1) Please describe your program’s learning-outcomes trajectory since 2006-07: Has there been a transformation of organizational culture regarding the establishment of learning outcomes and the capacity to assess progress toward their achievement? If so, during which academic year would you say the transformation became noticeable? What lies ahead; what is the next likely step in developing a learning-outcomes organizational culture within the program?

The Sacramento State Master’s Program in Public Policy and Administration (PPA) was an early adaptor of the use of learning outcomes as a primary assessment measure. As noted in our 2005 Self Study Program Review (publicly available at http://www.csus.edu/ppa/about/progreview/2005/self_study_text.pdf), in that year we had already committed to a desired learning outcome matrix for the program achieved through a mapping back of these outcomes to the program’s specific core courses. Since the 2006-07 academic year, we have continually produced annual assessment reports (publicly available at http://www.csus.edu/ppa/about/progreview) that rely upon a multi-pronged approach to measure our success at achieving these learning outcomes. This includes the production of two summative measures: (1) an evaluation of individual core course level outcomes to monitor course effectiveness and (2) an evaluation of policy memos completed by entering and finishing students to provide insight into the degree of value added by completing the entire program. PPA faculty discuss tabulated results at an annual spring retreat with an eye toward curriculum or pedagogical changes to implement in the following academic year in areas where learning objectives are not fully achieved. Following these practices, we immediately observed a measurable improvement in the achievement of our learning goals. Furthermore, we continue to see further improvements each year we go through this process. The major component of our upcoming 2012 program review is a reassessment of the appropriateness of our core-learning objectives through feedback from surveys and focus groups of potential employers and alumni.

2) Please list in prioritized order (or indicate no prioritization regarding) up to four desired learning outcomes (“takeaways” concerning such elements of curriculum as perspectives, specific content knowledge, skill sets, confidence levels) for students completing the program. For each stated outcome, please provide the reason that it was designated as desired by the faculty associated with the program.

The PPA Department has established five general learning objectives for those holding its master’s degree. Without prioritization, I describe these below and the more specific learning objectives that each entails. See pp. 10-11 of the 2010-11 PPA Department Assessment Report (in the attached appendix) that indicates where we achieve each of these specific learning objectives in PPA core courses.
a) Critical Thinking

A “mastery” of public policy and administration must include the ability to think critically – in an objective and systematic manner – about a public policy and/or public administration challenge. This entails the more specific learning objectives of: (1) appropriate problem definition, (2) objective research design and casual inference, (3) implementation considerations, and (4) ethical implications of choices.

b) Integrative Thinking

This involves the ability to take the skills picked up in economics, political science, public management, public budgeting, and statistical analysis, and use them in an integrative and appropriate way to address public policy and/or public administration challenges. Our graduates achieve such interdisciplinary thinking through the mastery of the following specific learning objectives: (5) microeconomic concepts and analysis, (6) political environment and analysis, (7) techniques of policy analysis, (8) budgeting concepts and budgeting analysis, (9) organizational analysis and change development, and (10) statistical analysis.

c) Effective Communication for Policy Audiences

The effective practice of formulating and administering government activity in a democracy requires the highly effective communication of what, why, and how you plan to do it. Thus, we require our PPA master’s graduates to be adept at the following specific learning objectives: (11) report writing, (12) memo writing, (13) presentation of technical information, (14) oral presentation, and (15) effective written presentation.

d) Understanding Professional Role

Ours is a professional master’s program geared explicitly to those who desire to work in the public sector. Thus, a requisite learning objective must be the development of an understanding of one’s role in the PPA profession. The achievement of this occurs through the specific learning objectives of: (16) role of public sector in democratic/market system, (17) role of nonprofit sector, (18) California policy context, (19) intergovernmental relations, (20) role of policy analysis, (21) role of public manager, and (22) public sector workplace and role ethics.

e) Practical Application

Holders of our professional master’s degree need also comprehend some essential practical applications for dealing with public policy and administration concerns. The specific learning objectives related to this include: (23) influencing the policy process, (24) practical problem solving, (25) knowing how and where to get data, (26) use of statistical data, (27) benefit/cost analysis, (28) group collaboration skills, (29) understanding budgets, (30) performance measurement, (31) strategic planning, and (32) conflict resolution.

