program.

It also has some internal advantages because it makes the task of constructing a core program much less onerous. It provides a program with the opportunity to take advantage of the particular interests, skills, and expertise of its faculty. And it should be remembered that there are other programs out there with as few as five courses in its core curriculum. Additionally, there are two other universities that only require six courses. Moreover, three out of those four programs are NASPAA accredited. And the fourth program (The University of Michigan-Dearborn) is likely too new to have completed the accreditation process.

With all of the above in mind, what should a model core MPA core curriculum look like? I suggest that programs consider a core curriculum of approximately eight courses. For those eight courses, I suggest they consider the following:

- Public Policy Formation and Implementation
- Research Methods in Public Administration (with a strong quantitative emphasis)
- Senior Seminar or Capstone in Public Administration

As a practical point, a new program might want to consider setting the total number of hours for the program in such a way that it allows for two concentrations or specializations. Thus, if the program was to settle on an eight-course core structure (regardless of what those classes were), the program might want to seriously consider that the number of total classes required be 14, allowing for two concentrations of three courses each. While this would place the program toward the high end of those programs surveyed, there are three other programs that require as many hours.

In conclusion, the devising of a core MPA curriculum should be well thought out and structured with clear goals in mind. I have suggested that one goal should be devising a program with the concept of best practices as a guideline for its content and structure. The problem, however, is in deciding what actually constitutes best practices. I argue that examining the standards of a national accrediting agency, NASPAA, helps to establish what the best practices are. But I also argue that one should look at what other programs are doing. Typically, this is termed benchmarking.

The problem with benchmarking is that one basically has everyone looking at what others are doing. That assumes that everyone is doing it correctly, which may not be the case. While benchmarking provides good insights into current practices, benchmarking must be coupled with some sort of objective standard. That is why that I suggest that both approaches should be used—use NASPAA standards for its objective standards and examine what others are currently doing (benchmarking) so as to understand what is happening in the marketplace.

A second goal that programs should consider is how to distinguish itself from other MPA programs so as to better situate the new program in a very competitive environment. Program viability is always a concern. I have suggested that this can be done at both the core level as well as the level of offering an area emphasis or concentration. At the core level, programs maintain a considerable amount of flexibility and opportunity even when addressing NASPAA standards. The NASPAA standards are not so rigid that every core MPA program has to look alike. Within the model core curriculum that I suggest, there are two courses that set it apart.

The first is one that focuses on legal foundations, which is clearly not well represented in current MPA programs. And the second is a course on information technology, which addresses a current and ongoing need within the public and private sector for people to be skilled in the use of technology. And, of course, at the concentration level, programs can find ways to tailor their program to address needs that are local or regional as well as to make use of the specific skills and expertise of its faculty members.

Carefully devising a core MPA curriculum can help to ensure that both the program and the students are successful. A successful MPA program is one that is rigorous, viable, and sustainable. I have outlined how the core can address all three of those ideas. It addresses rigor by being as comprehensive as possible; it addresses viability by being able to attract students; and it addresses sustainability by focusing on current requirements and ongoing trends that employers emphasize, which means the program will always be in demand.

The core curriculum helps students be successful by providing them with the knowledge and skills that employers indicate they are looking for, ensuring that students have very good prospects of employment once they complete the MPA program.

### **References**

- Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation. 2008. "General Information and Standards for Professional Masters Degree Programs." National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration.
- Lee, Roy. 2006. "Do NASPAA Standards for Accreditation Matter? Perceptions of Executive Directors in the State of Texas?" Masters Thesis. Texas State University.

