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ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT REPORT (2024-25) 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.

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 51903: Seminar in Public Administration
- PLSC 51103: Seminar in Human Resource Management
- PLSC 51203: Public Budgeting and Finance
- PLSC 51603: Public Policy
- PADM 59103: Policy Analysis – Theory and Practice
- PADM 58003: 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 42803: Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations
- PLSC 51003: Human Behavior in Complex Organizations
- PLSC 51303: Nonprofit Management
- PLSC 51403: Administrative Law
- PLSC 51703: Community Development
- PLSC 52403: Seminar in State Politics and Policy
- PADM 58203: Strategies of Fundraising in the Nonprofit Sector
- PADM 59003: 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, and nonprofit management. 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, service learning projects, 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, service learning projects, and/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, service learning projects, 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 internships in international organizations, entities in foreign countries, or international nonprofit organizations and reflecting on their experiences in a written paper. Another way some classes assess students' understanding is by offering class simulations that require 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 stakeholders 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

Retention and timely graduation of students, though not directly tied to the program goals and learning outcomes discussed earlier, serve as important indicators for assessing the program's effectiveness in achieving those stated objectives and outcomes.

Assessment Results

Most M.P.A. students graduate on schedule, demonstrating consistent progress in their coursework and the development of their M.P.A. portfolios. This portfolio process is a pivotal aspect of the program, enabling students to craft a final product that showcases the knowledge and skills acquired through their studies under the close guidance of M.P.A. faculty. However, not all students complete their degree within the standard

two-year timeframe. Challenges in keeping up with coursework can arise, particularly for those who take breaks or switch their major. Additionally, some students fulfill their coursework requirements on time but opt to delay their graduation by postponing portfolio completion due to personal or professional commitments, such as full-time off-campus employment, marriage, or childcare responsibilities. In certain instances, students may need to retake classes to achieve a passing grade. Despite these challenges, the majority of M.P.A. students successfully graduate within a few years of commencing their program, equipped with a comprehensive portfolio that reflects their academic pursuit and professional readiness. Our summer 2024 graduate program alumni survey offers valuable insights on this. With 64 alumni responding, the M.P.A. program continues to demonstrate strong retention and degree completion. The majority of alumni indicated that they graduated within a standard or slightly extended timeframe. Several responses highlighted the challenges posed by full-time work, family responsibilities, or the portfolio requirement. These factors often caused students to delay graduation despite completing coursework on time. The qualitative comments confirmed that portfolio delays are frequently due to the demands of professional life rather than academic shortcomings. These findings reaffirm the importance of maintaining flexible timelines and individualized academic advising. Strategies such as providing targeted support for portfolio completion, establishing structured milestones, and accommodating professional student schedules, along with offering more flexible course delivery modes, could further enhance timely graduation outcomes.

Improvement Plans

We are considering several improvement strategies, including:

- Enhancing our recruitment strategy to attract students from varied backgrounds who demonstrate exceptional potential. Our approach includes forming partnerships with community organizations (e.g., Arkansas Municipal League) and enhancing the appeal of our financial aid offerings. Notably, our top incoming M.P.A. students benefit from graduate assistantships and the Gosack fellowship – a prestigious award recognizing individuals with exemplary academic achievements and a proven potential for professional success and community service. Furthermore, we will amplify our marketing (e.g., KUAF/KUAR radio advertisements) and outreach initiatives (e.g., Gosack Forum) to achieve these goals.
- Undertaking a comprehensive assessment of the student's academic performance during the first semester by collaborating with graduate faculty responsible for teaching core M.P.A. courses.
- Improving academic and career coaching to ensure students are fully informed about the requirements for their chosen career paths. This will enable them to align their educational objectives more effectively with their professional aspirations, ensuring a more successful match.

- Supporting students grappling with their academic work and off-campus obligations at the earliest opportunity. This proactive approach will help them regain their footing, preventing them from falling behind.
- Participating in the ACMA (Arkansas City Management Association) and ICMA (International City Management Association) meetings, as well as the conferences hosted by the NASPAA (Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration). We aim to connect with other M.P.A. programs and a wide range of city managers from Arkansas and beyond. Our goal is to enhance our understanding and gain valuable insights into this field and profession, expanding our knowledge and fostering professional growth.
- Evaluating the feasibility of offering a fully online M.P.A. degree and micro-certificates in nonprofit management as substitutes for the current in-person degree offerings.

2. Curriculum

The curriculum is central to a productive and streamlined graduate education experience. It is essential that our existing curriculum aligns not only with the aforementioned program objectives but also with our students' needs.

Assessment Results

The core M.P.A. courses are mostly taught by faculty members who possess considerable experience in their fields, ensuring a comprehensive curriculum delivered through rigorous teaching methods. This approach has consistently facilitated superior learning outcomes for students, aligning closely with the program objectives. However, the program has encountered challenges, particularly due to its small cohort size and the recent retirement of a key M.P.A. faculty member, which limited our ability to offer a diverse array of elective courses tailored to students' specific interests, such as program evaluation or grant writing. In response, we have welcomed a new tenure-track M.P.A. faculty member skilled in teaching both elective and core M.P.A. courses, including Policy Analysis and Nonprofit Management. Despite this addition, the pursuit of excellence in our M.P.A. curriculum necessitates further expansion of our faculty team. Our recent graduate program alumni survey offers valuable insights on this. In general, curriculum evaluations were favorable, with a total of 90 "Excellent", 132 "Good", and 55 "Fair" responses across the five curriculum evaluation items. Only 11 responses (3.1%) were rated as "Poor." These results reflect a strong endorsement of the academic quality and rigor of the program, particularly in areas such as public management, budgeting, and policy analysis. Nonetheless, feedback revealed a persistent demand for broader course options, particularly in applied areas, such as grant writing, program evaluation, and nonprofit leadership. The limited diversity in electives, exacerbated by small cohort sizes and past faculty retirements, has

constrained the program's ability to meet some students' individualized goals. The recent hire of a new tenure-track faculty member with expertise in nonprofit management and policy analysis represents a meaningful step forward. However, sustained curriculum development, possibly through cross-listed courses or practitioner-led electives, is needed to meet student expectations and industry demands.

