

A Discussion Paper on CAPPa Accreditation

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Introduction

During the past several years relatively few policy and administration programs have sought accreditation under the existing CAPPa process. Currently only four programs are accredited out of a possible 22 Canadian programs eligible for accreditation (See Appendix 1). This is not a record of progress that is sustainable or a pace that can bring the benefits from accreditation that have occurred elsewhere.

This document proposes a new process for accreditation based on a combination of mission and universal standards with a focus on student competencies that we hope will aid in bring a renewed interest in accreditation. A recent survey of CAPPa members indicates that accreditation is still considered valuable. Sixteen of twenty-one respondents indicated that accreditation is either “important” or “very important.” The question is: what kind of accreditation?

The purpose of this document is to briefly review developments on the accreditation front and to suggest some ideas for a revamped CAPPa accreditation process. We begin with a discussion of the motivation behind accreditation and proceed to discuss the role of student competencies in a new accreditation model. We conclude by outlining some possible principles for program accreditation.

1. Purposes and Objectives of CAPPa Accreditation

The basis of the current CAPPa accreditation process was the report of the CAPPa Working Group on Accreditation Implementation in 2006. Given the diverse character of public administration and public policy programs and the need to promote the discipline rather than divide it, CAPPa agreed at the time to a mission based approach to accreditation. This approach, as distinct from a “standards-based” approach, was deemed sensible in the absence of a consensus on universal standards. It was also premised on the idea that a mission-based process could be rigorous while being economical and efficient.¹

¹ For a thorough discussion of the Canadian experience with accreditation set against international developments, consult Leslie A. Pal and Susan Phillips, “Managing Multiple Missions: The Development of Accreditation of Public Policy and Administration Programs in Canada.” Paper presented to the 14th Annual Conference of the International Research Symposium on Public Management Berne, 2010.

While CAPPa was adopting its mission orientation, other accrediting bodies were reconsidering their own approaches. The Network of Schools of Policy, Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) in the United States was created in 1970 and has engaged in accreditation for over 30 years. Originally called the “National Association,” it changed its name in 2013 to allow it to recognize and capitalize on the growing trend toward internationalization among policy and administration programs. In 2009 NASPAA undertook a major reconsideration of its approach to accreditation and emerged with a set of standards that are a combination of mission and universal expectations.

The accreditation movement is by no means confined to the United States. It is a global phenomenon premised, to some degree, on the idea of “best practices” in public administration and on the de facto convergence among programs on appropriate content. The *Atlas of Public Policy and Management* project, led by Les Pal and Ian Clarke, represents a state of the art resource for assessing trends in programs including the identification of themes and core material.

These developments, and others, have prompted the board of Directors of CAPPa to suggest a renewed dialogue on the subject of accreditation. As a concept accreditation has its supporters and detractors, regardless of the discipline. Accreditation requirements in professions such as medicine and engineering are associated with practitioner licensing and as such represent very potent means of controlling entry and behaviour within the discipline. Accreditation standards impose expectations on universities and governments that are not always welcome. On the other hand, accreditation has been defended as a quality control mechanism that permits prospective students to make informed judgments about which programs to wish to pursue.

Our purpose here is not to debate the pros and cons of accreditation. CAPPa has already adopted accreditation as part of its mandate. The question we believe needs to be addressed is the type of accreditation process we should adopt. The new NASPAA standards, adopted in 2009, now focus heavily on competencies and student learning outcomes. This is also the approach taken by the European Association of Public Administration Accreditation (EAPAA). While the notion of mission-based accreditation remains, NASPAA also expects accredited programs to meet “universal” standards and there is now greater emphasis on how various missions are achieved via the curriculum. We believe these changes merit CAPPa’s attention.

The method of accreditation adopted by CAPPa in 2006 relies almost exclusively on input and output information provided by the school and on some indirect measures of success primarily based on interviews with students and other associated stakeholders such as employer groups. No precise effort has been made to link accreditation directly to mission in any meaningful way. Of particular relevance at the moment, the existing process has no mechanism for ensuring that

learning outcomes flow from the mission or that these outcomes are measurable and publicly reported. Indeed most mission statements of Canadian public policy/management programs do not mention what sort of skills they are trying to impart to students. (See Appendix 2 for a sample).

The question that we face as an academic community is how to we make accreditation more valuable for the programs, for faculty, for students and for stakeholders such as employers. The answer advanced here is to focus more on student learning outcomes that are based on competencies that flow from a self-directed review process coupled with peer evaluation, and periodic public reporting through the *Atlas*.

