

## **Experience with a CAPP Accreditation Review**

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This note provides my reflections on the CAPP Accreditation Review Panel process. It draws upon my recent experience (October-November 2011) as chair of the CAPP Accreditation Review Panel examining the Masters of Public Administration and Masters of Public Policy Programs of the Johnson-Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy (JSGS) at the University of Regina and University of Saskatchewan. The focus of this note is on the accreditation review process with the key points set out below:

1. When it was first proposed that I chair the review panel I had a short telephone discussion with the Chair of the CAPP Accreditation Board and the Director of JSGS. This was a useful and necessary introductory meeting to understand the importance and nature of the review, the state of development of the school, and to agreed upon panel members and timing for the review. It gave me the opportunity to stress the importance of receiving good documentation on the school and its programs in advance of a site visit by the panel and to ensure that the agenda for the site visit included sufficient time at the end to debrief the Director and Executive Director of JSGS and for deliberation by the Review Panel. The Chair of the Accreditation Board subsequently established the Review Panel through letters to each member. Also included with the letters were terms of reference and principles for the review as well as a draft paper on Canadian MPA/MPP Programs and Professional Competencies entitled 'Academic Respectability Meets Professional Utility' by Ian Clark and Leslie Pal. These background materials were useful to the panel members.
2. I was most fortunate to have two excellent panel members: Paul Thomas, Professor Emeritus, University of Manitoba and Wynne Young, Deputy Minister of Tourism, Parks, Culture, and Sport, Government of Saskatchewan. Their extensive experience in very senior positions in academia and the public service, along with their significant expertise and established networks in public administration and public policy resulted in a strong and effective panel. A representative panel was also essential, which in this case included a balance in membership between scholarly research and practitioner based perspectives. I have benefited from Paul and Wynne in the preparation of this note.
3. Upon receiving the documentation from the school<sup>1</sup> and prior to the site visit I convened a teleconference call with the panel members. The Chair of

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<sup>1</sup> In the case of JSGS the documentation was extensive and included: an application for accreditation; founding documents for the school; documents on strategic directions, achievements to date, student enrolment plan, student profile, and student testimonials; MPA, MPP, and certificate course information and fact sheets, course outlines, information on the internship program; governance documents including the signed MOU and agreed operating principles between University of Regina and the University of Saskatchewan; documentation on the relationship between JSGS and the Province of Saskatchewan; information on the utilization of and satisfaction with executive development programs; and faculty CVs.

Accreditation Board participated in the first part of the call and explained the nature and context of the review and answered questions. During the second part, the panel members formulated an overall approach to the review and identified additional information which was requested from JSGS and promptly provided in advance of our site visit.<sup>2</sup>

4. The Review Panel undertook a two-day site visit to JSGD – one day in Regina and the other in Saskatoon. We began with a breakfast meeting with the Executive Director and Director of the School to highlight both successes and challenges facing the school. Over the course of the next two days we met with a broad range of individuals, 37 in all, including faculty, provosts, deans, students, support staff, provincial officials, and others. The discussions were open, candid, and informative. Questions and discussion dealt with the recent formation of the school, the current situation, and the future challenges and opportunities. The focus of each discussion reflected the interests, expertise, and vantage point of the individual we met with, but overall covered a broad range of areas including, school governance, leadership, the program (especially the core), faculty, students, staff, research, teaching, outreach, internship, and mission and performance.
5. Debriefing the Executive Director and the Director on our preliminary findings near the conclusion of our second day was useful to the Panel in subsequently sharpening our findings and conclusions. We also found that it was important to reserve sufficient time (one hour) at the end of the day for the Review Panel to formulate its general conclusions, to discuss and consider various points of view and perspectives, and to map out the general contents of its written report and strategic memorandum.
6. The panel produced a report which is available on the CAPP website and a strategic memorandum prepared for the Director and Executive Director of JSGS. The report sets out the essential background and process for the review, provides a recommendation on accreditation, and highlights some of the findings of the panel in terms of school governance, the programs, faculty, staff, and students.
7. The strategic memorandum prepared for the Executive Director and Director was a critical and essential part of the overall accreditation review. It provided advice to the leadership of the School recognizing the importance of sustaining a strong collaborative partnership across the two universities. It focused on a number of areas which the panel believed were especially important to ensure continued success and improvement in the future. These included such areas as continued effective leadership and institutionalized support, core curriculum, managing future opportunities and challenges, and building on the important role of students in facilitating cohesion across the two campuses.

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<sup>2</sup> This included information on the relationship between JSGS and the Province of Saskatchewan and a request that students who had recently graduated from the program be made available to the panel.

8. When the report was considered formally by the CAPP Accreditation Board I was available for the first part of their meeting to summarize the panel's findings and recommendations, to explain our review process, and to answer questions.
9. Finally there is the critical question of the readiness of the organization to host an accreditation process and its commitment to use it, if at all possible, for learning purposes. Readiness is indicated by the extent which the organization has thought seriously about its strategic directions, has produced documents for this purpose, has linked planning to resource issues, and has rich information sources which can be related to various performance targets. In this sense accreditation should not be a symbolic ritual and institutions should not rush into the process without a commitment to provide the necessary information and to use the evidence -- both positive and negative -- for learning and improvement. By definition, not all programs can be the best and not every institution can adopt so-called 'best practices'. For some programs the measure of success might be marginal improvements over what already exists. In short, advance preparation and the development of a strong organizational commitment to the process make the accreditation process more rewarding for the panel and more valuable for the host institution.