3) For undergraduate programs only, in what ways are the set of desired learning outcomes described above aligned with the University’s Baccalaureate Learning Goals? Please be as specific as possible.

This is a graduate only program.
4). For each desired outcome indicated in item 2 above, please:

a) Describe the method(s) by which its ongoing pursuit is monitored and measured. b) Include a description of the sample of students (e.g., random sample of transfer students declaring the major; graduating seniors) from whom data were/will be collected and the frequency and schedule with which the data in question were/will be collected. c) Describe and append a sample (or samples) of the “instrument” (e.g., survey or test), “artifact” (e.g., writing sample and evaluative protocol, performance review sheet), or other device used to assess the status of the learning outcomes desired by the program. d) Explain how the program faculty analyzed and evaluated (will analyze and evaluate) the data to reach conclusions about each desired student learning outcome.

It is not appropriate to answer each of the questions for each desired outcome, as all outcomes are evaluated the same. Thus I will only answer a) through d) once for all of the desired outcomes.

The PPA Master’s Program bases all of its assessment efforts on a matrix of program-level learning objectives found in Table 1 on pp. 10-11 of the appended 2010-11 Assessment Report. From that matrix, we have developed a series of outcomes that then map to specific objectives in a primary (P) or secondary (S) manner in the core PPA courses we teach. Table 3, beginning on p. 19 in the appendix, offers the assignment description that we use to assess the value added gained by a PPA student. The assignment aims at having students identify a contemporary administrative or policy issue and then offer alternative solutions and justifications for what they view as the “best” solution. We use a 12 criteria rubric to evaluate the memo that students write in the first and last class. Table 3 in the appendix contains this rubric. Table 4, on p. 22 in the appendix, offers the summary scores, as assigned by PPA professors reading the memo.

Our annual assessment efforts in the past have included two summative measures described above. Beginning this past academic year, we added an experimental third measure that consists of an exit survey of students who have just completed their thesis. They complete a web-based questionnaire using “Survey Monkey” that is designed to assess their feelings of mastery over specific learning objectives (listed in Table 2 in the appendix) as they leave the program. The results of this survey are interesting because they occur after some distance from when survey responders completed the courses meant to fulfill the learning objectives. Though the survey remains experimental and the sample size small (16 graduating students), we find the initial results provocative. Table 5, beginning on p. 23 in the appendix, contains the average score on each question (with 5 being the highest) for the 16 graduating PPA students that took this exit survey in either fall 2010 or spring 2011.

Last spring, like every spring for the past five academic years, we held a daylong department retreat to review the assessment data, draw lessons from the information, and suggest specific curricular adjustments as deemed necessary. To do this, we examine the average scores received in all of the assessment instruments described above and look for both relatively low values and values that exhibit a greater variation around the averages. As a faculty, we then discuss the possible pedagogical and curricular reasons that this may have occurred. In a collaborative manner, we then offer suggestions as to what to change to try to raise the assessed scores in these lower performing areas.
5) Regarding each outcome and method discussed in items 2 and 4 above, please provide examples of how findings from the learning outcomes process have been utilized to address decisions to revise or maintain elements of the curriculum (including decisions to alter the program’s desired outcomes). If such decision-making has not yet occurred, please describe the plan by which it will occur.

For the student survey results by course in Table 2 in the appendix, we believe that average scores on a specific learning objective near 3.8 or less offers an indication of a learning objective that deserves increased attention on our part. We list these items next by course and the average score received:

PPA 200
Understand the major research and/or professional conventions, practices and methods of inquiry of discipline (3.38)
Understand the major formats, genres, and styles of writing used in discipline (3.52)

PPA 240A
Gain experience with graduate level literature reviews (3.57)

PPA 220B
Develop basic proficiency using quantitative spreadsheet models to inform policy questions (3.84)

PPA 230
Improve written and verbal communication skills, including the presentation of budgetary information (3.86)

For the student-exit survey result in Table 5, we believe average scores on a specific learning objective near 3.6 or less offers an indication of increased attention on our part. (We set the bar here lower than the 3.8 above, because of the distance between when these objectives taught in a specific course and asked about upon graduation.) We list these items next by course and the average score received:

