

Public Policy and Administration

An interdisciplinary graduate program in the College of Social and Behavioral Sciences offering the Master of Public Policy and Administration (M.P.P.A.)

■ The Review Process

This was a standard AQAD review. Reviewers were:

Gregory B. Lewis, chair (Georgia State University)

Ellen Schall (New York University)

Timothy M. Smeeding (University of Wisconsin, Madison)

■ Main Issues

The visiting team characterized the MPPA program as a “small gem,” and reported being “favorably impressed with the faculty and students.” The students were found to be “very good and appear remarkably satisfied with the quality of education they are receiving.” The faculty are “not merely excellent researchers but an amazingly collaborative group” that “accomplishes what many public policy centers claim but very few deliver: It truly is a hub for multidisciplinary policy research and does act as a bridge across departments and colleges.”

While the team found the MPPA program to have “good regional strength, ... it is not in a position to compete well with the highest-ranked national policy schools without a substantial infusion of scarce resources.” The “students appear bright, articulate, hardworking, and highly satisfied with the program,” but “the key weakness ... is that every student and alumnus we met indicated that he or she would not have chosen the program without funding.” Given that “most full-time students have assistantships that provide tuition and fee waivers, ... the program in its current form does not generate revenues sufficient to cover its costs.”

The team noted several other issues:

- **Increased visibility of the program.** To highlight the program’s accomplishments and value, the team suggested giving such centers “more visibility” for the credit hours and grant funds generated by affiliated faculty; thinking of the state legislature as a “more important audience,” and considering programs “aimed at the state capitals located within two hours of campus.”
- **Increasing revenue.** The team noted the “locational challenges” to drawing in-service students, with “no population centers with large numbers of government employees who can easily commute to its evening classes.” The team also observed that the reliance on other departments to provide MPPA courses could complicate expansion of programs for working professionals. Nonetheless, the team recommended exploring “ways to attract more part-time, fee-paying students.” This might involve “a shorter master’s program, with more offerings in the evenings,” or new certificate programs. The team was “more optimistic” about engaging the large local higher education community through a possible higher education administration program and especially through a five-year BA/MPP option for high achieving students, given the “large number of high-quality (and often well-off and out-of-state) students in the Five Colleges.” The team recommended that such a program differ in its requirements from the

existing MPPA with a “smaller number of courses, especially in the fields of specialization.” The team also suggested considering limiting financial aid to the second year only or “other creative ways” of managing existing levels of subsidy.

- **Structural changes.** The team expressed “worry about the sustainability” of the program “for a variety of structural reasons.” First, the program provides “too few structural incentives to maintain the current level of collaboration as the faculty or their incentives change.” The absence of dedicated tenure lines and “limited official voice” in tenure, promotion and merit decisions “gives it little muscle” in decisions crucial to it faculty. The team noted that the Political Science department, despite a “recent, rather extensive spate of hiring,” had added no faculty members to teach traditional MPPA courses. On the other hand, the team also expressed “some concerns about whether having a handful of faculty with tenure homes” in the program would “alter the incentives for existing faculty.”
- **Accreditation.** The program had asked the team to give advice on the question of whether to seek disciplinary accreditation through the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA). The team saw “little reason to do so at this time,” and noted that NASPAA’s current re-examination of its accrediting standards might result in a better fit with the emphasis of the UMass Amherst program.

■ **Response to the Review**

The program expressed general agreement with the team’s findings, and highlighted three areas of focus. The first was the set of structural concerns identified by the team. The program called for at least some tenure-line appointments in the program itself, rather than in affiliated departments. Second, the program asked for changes in the University’s practices to make teaching and research contributions less “hidden.” Third, in terms of financial sustainability, the program argued for continued subsidy of its graduate students, but also identified several areas in which it would actively seek expanded revenues: online certificates and courses, a five-year BA/MPP program, a grants workshop, and a collaborative program for Latin American NGOs.

The Dean also generally concurred with the team’s findings, and identified two main focus areas: 1) the financial structure and the need for new revenues; and 2) the various structural questions. The Dean expressed “enthusiastic” support for the program, but also noted that it is “clear that the revenue and administrative structural issues must be addressed aggressively.”

■ **Student Outcomes Assessment**

The MPPA program is a graduate-only program, and therefore does not employ the kinds of student outcomes assessment tools appropriate to undergraduate education. Evaluation follows the graduate model, which in this case includes as an important component preparation for and evaluation of the required internship experience.

Consistent with the recommendations of the visiting team, the program has submitted a proposal for a new Master’s degree in Public Policy, based on a subset of the existing MPPA requirements. As part of that process, the program is evaluating the learning goals for its courses and how they fit with the proposed dual emphases.