NEW OPTIONS FOR THE PPA CULMINATING (CAPSTONE) EXPERIENCE

January 31, 2020

Effective Fall 2020, the Department of Public Policy and Administration (PPA) will replace the traditional thesis requirement with a set of culminating experience options. Students will have three options, each with a principal (primary) and supplemental element. The purpose of having principal and supplemental elements is to weave in the learning objectives from across the program, attuned to students' individual interests. The options are:

1. Developing a career-oriented portfolio;
2. Completing a project or policy report;
3. Drafting the equivalent of an academic journal article

Regardless of the option you choose, the *systematic study* that you will undertake to be prepared to complete one of the options (the main data collection, research, analysis, or applied work) is largely to be done prior to enrolling in PPA 500, based on your work on significant assignments or projects in the rest of the curriculum. See page 6 to see how the CSU defines systematic study.

The purpose of the new approach is threefold:

1. Offer alternatives to support diverse academic and professional objectives among our students, with greater emphasis on creating applied, career-relevant products. We received a written proposal for a comprehensive curriculum redesign from a group of students last summer. It noted that the thesis is a barrier to completion of the degree, especially for working professionals, and that not every student's degree goal is to prepare for academic scholarship. The proposal suggested that students identify their research topic and question in the first year and produce as much of the culminating project as possible in the coursework *prior* to PPA 500.
2. Improve the integration and synthesis of concepts and tools from across the PPA curriculum in the culminating experience. This will help enhance the value of the entire program for you by creating an intentional phase of reflection. Toolkits from the various courses might be useful for this phase of work.
3. Accelerate completion by reducing the overall workload of the culminating experience, shifting the systematic study portion of the work to earlier points in the curriculum, and accommodating the needs of working professional students by incorporating more work-relevant options.

Please note that changing the curriculum to fully align with this plan is a work in progress. We are trying to ensure that students who are currently enrolled have enough supports and information to complete the new options in the intended ways. Since the curricular reform will be occurring over the next 1-2 years, please ask questions of us if you hit a stumbling block when trying to use class assignments and projects to complete a culminating option.

Transition & Implementation

Relatively few students are anticipated to advance to candidacy and enroll in PPA 500 in Fall 2020. This offers us the opportunity to carefully and iteratively build out these three options in consultation with students, employers, alumni, and others. This document provides the basic structure and approach. Initial details, definitions, standards, and procedures will be developed as we learn, test, and collaborate over the coming months. We welcome your feedback.

Option	Principal Product	Systematic Study (to be completed prior to PPA 500)	Op-Ed	Prof Publication	Podcast	Brief	Oral Presentation	Synthesis
		Supplemental Product Alternatives						
1	Portfolio & synthetic policy/admin brief	≥ 3 artifacts from multiple courses						•
2	Applied project or policy report	Major artifact(s) from any PPA course (e.g. 207, 210, 220AB, 240AB, 272, 296M)	•	•	•	•	•	•
3	Draft article in the style of an academic journal	Major artifact(s) from any PPA course (e.g. 207, 240B)	•		•	•	•	

PPA 500 AND CULMINATING EXPERIENCE ADVISORS

Students will continue to enroll in PPA 500 (which will continue to be taught by a PPA faculty member) and continue to have a main and secondary culminating experience advisor. The table below summarizes the general pattern we expect students to use in choosing advisors. Note that in addition to the secondary readers mentioned in the table we will consider a second reader from the practitioner community on a case by case basis.

Typical Advisor/Reader for Each Option		
Option	Advisor	Secondary
	PPP 500 Instructor	Any faculty member
2	PPA 500 or original artifact instructor	Either original artifact or 500 instructor
3	Original artifact instructor	Any faculty member

In consultation with the advisor, the student prepares a project proposal. The proposal should be 1-2 pages in length and must include the option selected, a brief description of the topic or problem to be addressed, a basic outline, and the specific supplemental option you intend to complete. The prior assignment(s) which represent the *systematic study* must be attached or linked.

The advisor reviews the proposal and either returns it for revision or approves it. When approved, the advisor transmits the proposal to the department chair and the faculty member who will be the instructor of PPA 500. The PPA 500 instructor reviews the proposal to ensure its completeness, and if deemed acceptable, authorizes enrollment in PPA 500 if you have advanced to candidacy.

TRANSITION Q&A

1. **I applied for the MPPA program because I wanted to produce a traditional thesis. I'm confident I can complete it in one semester as part of PPA 500. Is this still possible?**

   The new Option 3 is a close cognate of the traditional thesis. Both involve a rigorous, in-depth academic study that pushes at the frontier of knowledge, and both are well-suited to students who may have interest in research, academic professions, or doctoral study. In this case, you would want to move your article toward publication in an academic journal. Current students who wish to pursue a traditional thesis may do so (this will no longer be an option for future entering classes), but we strongly recommend considering Option 3 with your advisor.

2. **I'm interested in Option 1. But the best work in my portfolio here doesn't neatly converge on a single topic. After all, I couldn't have planned for Option 1 when I chose my topics in coursework prior to 2020.**

   In future years, students will be expected to choose and shape their artifacts in order to contribute cohesively to the systematic study of a policy or administrative topic prior to submitting their PPA 500 proposal. If you're progressing to PPA 500 in 2020-21, you may need to revise or develop additional artifacts leading up to or during PPA 500.

3. **There is a lot here. Will this really make it much more feasible for me to finish it in a single semester?**

   Yes. All of the options significantly reduce the total amount of effort and time required to complete the culminating experience (Option 3 by producing a product that is significantly shorter than a typical thesis). First, you'll be adapting research, data, analysis, and/or applied work that you've already done as the main body of substantive work, rather than starting a big new project. Second, while you'll be demonstrating skills and competencies from across the curriculum in writing formats that can be more challenging than a thesis, the total amount of writing you'll be producing will shrink:

Comparison of Writing Expectations		
Option	Principal Product, page limit	Supplemental Product, page limit[*]
1	12	4 + 5 pg. prof. development plan
2	15	5
3	35	12
Old Thesis	50-100 (typically)	n/a
[*] *Illustrative only. Some supplemental alternatives are not written products.*		

CULMINATING PROJECT OPTION 1: DEVELOPING AN INTEGRATED CAREER-FOCUSED PPA PORTFOLIO

OVERVIEW

This document summarizes a new option for completing the PPA culminating experience requirement: developing a career-focused portfolio that documents evolving knowledge and competency related to a specific policy or administrative topic. This alternative may be especially appropriate for students who wish to refine and reflect on professional development goals and demonstrate knowledge, skills, and abilities to prospective employers.

GUIDELINES

Creating a PPA portfolio is a significant undertaking that will involve organized tracking of PPA coursework and relevant professional materials. You will need to identify a central public policy or administrative topic you wish to explore during the initial year of the program and begin to concentrate on this topic as you complete assignments in multiple PPA courses. Your academic work will be a major source of portfolio documents and you will need to complete a well-researched and compelling policy analysis on the topic you select. You will also need to develop, draw on, and/or refine key professional documents during your time in the program. These can come from current and prior work, internships, or public service activities. