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ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT REPORT (2021-22)
MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION AND
NONPROFIT STUDIES PROGRAM

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Program Goals of the Master of Public Administration and Nonprofit Studies Program

The Master of Public Administration and Nonprofit Studies (M.P.A.) is a 36-39 hour, two-year professional degree offered by the Political Science (PLSC) Department. Pre-career students are required to complete 39 credit hours while in-career students are required to complete 36 credit hours. The department also offers a J.D./M.P.A. dual degree program with the University of Arkansas Law School and a 15-hour Graduate Certificate in Cross-Sector Alliances with the M.B.A. program in the Walton College of Business.

All M.P.A. students are required to take the following six core courses focusing on public administration theory, human resource management, public budgeting and finance, policy theory, policy analysis, and data analytics.

- PLSC 5193: Seminar in Public Administration
- PLSC 5113: Seminar in Human Resource Management
- PLSC 5123: Public Budgeting and Finance
- PLSC 5163: Public Policy
- PADM 5913: Policy Analysis – Theory and Practice
- PADM 5803: Quantitative Methods Analysis

In addition, all M.P.A. students are required to take two courses from the following restricted elective courses depending on their primary interest.

- PLSC 4283: Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations
- PLSC 5103: Human Behavior in Complex Organizations
- PLSC 5133: Nonprofit Management
- PLSC 5143: Administrative Law
- PLSC 5173: Community Development
- PLSC 5243: Seminar in State Politics and Policy
- PADM 5813: Methods in Public Management Information
- PADM 5823: Grant Writing for the Social Sciences
- PADM 5903: Risk and Public Policy

Lastly, the M.P.A. students are expected to take a minimum of 9-12 credit hours of elective courses in their focused study area to meet their career goals. This focused study area includes community development, environmental policy, health administration, higher education administration, nonprofit management, and public policy analysis. Other focused study areas may be exercised with the consent, advice, and approval of the Director of Graduate Studies.

Upon completion of their graduate coursework, all M.P.A. students must either (1) complete six hours of thesis credit and defend their thesis or (2) pass a comprehensive examination (i.e., M.P.A. portfolio) to graduate.

At the end of their program, students should be able to:

- understand the link between political, policy, and administrative issues facing contemporary public/nonprofit managers by applying learned knowledge and skills to real world problem solving. (Goal 1)

- analyze, write, and communicate in a competent manner suitable for various audiences. (Goal 2)
- understand and respond to the ethical dilemmas public and nonprofit managers might face. (Goal 3)
- grasp the role of institutions and organizations in the shaping of politics and policy both in the domestic and international realms. (Goal 4)
- understand the impact of public-private collaborations – involving both nonprofit and for-profit organizations – on the work of the public/nonprofit managers. (Goal 5)

Evaluating Student Learning Outcomes

These program goals and related student learning outcomes are evaluated by offering students assignments both in class and through service-learning projects, by designing meaningful tests, and by supporting students through internships and other professional opportunities. All M.P.A. students must demonstrate their academic and professional competencies through written and oral assignments including their M.P.A. portfolios, composed of at least three artifacts (unless they plan to work on their thesis research).

The following provide examples of processes used to determine M.P.A. student competency:

- Goal 1 can be evaluated in reflective essays and research papers after reading seminal texts 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. 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.
- Goal 2 can be 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.
- Goal 3 can be 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 the kinds of ethical issues that they might encounter in the workplace. These are designed to sensitize them to the intractability of some decision-making situations and help them think through the potential consequences of their choices.
- Goal 4 can be 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 students to apply their knowledge to that specific setting. Other students may conduct research that involves direct work with local officials, nonprofit organizations, or other entities.
- Goal 5 can be assessed in several ways. As state and local governments search for new ways to deliver services, 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.

Assessment Results and Improvement Plans

We discuss assessment results and improvement plans in the following while focusing on (1) retention and timely graduation, (2) curriculum, and (3) career preparation.

1. Retention and Timely Graduation

The retention and timely graduation of students is not a direct outcome measure that is linked to the program goals and learning outcomes we discussed earlier. However, it still is a meaningful indicator for evaluating how successful this program was in achieving those stated goals and learning outcomes.

Assessment Results

Most M.P.A. students graduate on time while demonstrating progress toward completing their M.P.A. portfolios. This portfolio process allows students to continue developing a final product that reflects the knowledge and skills they learn through their coursework while working closely with the M.P.A. faculty. However, a few students do not graduate in the typical two-year degree completion period. Some find it challenging to catch up with the coursework, especially if they take time off or switch majors. Other students complete their coursework on time but delay graduation by postponing their portfolio work for personal/professional reasons, such as an off-campus full-time job, marriage, or childcare. In some cases, students may also need to retake classes if they do not receive a passing grade the first time. Ultimately, though, most students are able to graduate within a few years of starting their degree program.

Improvement Plans

We have considered the following plans for improvement.

- We plan to improve our recruitment effort so that we can bring in students from diverse backgrounds who excel. To do this, we will be partnering with community organizations and making financial aid packages more attractive. It is worth noting that some of the top incoming M.P.A. students currently receive a graduate assistantship and a Gosack fellowship, a prestigious fellowship given to those with outstanding academic records and demonstrated potential for professional success/community service. Additionally, marketing and outreach efforts will be increased.
- We plan to conduct a more thorough evaluation of the student's performance in the first semester, working with graduate instructors who teach core M.P.A. courses.
- We plan to make improvements to academic/career coaching in order for students to be better acquainted with the requirements needed for their chosen professional path, so that they may more successfully match their learning goals/outcomes with their career goals.
- We plan to help students who are struggling with their coursework and responsibilities off-campus as early as possible so that they can get back on track and avoid falling behind.

2. Curriculum

The curriculum plays a pivotal role in productive and seamless graduate education. It is crucial that our current curriculum lines up with the program goals mentioned above, as well as with the needs of our students.

Assessment Results

The required M.P.A. courses are mostly taught by faculty members with ample experience in the field. The course material is comprehensive and the instructional methods are rigorous. As a result, students, on the whole, achieve outstanding learning outcomes in relation to the program's stated goals. One issue the program currently faces is that, due to its relatively small cohort size and the recent retirement of a senior M.P.A. faculty member, we are unable to provide students with a diverse range of elective courses to meet their specific needs. For instance, we do not offer classes regarding program evaluation or grant writing. As a result, students often have to enroll in independent studies or courses from other departments to fulfill their degree requirements.

Improvement Plans

We have acknowledged these issues and have put the following plans into place to improve them.

- We plan to expand our elective offerings. Our students will have the opportunity to explore new interests and improve the skills necessary for success in the area of their interest. Relatedly, we expect to hire one new assistant professor who will be a core M.P.A. faculty member. This will undoubtedly assist us in offering more M.P.A. courses in the future.
- We intend to increase the number of M.P.A. students enrolled in our graduate program. By doing so, we can guarantee that course enrollment will remain high even when additional M.P.A. courses are offered.
- Furthermore, we are in the process of making our program more visible to potential applicants and increasing our marketing efforts. Part of this process includes continuing to increase awareness of both the J.D./M.P.A. dual degree program as well as the Graduate Certificate in Cross-Sector Alliances while maintaining strong relationships with both the Law School and Walton College of Business, respectively. Our dual degree program allows our students to obtain two graduate degrees in less time than if they went after each one separately. Also, our certificate program gives M.P.A. graduates the extra edge they need to succeed in the nonprofit sector.

3. Career Preparation

The most essential aspect of an M.P.A. education is career preparation. To that end, we are dedicated to assisting our students in achieving their professional goals in their chosen career path.

Assessment Results

The M.P.A. program prepares students well for careers in the public administration, public policy, and nonprofit management fields by continuing to enhance student learning and professional opportunities. The M.P.A. faculty, the internship director, and the program director continue to identify high-quality public and nonprofit sector internships and provide various service-learning opportunities by expanding the number of our service-learning courses as part of the M.P.A. curriculum. Also, the department continues to support M.P.A. students' conference participation (e.g., International City Management Association (ICMA) conference, Arkansas City Management Association (ACMA) conference) and professional development (e.g., Gosack Forum with Mr. Mark Stodola, the former Little Rock Mayor, or many local government officials and business leaders from Northwest Arkansas region). As a result, many M.P.A. students take an internship with reputable organizations and/or attend major

professional conferences while working with their M.P.A. faculty mentors. These efforts are expected to lead to improved student learning outcomes and job placement.

Improvement Plans

- We are committed to helping our students gain more professional experience through internships, especially those who will enter the job market immediately after their graduation.
- Additionally, we intend to continue developing our ties with community partners and provide more career opportunities for our students.
- We will continue to support our M.P.A. students' participation in major professional conferences in a meaningful way.
- We will continue to develop our alumni relations in order to engage them with our program and solicit their continued support for our students.

Cross Sector Alliances - Graduate Certificate (CSAL_GC)

Over the last decade, nonprofit, business, and governmental organizations have been increasingly working together to address a broad range of societal issues. The M.B.A. (Walton College of Business) and the MPA (Fulbright College) programs at the University of Arkansas collaborate to furnish this 15-hour certificate program. Students participating in the certificate must be admitted to either the M.B.A. or the M.P.A. program to participate in the certificate. The Graduate School is officially responsible for tracking interdisciplinary graduate programs and certificates.

1. Program Goals

Students participating in this certificate program will be in a superior position to transfer their knowledge to the diverse organizations and businesses that employ them. Moreover, they will be prepared for newly emerging careers that require intimate knowledge of the inner workings of other sectors.

At the end of their program, students should be able to:

- prepare themselves as future managers to understand the diversity of perspectives and purposes held by organizations in the three sectors while developing their appreciation for the risks and challenges inherent in cross-sector collaborations, including how effectiveness of mission or goal accomplishment (“success”) is defined, how power differences are managed, how trust is built in inter-organizational collaborations, how accountability to a complex set of stakeholders is assured and the extent to which communities are impacted (“Collective impact”). (Goal 1)
- prepare for professional careers that require knowledge of complex collaborations among public, for-profit, and nonprofit sector organizations, including (1) middle and senior management positions in foundations or nonprofit organizations, (2) board members of nonprofit organizations, (3) for-profit funders and fund development professionals, (4) international careers as managers in NGOs, international organizations or organizations involved with social enterprises/innovations, and (5) governmental managers that develop and monitor complex policies involving cross-sector relationships and grants. (Goal 2)

2. Evaluating Student Learning Outcomes

The following provide examples of processes used to determine the certificate students' learning outcomes related to the program goals.

- Goal 1 can be evaluated by assessing students' (1) understanding of the challenges faced by public and private managers working at the intersection of public affairs, economic/business analysis, and associated theories, (2) critical thinking capacity as to the challenges facing managers working in intersectoral environments, (3) ability to select appropriate quantitative and qualitative methodologies and technologies that can help explore relevant challenges, and (4) communication ability with different domestic and international audiences and purposes.
- Goal 2 can be evaluated by assessing students' (1) work with and for others in ways that translate broader community needs into actionable policy/program solutions and promote action awareness, (2) understanding of the complex ethical challenges when working in environments that promote different values and standards and learn to work through possible resulting conflicts, and (3) ability to conduct a purposeful inquiry exploring the problem/issue a client is experiencing (internships and professional development) and assist in finding viable solutions.