Critical Thinking
Possess the ability to accumulate data and do basic descriptive statistical analysis... (3.50)
Understand the appropriate use of bivariate and regression statistical techniques... (3.50)

Integrative Thinking
Have a working knowledge of regression analysis and the value it offers to answer policy... (3.56)

Practical Applications
Possess basic skills in budget development, analysis, and implementation and cash and debt.. (3.56)
Familiar with active listening and HR intervention strategies... (3.00)

For the pre- and post-memo assignment results in Table 4, we concentrate on the “person-to-person” comparison of students. Person-to-person refers to a comparison of the score given to a particular student’s memo when that individual entered the PPA Master’s Program in comparison to the score given to the same person when he or she wrote a similar memo at the
completion of her PPA core courses. Of possible concern for us are the two lowest valued added scores of 0.51 for item 6 (Is memo well written?) under effective communication, and 0.70 for item 5 (Are appropriate economic, political, policy, budget, and/or administrative concepts and analyses considered?) under integrative thinking.

After considering the results of possible concern noted above in the achievement of our learning goals, PPA Faculty generated the following list of specific changes to pursue next year.

• The specific concerns raised by students in PPA 200 were likely due to the transition of this course into one that now qualifies for “Graduate Writing Intensive” credit. The course objectives that received the lower scores were added as part of this transition. The instructor has agreed to pay greater attention to helping the students understand the major research and/or professional conventions, practices and methods of inquiry of PPA discipline, and the major formats, genres, and styles of writing used in PPA.

• The literature review concerns raised in PPA 240A were likely due to the way of teaching on how to write a literature review in this class not being fully integrated with the way it is also taught in PPA 207. Although this is due in part to a faculty transition instructors of both courses have agreed upon working harder at this integration in the upcoming academic year.

• The instructor of 220B felt the concern over spreadsheets is likely the result of some students' weakness in the basics of Excel at the start of the class. He has agreed to spend more time on reviewing these basics next year.

• The instructor of PPA 230 acknowledged the concern over using verbal and written skills in presenting budgetary information in PPA 230. She has agreed to rethink some of her assignments to try and specifically address these concerns.

• Regarding the low scores registered in the student exit survey, we note that they arose in relation to highly specific skills (statistical analyses, budget analyses, and HR intervention strategies) taught in specific courses. These skills may be less likely to be retained by students not using these skills after they leave the class. The faculty are considering whether a broader measure of knowledge and skills is more appropriate for an exit survey.

• The relatively low value added of 0.51 calculated for whether a memo is “well written” is very likely due to the average value of 1.84 assigned to students in this category at the first memo. This is by far the highest average starting point, and thus perhaps it is not surprising that it grows the least. We specifically screen our admitted students for their strong writing ability, and this statistic likely reflects this result.

• We are a bit concerned that students score relatively low on the use of appropriate economic, policy, politics, budget, and/or administrative concepts in the value added calculated for their memos. However, a key point is that there is still a valued added of 0.70. We flagged this because it was the second lowest value added. Instructors in PPA 200, PPA 210, PPA 220A, and PPA 240 have noted this potential weakness where these
conceptual distinctions are taught. They have agreed to try harder to draw such distinctions in their next year’s teaching of these concepts.

To see if we have achieved the desired outcomes, we will administer the two assessment instruments next academic year that we have used for multiple years and check whether there was any change in the specific issues raised above. We are very likely to change the exit survey of graduating PPA students to better assess broader learning objectives than just the class specific ones previously asked.

6) Has the program systematically sought data from alumni to measure the longer-term effects of accomplishment of the program’s learning outcomes? If so, please describe the approach to this information-gathering and the ways in which the information will be applied to the program’s curriculum. If such activity has not yet occurred, please describe the plan by which it will occur.

Yes, this past summer, in preparation of our 2012 program review, the Sacramento State Office of Institutional Research conducted a survey of our alumni for just this purpose. In this survey, we first desired to inquire as to whether the five general learning objectives in this table (Critical Thinking, Integrative Thinking, Effective Communication for Policy Audiences, Understanding Professional Role, and Practical Applications) still make the most sense. Following this, we wanted to ask if the specific learning objectives that map to each of these five general learning objectives (or a new group of them) capture the essential elements desired for our chosen general learning objectives. We also wished to inquire as to whether certain specific learning objectives should carry greater weight than the others.