Improvement Plans

We are considering several improvement strategies, including:

- Broadening our range of elective courses, providing our students with greater opportunities to discover new interests and acquire the professional skills necessary for success in their chosen fields. In conjunction with this, we are looking to recruit an additional tenure-track assistant professor to join our core M.P.A. faculty team. This strategic addition will undoubtedly enable us to expand our M.P.A. course offerings in the future, enhancing the educational experience we provide to our students.
- Increasing the number of M.P.A. students enrolled in our graduate program. This strategy will ensure that course enrollment remains robust, even with the introduction of additional M.P.A. courses.
- Enhancing our program's visibility to prospective applicants through intensified marketing strategies (e.g., KUAF/KUAR radio advertisements). This initiative involves amplifying awareness of the J.D./M.P.A. dual degree program, while simultaneously reinforcing our strong ties with the Law School. Our dual degree offering enables students to acquire two graduate degrees in a shorter timeframe than pursuing them separately.
- Participation in meetings of the ACMA (Arkansas City Management Association) and the ICMA (International City Management Association), as well as attending conferences organized by the NASPAA (Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration). These events enable us to connect with fellow M.P.A. programs and engage with numerous city managers from Arkansas and beyond. This interaction will enhance our knowledge, widen our perspectives, and provide valuable insights in this field.
- Exploring the possibility of offering a fully online M.P.A. degree and micro certificates in nonprofit management as alternatives to the existing in-person degree programs.

3. Career Preparation

The cornerstone of an M.P.A. education lies in preparing students for their careers. With this focus, we are committed to guiding our students toward realizing their professional aspirations within their selected career paths.

Assessment Results

The M.P.A. program excels in preparing students for successful careers in public administration, public policy, and nonprofit management by enhancing both learning experiences and professional opportunities. Faculty members, along with the internship/program directors, actively seek out high-quality internships in the public and nonprofit sectors. They also expand service learning offerings within the M.P.A. curriculum, further enriching the educational experience. Moreover, the department encourages M.P.A. students to engage in professional development and networking by supporting their attendance at major professional conferences, such as the ICMA (International City Management Association) and the ACMA (Arkansas City Management Association) conferences. Opportunities for professional development also include events like the Gosack Forum with notable figures such as Mr. Asa Hutchinson, former Arkansas Governor, and interactions with other influential government and business leaders from the Northwest Arkansas region and beyond. As a result, many M.P.A. students secure internships with prestigious organizations and participate in major professional conferences under the guidance of their M.P.A. faculty mentors. These initiatives aim to improve student learning outcomes and broaden career opportunities, demonstrating the program's commitment to student success. Our recent graduate program alumni survey offers valuable insights on this. Career preparation outcomes are a clear strength of the M.P.A. program. Of the 64 survey respondents, 56 (88%) provided job titles, and 57 (89%) reported the number of jobs they have held since graduation, with many indicating robust and diverse career trajectories. Job titles included *Senior Consultant*, *Project Manager*, *GIS Technician*, *Congressional Affairs Advisor*, and *Clinical Full Professor*, illustrating the program's success in preparing graduates for leadership roles across the public, nonprofit, and academic sectors. Alumni consistently cited the importance of internships, faculty mentoring, and professional development experiences. Departmental efforts to connect students to conferences (e.g., ICMA and ACMA), alumni events, and forums like the Gosack Forum were widely appreciated. These initiatives not only strengthened students' networks and résumés but also provided tangible pathways into competitive positions. These findings validate continued investment in internship coordination, conference support, and alumni engagement as high-impact strategies for advancing career readiness.

Improvement Plans

We are considering several improvement strategies, including:

- Empowering our students with professional experience via internships, particularly for those entering the job market right after graduation. Our approach focuses on forging some meaningful relationships between students and relevant organizations, providing them with essential hands-on experience, and offering professional guidance on advancing their careers. We aim to arm our students with the skills and confidence needed to thrive in their chosen fields.
- Strengthening our relationships with community partners (e.g., City of Fayetteville, Arkansa Municipal League) and creating an abundance of career opportunities for our students.
- Supporting our M.P.A. students' engagement in professional conferences (e.g., ACMA, ICMA)
- Developing our alumni relations to foster a lasting connection with our M.P.A. program. Our aim is to cultivate an engaged and vibrant community that offers valuable support to our students, thereby supporting their success. Through a variety of initiatives and opportunities, we strive to maintain strong ties with our alumni (e.g., Gosack Forum), ensuring they contribute significantly to the continuous improvement of our program.
- Participating in both the Arkansas City Management Association (ACMA) and International City Management Association (ICMA) meetings, as well as the NASPAA (The Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration) conference. These engagements will enable us to connect with fellow M.P.A. programs and interact with numerous city managers from Arkansas and beyond. Our goal is to broaden our understanding and acquire significant insights in this field.