

# PROGRAM REVIEW REPORT EXTERNAL REVIEWER

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**MASTER OF PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION  
DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC POLICY AND ADMINISTRATION  
CALIFORNIA STATE UNIVERSITY SACRAMENTO**

*NOVEMBER, 2012*

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## EXECUTIVE SUMMARY

The visit of the external reviewer took place Monday October 15 – Tuesday October 16, 2012, in the company of the internal program review team. The self-study was reviewed and numerous interviews took place. The Department's self-study for program review was written under Pilot Study Option C, focused inquiry. This report from the external reviewer will address the information provided in the self-study as well as information obtained from interviews on campus. An appendix will provide additional information of interest to the program should it decide to seek accreditation by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA).

The faculty in the Department of Public Policy and Administration are well known and highly respected for their teaching, scholarship, and service. The MPPA is a rigorous degree that produces successful graduates who make an impact on the community. The Department collaborates with many other units and entities across campus as well as across the community. The degree program is an under-appreciated gem, a green spot on the CSUS campus.

The MPPA degree could be more visible, across campus as well as in the capitol region and across the state. A recent drop in the number of applications prompted the program to step up its recruiting effort. There could be more of a presence in the "downtown" arena where the high quality thesis research of its graduates could be showcased for policy makers. The department could also use social media to communicate with its policy audience and to recruit future students.

Finally, the Department does more with its few resources than most other programs. For example, the program has carried out substantial assessment activities, mostly all using indirect evidence of student learning.

- *Recommendation: The program should sample and evaluate student work from courses that directly reflects their learning on the major student learning outcomes, i.e., use more direct measures of assessment. These can be supplemented with occasional indirect measures.*

A lack of attention to the resource situation has resulted in considerable overload for the faculty who are still full-time in the department as well as for those who are on full-time administrative assignments outside it. A high quality program cannot exist indefinitely on over-commitment and under-compensation.

- *Recommendation: CSUS administration should provide funding to hire part-time (adjunct) instructors to fill in for faculty who are currently on administrative assignment; ideally the department would be able to hire a full-time instructor who can assume teaching and advising duties. In the long term, faculty who leave should be replaced by new tenure-track hires.*

Putting aside the question of who subsidizes whom, this is a highly competent and productive graduate program. Class sizes are larger than in many other graduate programs, and more students graduate each year than in some other graduate programs. The question for the administration is how to support it at the prudent and reasonable level it deserves.

## INTRODUCTION

The visit of the external reviewer took place Monday October 15 – Tuesday October 16, 2012. In the company of the internal program review team, a number of people were interviewed, including:

- Robert Wassmer, Chair, Department of Public Policy and Administration
- Mary Kirlin, Professor, Department of Public Policy and Administration
- Su Jin Jez, Professor, Department of Public Policy and Administration
- Peter Detwiler, Adjunct Instructor, Department of Public Policy and Administration
- Ted Lascher, SSIS Interim Dean and Professor, Department of Public Policy and Administration
- Christy Jensen, Professor Emerita, Department of Public Policy and Administration
- Suzi Byrd, Administrative Assistant, Department of Public Policy and Administration
  
- Don Taylor, Interim AVP, Academic Programs and Global Engagement, Academic Affairs
- Kimo Ah Yun, Interim Associate Dean, College of Arts and Letters, and Professor
- Amy Liu, University Assessment Coordinator
  
- Nancy Shulock, Director, Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy
  
- Susan Sherry, Director, Center for Collaborative Policy
- David Booher, Center for Collaborative Policy, and Adjunct Instructor, PPA
- Adam Sutkus, Mediator, Center for Collaborative Policy
  
- Steve Boilard, Director, Center for California Studies
- Donna Hoenig-Couch, Administrative Staff, Center for California Studies
  
- Carlos Nevarez, Director, Ed.D. program, College of Education
- Bob Pritchard, Professor, Ed.D. program, College of Education
  
- PPA students and alumni

The Department's self-study for program review was written under Pilot Study Option C, focused inquiry. The self study contained required element one, general information about the program; required element two, intended program level student learning outcomes and methods of assessment, assessment results to date, and dissemination of the results; and required element three, the focused inquiry. For the latter, the department chose to conduct a detailed examination of their five, required, program-level student learning outcomes. This report from the external reviewer will address the information provided in the self-study as well as information obtained from interviews on campus. An appendix will provide additional information of interest to the program should it decide to seek accreditation by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA). The observations provided in this report, however, are those of the external reviewer only, and are not intended to constitute any type of communication from NASPAA.

## **Required Element One: Quality of Curriculum, Instructional Personnel, and Curriculum Delivery**

Contemporary Curriculum: A review of course syllabi posted on-line showed the content to be current as well as appropriate to a course of study of public policy and administration at the state level.