This approach begins by dissolving the apparent distinction between a “mission-based” and a “standards-based” approach to accreditation. All accreditation involves standards. The main question is whether these standards should be premised on the mission that various programs claim for themselves, or on so-called universal standards that presume “best practices” in the development and delivery of programs.

The small survey of CAPP members referenced earlier and completed in November 2014 indicated clearly that respondents believe strongly in a combination of the two. Thirteen of 21 respondents endorsed equal emphasis on both types of standards while only two respondents wanted strictly universal standards and two strictly mission based standards. This small piece of feedback should not be construed as consensus on the matter, but it does reflect a desire on the part of many members to ensure that general expectations exist but that they not overwhelm specific circumstances.

It is our judgement that we are most likely to make progress on standards by focusing on student competencies. Not everyone will agree, but to the extent that our programs claim to be training and educating would-be public service professionals, it is not unreasonable for employers to expect us to ensure our students possess skills that are required for success in the workplace.

Other standards may also be relevant for CAPP as an accrediting body. NASPAA, for example, will not accredit programs that do not meet minimum resource requirements. These include expectations regarding space, fulltime faculty, and pedagogical amenities. Standards such as these are common among professional programs as are standards requiring specified levels of academic preparation among faculty.

Rather than address these latter standards as a first order of business, we propose that CAPP focus on learning outcomes expectations. These are also part of the current NASPAA standards; in fact, they represent the area on which programs seeking accreditation typically focus most of their attention. A focus on competencies would provide prospective students, employers, the professional

community, university administrators, provincial legislatures, and policy makers in various jurisdictions with some assurance regarding the quality of our graduates. It would also raise resource questions since ensuring competencies will require adequate resources. In particular, a shift to a new mission/ competency/learning outcome framework for our accreditation system will put new pressure on our collective ability to:

- 1) Specify desired learning outcomes (competencies) as well as the minimum acceptable level of performance
- 2) Provide the student with the teaching and learning environment conducive to the acquisition of these competencies, and
- 3) Make use of valid and reliable assessment methods and instruments to evaluate each student's performance to verify that it meets the minimum acceptable level set above.

One of the major challenges in a new process of accreditation based on learning outcomes/competencies is the adjustment it will require in curriculum development. This will involve intentionally adopting student learning goals, developing teaching and learning strategies to help students reach the goals, and developing a series of assessment measures to gauge the success of students meeting these targets. The specifications of student learning outcomes would become the norm and the level of competency expected would also become part of the learning process. Students in turn would be required to demonstrate the mastery of skills and knowledge as a condition of being awarded the degree. This approach to curriculum development would represent a substantial change for many programs.

If CAPP moves forward with such a process it will require programs to define what sort of professionals they want to produce in their mission statements. CAPP also has a role to play by determining the degree to which the competencies expected are compatible with CAPP's own mission as a body dedicated to developing and sustaining professional practice. The universal competencies endorsed by NASPAA are enumerated below. Many of these competencies will be familiar to CAPP members and to anyone who has undergone an academic review. We are not recommending adoption of these competencies, but the NASPAA list provides us with a starting point. The *Atlas* represents another important resource.

The five NASPAA competencies are:

- 1) To analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions
- 2) To lead and manage in public governance
- 3) To articulate and apply a public service perspective
- 4) To communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry

5) To participate in and contribute to the policy process

Programs are invited to add additional competencies based on mission.

Agreeing on universal competencies may not be the most difficult part of the exercise. The experience of accrediting bodies like NASPAA suggests that translating the required competencies into specific student learning outcomes given the particular mission and student population is at least as challenging. For example, mastering a competency requires more than taking a course. Normally students need only accumulate a prescribed number of credits to warrant a degree; in a competency-based program degrees and certificates are only proxies for student accomplishments. Instead of fixed time and variable outcomes, now the outcomes are fixed and time is variable.

Not only would the curriculum be organized around competencies, student work must demonstrate the learning of these competencies. It is not necessary to demonstrate a mastery of all competences at once and programs will undoubtedly cycle through them based on their own sense of which ones they are most likely to achieve. In this regard, the consensus is that using direct evidence of student learning is preferred, but it is possible to use a combination of direct and indirect evidence. Direct evidence includes a project or an artifact produced by the student to demonstrate their best effort, generally as part of a course or in a free-standing element such as a comprehensive exam, a thesis, an internship, or community service learning experience. Indirect evidence usually consists of opinion, satisfaction, or reputational data, provided by the student or others, generally in the form of an interview, focus group, or survey. (See appendix 3).

