

Public Policy and Administration

An interdisciplinary graduate program in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences offering the M.P.A.

■ The Review Process

This review used the regular re-accreditation review of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) as its AQAD review. Reviewers selected by NASPAA were:

Gordon Whitaker, chair (University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill)
Beverly Cigler (Pennsylvania State University, Harrisburg)
Sheldon Edner (U.S. Department of Transportation)

■ Executive Summary

On the basis of the report of the visiting team, NASPAA found that the program had “specific non-conformities” with the accrediting standards, and further found that “these non-conformities cannot be resolved within one year.” As a result, the program was not re-accredited.

The specific non-conformities cited by NASPAA were as follows:

- **Confusion as to the purpose and scope of the program.** The visiting team found that “the degree is referred to as the ‘MPA,’ ... but is also called the ‘Master’s in Public Policy and Administration.’ Most students seem clearly to see the program as focused on policy. Some, however, said they want management careers, had expected more emphasis on administration, and were disappointed not to be learning more about how to lead and manage organizations.”
- **Evaluation and improvement.** NASPAA requires that a program shall “assess its students’ performance and the accomplishment of its objectives.” However, the site team found that the program “has undertaken no systematic review of placements or of the retrospective assessments of program graduates or their employers regarding the quality” of professional preparation. In addition, NASPAA standards require that “the program shall use information about its performance in directing and revising program objectives, strategies, and operations.” Given the absence of systematic assessment, and given the perceived ambiguities in mission ... concerning the balance between policy and administration emphasis, this situation is especially grave.”
- **Faculty and faculty influence.** Standards require “identifiable faculty membership ... recognized at the next higher level” of administration. Moreover, this faculty must have “substantial determining influence” with respect to program policy, curriculum, admissions and faculty personnel decisions. NASPAA found that “there is no agreement among students, faculty, or administrators about who specifically constitute program faculty,” and that the governance structure is “unclear.” Both factors prevent the faculty from exercising “appropriate scope of influence.” NASPAA also found that the program “does not have a separate, formal written diversity plan.”
- **Internships and Student Placement.** NASPAA requires a “carefully planned internship experience” ... with “on-going academic supervision.” Programs are also required to “provide an adequate placement service.” According to the site team, “students report that

they are largely on their own to seek placement opportunities,” and that “there appears to be little faculty involvement during the internship experience.” NASPAA acknowledged “students’ apparent success in finding jobs,” but also noted that the “lack of a formal placement mechanism and the lack of assessment of graduates end employers do not make it possible to judge the adequacy” of placement services.

■ Results of the Review

The program took exception with some of the visiting team’s key findings. In terms of “mission ambiguity” and the team’s finding that the program’s policy and management emphases are confused, the program argued that some of the confusion is semantic in origin (the use of the phrase “policy program” as shorthand), and states that “faculty are well aware that the program serves students with interests in both policy and administration.” Information was provided on the distribution of courses and faculty between public administration and public policy. The program also argued that the students with whom the visiting team spoke may not have been representative of the program as a whole.

In terms of the perceived lack of a “core” faculty, the program acknowledged that “in some instances greater clarification of faculty roles and responsibilities is preferable.” It also argued, however, that the issue was largely a matter of definition rather than faculty commitment or control.

NASPAA reviewed these arguments and notified the program that it stood by the substance of the visiting team report.

The Dean noted that a structural problem exists in that NASPAA accredits only public administration programs, and that the reviewers “did not consider the *public policy* part of the [program], which has in fact become the primary focus” over the past five years or so. According to the Dean, the program therefore “somewhat awkwardly awards an MPA [Master of Public Administration] degree for a program whose title has an explicit public policy component.” The Dean argued that NASPAA accreditation therefore might not have been “a good fit,” and proposed that an AQAD review might be conducted in the next year or two focused on the “hybrid program that it is actually is.”

Before any such refocused evaluation, however, the Dean called for a review of the “critical issue” of how “the dual emphasis on public policy and public administration will be represented, and that the program staff and faculty “evaluate for themselves, whether and how ... curricular needs are offered and met for a Master’s Program in both Public Policy and Administration.” In the interim, the Dean called on the program to implement improvements to address the team’s findings related to student input and the internship program.