Curriculum Rigor: The Department of Public Policy and Administration (PPA) at CSUS offers a high quality masters' degree in public policy and administration. The rigorous curriculum, with 10 required courses and 2 electives, also requires satisfactory completion of a masters' thesis, which is unusual among MPA programs in the CSU (or in most comparable private university programs). One student commented that peers at the University of Southern California (USC) wished they had the option to do a thesis in their MPA program.

Faculty Qualifications: A review of faculty C.V.s revealed the high quality of the tenured and tenure-track faculty in PPA. All have doctoral degrees, and their combined fields of study provide the breadth necessary for this interdisciplinary program. Faculty also have substantial practical experience upon which to draw for their teaching, a must in such degree programs.

Percent of Instruction by Full-Time Faculty: The majority of all courses are taught by full-time tenured or tenure-track faculty. Over the 2011-2012 academic year, all the required courses were taught by PPA faculty. Of the six sections of elective courses offered, four were taught by full-time faculty and two by part-time (adjunct) instructors. However, three full-time faculty have been working outside the department in administrative roles, reducing the number of faculty available to teach required courses (more discussion follows below).

Use of Technology as Discipline Appropriate: The use of technology is appropriate.

Advising Program and Graduation Success: One indicator of the success of the program is the relatively high graduation rate among MPPA students at CSUS. The median time to earn the degree is about 2.8 years. The number of degrees conferred has ranged from a low of 15 to a high of 28 but averaged 21 per year over the past five years. The graduation rate for students entering between 2000 and 2004 ranged from 61% to 86%. For students entering between 2005 and 2008, graduation rates ranged from 50% to 77%, but these may eventually rise as students approach the seven-year deadline. These graduation rates are as high as or higher than those of similar programs at other CSU campuses. The major reasons for non-completion of the degree were given as 1) about a 10% drop out rate in the first semester among students who decide it does not meet their needs; 2) changes in job, relocations, transfers, or other changes in life situations among students who cannot continue at the CSUS campus; and 3) failure to finish the thesis. There has been discussion over the past several years of providing an option for students who don't finish the thesis, such as a comprehensive exam, but nothing has been adopted.

Distribution of Advising Responsibilities among Faculty Members: There is a formal system for advising. First, in the first week of June, all new students (usually 25-30 students) are required to attend a new student orientation in groups of 5-6 students. Second, there is an intensive weekend seminar held just before the start of fall classes, as part of the introductory course, which also includes advising. Third, there is a student handbook, with sample class schedules for full-time and part-time students. Fourth,

students may contact any member of the faculty for academic advising during the semester. Fifth, students are advised by their thesis supervisor as they complete the program.

- *Recommendation: Instead of scheduling multiple groups of 5-6 students for advising, hold one session for all newly admitted students, or at the most provide no more than two sessions*

Nevertheless, at the time of this review, there were only two full-time faculty available for advising in the PPA department, and one of them was working a reduced load due to illness; a third professor, who holds a 50% appointment in the department, was out on maternity leave. Three other faculty hold appointments in PPA but they are all working full-time in administrative appointments outside the department (Director of IHELP; Interim Provost; Interim Dean). This places the burden of advising (as well as numerous other duties) on the current department chair.

Proactive Advising Contact with Students to Assure Progress to Degree: The department checks registration rolls before each semester to contact students who have not enrolled. Students are sent multiple messages when it is time for them to begin work on the thesis. Students are encouraged to find a thesis chair in the semester prior to beginning the thesis; a second instructor serves as an additional thesis reader. Although the thesis course does not regularly meet, students who are enrolled in thesis are encouraged to meet with their thesis chair every couple of weeks.

Again, at the time of this review, the department was short-handed in terms of faculty available to serve as thesis chair. The result is that department faculty carry the responsibility of chairing numerous thesis committees, over and above their teaching assignments. In fact, the three tenured faculty working outside the department in administrative positions are still assuming the responsibility of chairing numerous theses each semester. In addition, one adjunct instructor has also served as second reader on as many as 10 theses per semester with no compensation.

- *Recommendation: CSUS administration should provide funding to hire part-time (adjunct) instructors to fill in for faculty who are currently on administrative assignment; ideally the department would be able to hire a full-time instructor who can assume teaching and advising duties. In the long term, faculty who leave should be replaced by new tenure-track hires.*

Program Roadmap to Curriculum Completion and Graduation Success: As noted previously, the department provides students with roadmaps for full-time and part-time options. Students are only admitted in the fall and their first four courses are taken in a prescribed order. Required courses are offered on a fixed schedule, which is an advantage to students so they can plan their schedule of courses. However, it can also be a disadvantage, since if a required course is cancelled, it may not be offered again for some time. In that case students must either scramble to find substitutes or wait until the course comes around again, delaying completion of the degree. A low course enrollment resulted in the past year because applications to the program decreased. However, faculty, students, and alumni have raised funds to stage a recruitment campaign and applications to the program as well as matriculations are expected to rise to prior levels.