Arguably this kind of approach can benefit students by strengthening the quality of programs. But, as mentioned above, this comes at a cost. It will require all faculty members to think in different ways, and be more creative in their teaching, in their assessment of teaching and in selecting the specific learning outcomes associated with various competencies. Yet if done properly this can improve the national reputation of our graduates, build strong and more direct links to employment and career development. It is also an important consideration for international students who increasingly look for markers of quality assurance from national accreditation agencies as part of their decision making process. Finally, it can also help build a strong reputation among peer programs internationally and allow CAPPa to be a voice in promoting public policy and administration programs across Canada. In short it promotes a conversation about what quality public management education should look like.

If we proceed in this direction CAPPa will first need to have a consensus on what the competencies should be and will need to engage its stakeholder community including program directors, faculty members, students and employer groups about this new direction. One of the first steps will be the need to develop a list of competencies that would include required and elective competences associated

with specific types of programs (i.e. non-profit management, urban management, international affairs etc).

All of this amounts to a major change and will need the support of all CAPPAs programs and this might well take some time to achieve. While the status quo is always an option, CAPPAs has attracted relatively few programs to the existing accreditation processes. It appears that we have hit something of a wall. This discussion paper is intended to push past the current impasse and begin the process of reconsidering our current practices. It merely raises the possibility of proceeding in a new direction. Many details would need to be worked out.

2) Principles and Suggestions for Program Accreditation

Below are a number of principles and suggestions that could be channeled into a set of standards for accreditation that would be approved by the board of CAPPAs:

- 1) To be accredited an MPA/MPP program would be required to set out the competencies associated with their program drawn from a list established by CAPPAs that link back to their individual missions. CAPPAs can elect to identify among this list those competencies it believes should be included in every accredited program.
- 2) The *Atlas* would be amended to include a competencies map for Canadian programs to track how their current and proposed curriculums approach the competencies.
- 3) To be accredited an MPA/MPP program would have to demonstrate how it plans to ensure that these competencies are transmitted to students and show how their program meets some measureable student learning outcomes associated with these competencies. This could be a staged process over a number of years as programs cycle through the competencies.
- 4) Programs would be encouraged to take full advantage of the *Atlas* in the selection of competencies. The *Atlas* is a resource that CAPPAs has supported for many years and has drawn the attention of our colleagues in NASPAA, but has so far been underutilized in Canada. The *Atlas* would become more front and center as far as actual accreditation is concerned and would be the basis for the development of competency and key concept maps for courses in accredited programs.
- 5) Standards of evidence would need to be agreed upon and peer reviewers would be instructed to focus on the competencies and the evidence rather than input measures.

- 6) These latter measures, which are often part of the standards used by other accrediting agencies, could be developed as guidelines to which peer reviewers can make reference in developing their reports if they believed that resources are relevant to the achievement of the standards associated with student competencies.
- 7) The entire result could then be put online and linked to the *Atlas* and the CAPPAs Website to help promote individual programs, and the broader discipline.
- 8) If the previous steps were taken, CAPPAs should consider developing its own version of an Accreditation Institute each year in conjunction with the CAPPAs conference. Such an Institute could be similar to the one developed by NASPAA and would involve a sharing of information, discussions of online delivery and other innovations, how to measure outcomes and how to use the *Atlas* and other tools to satisfy accreditation requirements.
- 9) It is important to ensure that the conduct of the accreditation process be independent from the CAPPAs executive. This could be achieved by creating an Accreditation Board, whose members would be chosen by the board of directors of CAPPAs. The Accreditation Board would operate at arm's-length, establish rules for the process, choose three-person site visit panels (including at least one academic and one practitioner) for each program under consideration for accreditation, and adjudicate any potential conflicts of interest. The Board would make the final decision on the recommendations of the review panels and report annually to the CAPPAs board.
- 10) The accreditation process should be conducted in as economical a manner as possible. E-mail, conference calls, and video-conferencing will be used where possible in preference to face-to-face meetings. While the chair of the Accreditation Board may receive a stipend during the years when the process is being established, members of the accreditation board and review teams generally do not receive honoraria.
- 11) The accreditation process, in steady state, should be self-financing from CAPPAs dues charged to professional graduate-level programs as well as fees charged to programs in the year they are being reviewed.
- 12) The accreditation framework and process would be subject to regular review by CAPPAs and can be adapted as CAPPAs learns from the process and as educational and professional needs change.