Appendix A: General Information on Select Masters of Administration Programs in Michigan and Ohio													
University	Admission Requirements		Classes <sup>a</sup>			Required Hours			How the University Markets the Program	NASPAA Accredited	Certificate Offered?	Online for Download	Brochure
	GPA	GRE <sup>b</sup>	Day	Night	Web	Total	Core	Specialization					
Bowling Green State University	NA	NA		X		39	21 <sup>e</sup>	12	Leaders and managers	No	Yes		No
Central Michigan University	2.8	NA		X		36	24	9-12	Leadership	No	Yes		No
Cleveland State University	3.0	40 <sup>th</sup> Percentile		X		42-45 <sup>f</sup>	16 <sup>f</sup>	3 courses	Leadership	Yes	No		Yes
Eastern Michigan University	2.75	NA		X		40	24	4 courses	NA	Yes	Yes		No
Grand Valley State University	3.0	NA		X	X	42	15	15	NA	Yes	No		No
Kent State University	2.75	450 (each sec.)		X	X	45	30	9	Careers in Public Management	Yes	No		No
Oakland University	3.0	NA		X		40 <sup>f</sup>	24 <sup>f</sup>	12 <sup>e</sup>	Leadership	Yes	Yes		No
University of Akron	3.0	NA		X		48 <sup>h</sup>	30	15	Public Service	Yes	Yes		No
University of Dayton	3.0	500 (each sec.)		X		39	18	None	NA	Yes	No		No
University of Michigan-Dearborn	3.0	Optional		X		33	15	None	Next Generation's Leaders	No	Yes		Yes
University of Toledo	3.0	1000		X		36	21	None	Training, Research, Service	Yes <sup>i</sup>	No		No
Wayne State University	3.3	NA		X		42	30	9	Professional training	Yes	Yes		No
Western Michigan University	3.0	NA		X		39	18	18	NA	Yes	Yes		No
Wright State University	3.0	NA		X		52 <sup>f</sup>	36 <sup>f</sup>	None	Public Service	Yes	Yes		No

<sup>a</sup> This indicates when the majority of the classes are offered or how the university markets its program.

<sup>b</sup> GRE scores run from 200 to 800.

<sup>c</sup> Does website highlight that they offer web classes?

<sup>d</sup> Either specifically stated or key words included in the first line of its mission statement or introduction to its program.

<sup>e</sup> Only two classes are required of all students; students must choose 5 of 7 classes for remaining core credits

<sup>f</sup> Classes are 4 credits

<sup>g</sup> Kent State has two MPA programs (Public Management and Public Policy); this is information on the Public Management track

<sup>h</sup> Includes 3-credit internship that can possibly be waived.

<sup>i</sup> Listed as having accreditation through 2009-2010.



Appendix B: MPA Core Classes Required by Select Universities in Michigan and Ohio <sup>a</sup>														
Course	BGSU (21)	CMU (24)	Cleveland d (16)	EMU (24)	GVSU (15)	Kent State (30)	Oakland b (24)	Akron n (30)	Dayton (18)	UMD (15)	Toledo (21)	Wayne (30)	WMU (18)	Wright b (36)
Administration of Financial Resources or Public Budget		X		X (2)		X (2)	X	X		X	X	X		X
Administration of Human Resources; Personnel Management--Public Sector Personnel Administration	X	X		X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X	X		X
Administrative Law	X													
Administrative Theory and Behavior: Public Administration Theory	X						X							
Ethics	X					X		X						
Foundations of Public Management					X									
Government Budgeting and Fiscal Policy or Managing Public Information Technology	X							X	X				X	
Governmental Information Systems							X							
Introduction to Public Administration		X	X	X				X	X	X	X	X		X
Leadership and Administration						X				X				
Legal Foundations of Public Administration								X					X	
Management in Small Local Government	X													
Managing Public Organizations & Programs												X		
Organizational Behavior; Public Organization; Organizational Theory		X	X	X	X			X	X		X	X	X	X
Policy Analysis												X		
Political and Economic Environment of Public Administration													X	
Program Evaluation		X				X	X					X		
Professional Development												X		
Public Bureaucracies and Policy Formation				X										
Public Finance			X											
Public Management Concepts and Practices						X								
Public Planning														X
Public Policy (Introduction) or Policy Formation and Development	X	X						X			X	X		
Research Methods in Public Administration <sup>C</sup>	X	X (2)	X	X (2)	X	X	X	X (2)	X (2)	X	X (2)	X (2)	X (2)	X (3)
Seminar in International Relations	X													
Strategic Planning						X								

<sup>a</sup> Does not include capstone of thesis seminar; number in parentheses is total credit hours required for core classes.

<sup>b</sup> Classes at these universities are 4 credit classes.

<sup>c</sup> Any class listed as quantitative (i.e. statistics) or as research methodology was coded as "Research Methods," including basic statistics or advanced classes.