Use of Technology to Supplement and Strengthen Advising Effort: The program uses a list-serv to communicate with students and tracks students with an access data base. The department also monitors student progress on the university-based system.

- *Recommendation: The program could explore the use of social media to communicate with students as well as a recruiting tool for new students.*

Post-Degree Success and Graduation Impact on the Community: In the self-study, the program provided an impressive list of the placements of its graduates. Alumni interviewed during this review also worked in such prestigious places as community colleges, energy and environmental organizations, city councils, departments of education, hospitals and health care systems, water boards, and not-for-profits. This sampling represents just some of the tremendous impact of this program on the community.

- *Recommendation: Use the network of graduates to recruit new students to the MPA program.*

Strength of Teaching Performance: The PPA department uses two surveys in each course each semester: the university form and a second, departmental form, where more qualitative (open-ended) comments are encouraged. On the university form, student evaluations of teaching rank PPA faculty consistently above a 4.0 on a 5-point scale. On the departmental form, students also rate faculty highly and in addition provide numerous comments. Students interviewed during this program review commented that their feedback on the departmental forms is taken seriously by the program, more seriously than in other departments. (But see further comments below under assessment).

Quality of Program and Resource Utilization: Despite the current lack of faculty resources, the PPA department continues to sustain a high quality, rigorous degree program and to graduate students in a timely manner. However, many persons interviewed concurred that the PPA faculty are overworked and that the department cannot possibly take on one more thing at this time.

Scholarly and Creative Activity: The self-study shows extraordinary scholarly productivity among the PPA faculty in the last two years alone. It was observed during an interview with individuals from the College of Education that “PPA has established a culture of scholarship, where faculty hold each other accountable and pressure each other to place greater emphasis on scholarship and publishing in peer reviewed journals.”

Service: The faculty have taken an active role in service, in the university, in the community, and in the profession.

Collaboration across Program Lines: This appears to be one of the strengths of the PPA program. PPA has collaborated with numerous entities, including:

- the College of Education, to create and sustain the Ed.D. degree program;
- the College of Business, to create and sustain the Masters in Urban Land Development program;
- the College of Continuing Education, to create and sustain the Certificate in Judicial Administration program;
- the Gerontology program, for a special master’s in PPA and Gerontology;
- the Center for California Studies, to offer courses to dozens of Capitol Fellows each year as well as involvement on other initiatives;
- the Institute for Higher Education Leadership and Policy, in various studies and initiatives;
- the Center for Collaborative Policy, developing and delivering curriculum for the Certificate in Collaborative Governance.

There has been little recognition of these important, substantial, and ongoing contributions of the PPA

department to the academic and scholarly pursuits of the university. With a full complement of five or six full-time tenured/tenure-track faculty, these pursuits can easily be continued; with the current staffing of only 2.5 full-time faculty, these contributions are difficult to sustain at their usual high level.

- *Recommendation: Provide reimbursement to the department for the courses taught by PPA faculty outside the department, such as in the EdD program, at a sufficient level to hire part-time faculty to cover courses that need to be offered to keep students on track to graduation.*

## Required Element Two, Student Learning Outcome and Assessment Methods

Student Learning Outcomes: In 2006, PPA adopted five program-level student learning outcomes:

1. Critical Thinking
2. Integrative Thinking
3. Effective Communication for Policy Audiences
4. Understanding Professional Role
5. Practical Application

The program developed detailed definitions of each of these, which they call general learning objectives, as well as 33 sub-objectives, shown in Self Study Appendix Table 1.

- *Recommendation: use standardized assessment language, for example, program level student learning outcomes (rather than general student learning objectives)*

Table 1 shows the distribution of the 33 sub-objectives among the required elements in the curriculum (with the exception of the thesis). Table 1 also shows whether each sub-objective receives Primary (P) or Secondary (S) coverage in each course. There are 54 cells are labeled with a “P” and 66 cells labeled with an “S”.

- *Recommendation: The curriculum matrix can be used to demonstrate where the learning outcomes are “covered,” but only put a “P” in the cells where the learning outcome forms a major emphasis of the course and where students produce a substantial assignment that counts toward a large percentage of the course grade. In other words, only indicate with a “P” (or some other symbol) where the major learning outcomes are going to be **assessed** with direct evidence.*

Assessment Methods: The PPA program has used two major methods of assessment: one direct and one indirect. The direct method consists of a pre-post assignment that students complete at the beginning and at the end of their program of study. Students are asked to identify a current governmental issue and provide a briefing memo for a decision maker. The program uses a 12-category rubric to evaluate the students’ memos over the dimensions of critical thinking, integrative thinking, effective communication, professional role, and practical applications, which are the five program level learning outcomes. One concern is that some of the five program level learning outcomes have some of their sub-objectives listed on the rubric but not others, and some program level learning outcomes have no sub-objectives listed on the rubric; it is unclear why this inconsistency exists.