These ideas are intended to stimulate discussion. Better ideas are undoubtedly out there. In addition, some effort will need to be made to distinguish programs from one another. At the moment our members offer programs with different degree

designations. Different criteria will probably be required in assessing different programs. In short, this discussion paper is just the beginning.

Appendix 1 Accredited Programs and those Eligible for Accreditation

Currently accredited:

- 1) Carlton, School of Public Policy and Administration, MA
- 2) Ryerson, Department of Political Science and Public Administration, MA
- 3) Western University, Department of Political Science, MPA
- 4) Johnson Shoyama Graduate School of Public Policy MPA and MPP

Eligible for accreditation:

- 1) University of Victoria, School of Public Administration, MPA
- 2) Simon Fraser University, School of Public Policy, MPP
- 3) University of Calgary, School of Public Policy, MPP
- 4) University of Winnipeg/Manitoba Joint MPA
- 5) University of Ottawa, School of International and Public Affairs
- 6) University of Ottawa, Department of Political Studies, MA
- 7) University of Toronto, School of Public Policy and Governance, MPP
- 8) York University, Schulich School of Business, MPA
- 9) York University, School of Public Policy and Administration, MPA
- 10) Glendon College, School of Public And International Affairs, MPAI
- 11) University of Waterloo, Public Service Program, MPS
- 12) Queen's University, School of Public Policy, MPA
- 13) Concordia, Department of Political Science, MPPPA
- 14) Laval, Department of Political Science, MA
- 15) ENAP, Quebec City, MA
- 16) Moncton University, MPA
- 17) Dalhousie University, School of Public Administration, MPA

Appendix 2 Missions of Canadian MPA Programs

- 1) Concordia: Department of Political Science** The Master of Arts in Public Policy and Public Administration (MPPPA) at Concordia University is a two-year innovative program that blends scholarly and vocational values. Housed in the Political Science Department, the MPPPA focuses Canadian and comparative public policy and administration with an emphasis on the on the nexus of the study of politics and public policy/public administration.

- 2) Dalhousie: School of Public Administration** The MPA program seeks to equip students with the management skills required by public service organizations and an understanding of the organization, processes and policies of government, its public agencies, and the policy groups that work in the public sector. This dual focus constitutes the unique characteristics of the MPA program and makes it highly suited for those interested in a career in the public sector.
- 3) ENAP- University of Quebec:** The multidisciplinary, graduate academic programs respond to public sector needs. ENAP offers a full-time or part-time training plan allowing flexible access to a graduate level program. Everyone can find a program that fits their profile. The Master's programs combine "knowledge" and "know-how" by offering an intervention project (managers) to solve a problem submitted by a public agency or an internship (analysts) that tests competencies and promotes employment opportunities and the development of a solid network of contacts.
- 4) Guelph-McMaster: Department of Political Science** The Public Policy and Administration Program (PPA) is offered jointly with the University of Guelph. It addresses issues related to the role of the state in contemporary society and the organization and operation of modern government. A mixture of core courses and specialized electives on various aspects of policy making and implementation in particular areas of public policy, students are exposed to a number of theoretical approaches and relevant analytical techniques. This combination, we believe, is critical not only for acquiring a background and training for a career in public policy and administration but also in terms of the overall intellectual development of the students. The Public Policy and Administration Program offered by McMaster and Guelph stands out from other PPA programs in being rooted in the discipline of Political Science. The grounding in the politics of public policy and public administration makes the degree excellent preparation for further studies, with a greater proportion of our students going on to doctoral studies than in comparable PPA programs.
- 5) Manitoba-Winnipeg: Joint MPA** The program is designed to meet the needs of two types of students, individuals who are presently employed and wish to add to their formal educational status; and individuals interested in a career in either public administration or public policy and who are proceeding from undergraduate to graduate studies. The objective is to provide students with a sound knowledge in Public Administration. The orientation is interdisciplinary, although the majority of courses are in politics and government. The core

courses expose all students to a common set of ideas designed to encourage both innovative and integrative perspectives. Optional courses allow pursuit of individual career interests. The intent is to allow students to obtain a knowledge of both the theory and the practice of government organizations, including an awareness of the political, economic, and social contexts in which they operate. The program offers significant opportunities or specialization in a range of policy areas such as health care, human resource management, social welfare, aboriginal government, and organizational change.