We will use this survey’s results during our upcoming program review to consider a reformulation of general and specific learning objectives and how they map back to specific PPA core courses. The goal in doing this is to insure that each of these specific learning objectives are a primary area of coverage in at least two PPA courses, and a secondary area of coverage in at least three PPA core courses. (These minimums could be greater for learning objectives deemed to carry greater weight.) If these minimums do not occur through the current way PPA core course taught, we will suggest ways that our overall curriculum and/or specific courses could change to achieve these objectives.

7) Does the program pursue learning outcomes identified by an accrediting or other professional discipline-related organization as important? Does the set of outcomes pursued by your program exceed those identified as important by your accrediting or other professional discipline-related organization?

The National Association of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPPA at http://www.naspaa.org) is the appropriate accrediting organization for master’s programs in public policy and/or administration. Accreditation is not mandatory in the sense that students can obtain employment in the area of public policy or public administration without having completed a program from an accredited institution; many of the most well regarded programs in the country are not accredited. For nearly a decade, we have maintained a non-accredited affiliation with NASPPA. We remain non-accredited due to the lack of resources to undergo the initial expense of achieving accreditation, and then the additional annual expense of maintaining this accreditation. As an alternate, we have paid close attention to the standards that NASPPA set for accreditation.
in setting our own learning goals and assessment strategies. These standards are described below (as given at http://www.naspaa.org/accreditation/NS/naspaastandards.asp):

**Universal Required Competencies:** As the basis for its curriculum, the program will adopt a set of required competencies related to its mission and public service values. The required competencies will include five domains:

- to lead and manage in public governance;
- to participate in and contribute to the policy process;
- to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions;
- to articulate and apply a public service perspective;
- to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry.

**Mission-specific Required Competencies:** The program will identify core competencies in other domains that are necessary and appropriate to implement its mission.

**Mission-specific Elective Competencies:** The program will define its objectives and competencies for optional concentrations and specializations.

**Professional Competencies:** The program will ensure that students learn to apply their education, such as through experiential exercises and interactions with practitioners across the broad range of public affairs, administration, and policy professions and sectors.

Understanding this, we believe the PPA Master’s Program has not suffered due to its non-accreditation status. We will continue to use NASPPA accreditation standards to guide our own setting of learning goals and assessment practices to evaluate them. If future resources make it possible to pursue and maintain NASPPA accreditation, we are very likely to seek it.

8). Finally, what additional information would you like to share with the Senate Committee on Instructional Program Priorities regarding the program’s desired learning outcomes and assessment of their accomplishment?

As stated earlier, PPA will undergo a program review in 2012 that will use four sources of input to conduct a focused inquiry on our already established learning goals. Two of these sources, already available, are the annual assessments of course specific learning goals we have accomplished over the last five years and an OIR alumni survey accomplished last summer. The two additional sources of information, gathered in the spring of 2012, will come from a focus group of alumni, and a second focus group of actual/potential employers of our Public Policy and Administration Program’s graduates. We also plan to involve current PPA Master’s Students in the entire process through at least four of them (already recruited) in the meetings and deliberations on the subject planned for spring semester 2012.

Closely looking over our previous annual assessment reports, and tracking data on how the achievement of learning objectives has changed over time, offers necessary information on the
achievement of existing learning objectives within our existing curriculum. The already completed alumni survey contains responses to how alumni feel regarding our existing general learning objectives and (1) “how often you use a specific skill (learning objective) in your day-to-day professional activities,” and (2) “extent to which your completion of the PPA Master’s Program enhanced a specific skill (learning objective).” These two sources of existing information offer valuable input on the areas of further inquiry and clarification needed. We will then investigate these areas in a series of focus group inquiries to both alumni and current/potential employers of our graduates.

The ultimate goal of our focused inquiry is a check up and potential revision of the PPA Learning Objective Matrix. This is an important and relevant goal for program review. It fully matches with both the WASC and Sacramento State objectives of clearly and appropriately stating what the learning objectives of an academic program are, implementing a method by which to assess whether these objectives are being achieved, and if not, suggesting changes in pedagogical practices and/or curriculum within the program to better achieve them.