- *Recommendation: adopt a 5-category rubric that parallels the five program level learning outcomes.*

A second concern is that the instructions provided to the student are quite brief. This may lead to one of the 12 categories not being addressed by the student, e.g., “professional role.” The scoring instructions state that if a student has appropriately left out one of the 12 categories, the student should be assigned the maximum score of 3 for that category. This could introduce bias into the scoring.

- *The memo instructions to the student should include the five program level student learning outcomes; the rubric should only include those categories that are an essential component of this assignment, i.e., applicable to every student’s memo.*

The indirect method of assessment administers a survey to every student, in every course, every semester, asking whether the course learning outcomes were met on a scale of 1 to 5, with 5 being highest. The survey also asks for open-ended comments. PPA has tracked these surveys several years, and the results have been fairly consistent, and are probably highly correlated with the university’s standardized form. Course sections garnering a score below 3.8 are discussed at a faculty retreat. However, some course-level objectives have recently changed, making longitudinal tracking problematic.

- *Recommendation: With limited department resources, instead of the department survey, use the university standardized form for student evaluation of instruction, adding optional multiple-choice questions about the specific course learning outcomes and/or inviting student open-ended comments on the back of the evaluation form.*

Two more indirect methods of assessment were added recently: a student exit survey, and an alumni survey. However, these measures only provide opinion data.

- *Recommendation: The program should sample and evaluate student work from courses that directly reflects their learning on the major student learning outcomes, i.e., use more direct measures of assessment. These can be supplemented with occasional indirect measures.*

One concern with the alumni survey was that although 43 alumni responses were obtained, this represents only 1/7 of the total possible, leading to questions of whether this is a representative sample. A second concern is that responses were obtained from alumni spanning the past 6 years, but the number is too small for an analysis of responses by cohort (year began the program). No results were provided by other characteristics, such as sector of employment (private, public, non-profit) or by demographic categories. In sum, not too much emphasis should be placed on such retrospective surveys.

### **Required Element Three: Focused Inquiry**

The department conducted a focus groups in Spring 2012, asking them for feedback on their program level student learning outcomes. In response, the program revised their previous list of 5 and expanded it to 6 new outcomes. The old and new outcomes are shown below.

The program then went through the process of developing sub-objectives and creating a new curriculum matrix showing where the program level learning outcomes as well as the sub-objectives are covered in the curriculum. This time there were only 26 sub-objectives; however the number of boxes with a “P” increased to 63, and 80 boxes were labeled with an “S”. The department has again begun the process of



surveying every student in every course in every semester about whether the course-level learning outcomes were met (which is only an indirect measure of student learning).

Previous Outcomes	New Outcomes
1. Critical Thinking	1. Synthesize, analyze and offer solutions
2. Integrative Thinking	2. Integrate the knowledge and skills of multiple dimensions
5. Practical Application	3. Apply knowledge and skills in multiple settings
4. Understanding Professional Role	4. Recognize your professional role
	5. Recognize the role of public policy and administration in public governance
3. Effective Communication for Policy Audiences	6. Communicate publicly relevant topics to multiple audiences

- *Recommendation: As stated under Required Element Two, above, the department needs to pinpoint only the most important embedded student work that demonstrates their learning on each program level outcome, collect the evidence, analyze the evidence, and use it for program improvement. Direct measures can be supplemented with occasional indirect measures such as student or alumni surveys or employer focus groups.*
- *Recommendation: Develop a five-year assessment plan, focusing in depth each year on one of the program level student learning outcomes, gathering and analyzing evidence of student learning and using the results for program improvement.*

## CONCLUSION

The Department of Public Policy and Administration are well known and highly respected for their teaching, scholarship, and service. The MPPA is a rigorous degree that produces successful graduates who make an impact on the community. The Department collaborates with many other units and entities across campus as well as across the community.

The MPPA degree could be more visible, across campus as well as in the capitol region and across the state. There could be more of a presence in the “downtown” arena where the high quality thesis research of its graduates could be showcased for policy makers. The degree program is an under-appreciated gem, a green spot on the CSUS campus.

Finally, the Department does more with its few resources than most other programs. A lack of attention to the resource situation has resulted in considerable overload for the faculty who are still full-time in the department as well as for those who are on full-time administrative assignments outside it. A high quality program cannot exist indefinitely on over-commitment and under-compensation. Putting aside the question of who subsidizes whom, this is a highly competent and productive graduate program. The question for the administration is how to support it at the prudent and reasonable level it deserves.