6) Ottawa: School of International and Public Affairs The purpose of the Master's is to familiarize students with critical methods of production of knowledge, to develop their research skills, both theoretical and applied, as well as their capacity to acquire the relevant expertise to face responsibilities as public managers and policy analysts. Three different options are offered for the Master's: Master's with thesis, Master's with research paper, Master's with internship and research paper.

7) Queen's: School of Public Policy Queen's MPA is a one-year, multidisciplinary program for full-time students. The program has been preparing students at the entry and mid-career levels for leadership roles in public service and policy-making for more than thirty-five years. Graduates hold positions as ministers and senior officials in all three levels of government, as well as providing leadership in hospitals, community organizations and national associations across Canada. The program's emphasis is on public policy, and the broad social, economic and political context within which public organizations operate. The program aims to develop policy leaders. Policy leadership requires skills in policy analysis and the capacity to implement new solutions. Policy and management are clearly interdependent. Without an understanding of the basic purposes that public organizations seek to achieve through policy, management is an empty process. Without the management skills to translate commitment into action, policy goals are empty promises.

8) Ryerson: Department of Political Science The mission of the graduate program in Public Policy and Administration is to provide a high quality, professionally-relevant educational program that recognizes the unique character of the public service and its role in democratic governance to full-time students considering careers in the public and para-public sectors, and to part-time learners already in the public service interested in furthering their education.

- 9) Victoria: School of Public Administration** The Master of Public Administration (MPA) On Campus program is designed for recent graduates preparing to launch their career in government and the non-profit sector. Whether your background is in economics or fine arts, the MPA On Campus program will lead you to careers in local, provincial, First Nations and federal governments as well as non-profit and international organizations. In this professional program students explore the theory and practicalities of both policy analysis and public management. The resulting mix of skills and knowledge opens doors to careers as managers, analysts and consultants. Our graduates manage city governments, administer non-profit organizations, run large government ministries, and lead in the interface between business and government.
- 10) York:** With the continued dynamic change in government, the professional requirements for success in the public sector are increasing rapidly. York's restructured Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree provides a unique combination of management education, program analysis and evaluation, and public policy analysis and development. In designing and developing the MPA program, Schulich has joined forces with members of York University's Political Science Department. Graduates of the MPA Program can build new careers or add value to existing careers in government at the local, provincial and federal levels; in the private sector; and in nonprofit organizations in the healthcare, education, and arts & media sectors.
- 11) Calgary: School of Public Policy** Our mission is to get public policy right in this country. This means strengthening Canada's public service, and bridging the gap between business, government and academia. These are the keys to unleashing Canada's full economic potential - domestically and internationally. We fulfill our mission by...Building capacity in government – The Master of Public Policy (MPP) trains students to hit the ground running, offering them practical, hands-on and intensive experience in policy development and analysis.
- 12) Regina and Saskatoon, Johnson Shoyama Graduate School** We are an interdisciplinary team of scholars and practitioners who seek to improve the knowledge base from which policy makers draw, the critical abilities of public policy practitioners, and the public's understanding of how and why policy is created.
- 13) Toronto, School of Public Policy and Governance** Our School has two broad goals. The first is to form a hub for policy discourse, bringing researchers,

practitioners, and community members together in order to contribute to policy debates, development, and discussion across many areas of expertise, both nationally and internationally. The second goal is to educate students enrolled in our innovative Master of Public Policy (MPP) program to be effective practitioners and leaders in public policy.

14) Simon Fraser University, School of Public Policy Our program is founded on an educational model that is academically rigorous, cross-disciplinary and professionally relevant. We emphasize practical application of principles and analysis from the social science disciplines. Students will be expected to master a core set of skills in policy analysis, politics, economics, and qualitative and quantitative research methods. Whereas other programs emphasize technical and applied skills of immediate application to the work place, MPP students also receive a solid foundation in economics and political science at an advanced level, thus ensuring they are well grounded in the two key disciplines for policy studies and analyses.

Appendix 3

Direct Evidence of Student Learning	Indirect Evidence of Student Learning
Annotated bibliographies Appraisals of live or videotaped presentations Assessment center/mock interviews Case study analysis; problem solving Completed course assignments Community Service Project report Comprehensive exam, midterms, finals Culminating projects or papers, thesis Internship supervisor report Journals, discussion board posts, blogs Oral exam judged by faculty/practitioners Policy analysis project Portfolios of completed student work Role-playing, simulation (juried)	Exit interviews - graduating students Focus Groups with students, alumni, etc. National ratings or rankings Student self-assessment Surveys of students or alumni Surveys of employers in general