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MASTER OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION
PROGRAM ASSESSMENT PLAN AND
PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT 2016-17
ACADEMIC ASSESSMENT PLAN WITH REPORTED OUTCOMES

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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. Students are encouraged to seek out an area of programmatic focus to complement their general coursework (such as public policy; community development; 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 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 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 by applying learned knowledge in analyzing "real world" political and policy issues;
- Outcome 2: write, analyze and communicate in a competent manner (suitable for various audiences);
- Outcome 3: understand and respond to the ethical dilemmas public and nonprofit managers might face;
- Outcome 4: 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 5: 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. 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 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.

Outcome 2 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 3 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 4 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 students apply their knowledge to that specific setting. Other students may conduct research that involves direct work with local officials, NGOs or other entities.

Outcome 5 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 the following three areas for continuous improvement:

1. Continued curricular integration

The program is moving to a more outcomes-based method of assessment. The Portfolio Exam process was introduced in the fall of 2014. This process allows for students to succinctly produce a final product that is reflective of their coursework, relevancy of various research methodologies and how the MPA degree can impact career trajectory. Two cohorts of students using the portfolio graduated in a timely manner. 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. Review of our curriculum

The enrollment trends of the MPA program are consistent with declining enrollment nationally. The faculty has committed to address areas that would make the program more attractive to potential students both locally and regionally. Possible options include modifying the core requirements, increased marketing efforts and increasing collaborative efforts with other graduate programs to attract UofA students.

3. Continue to strengthen career preparation

The MPA has done well in preparing our students, 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.
- 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. 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.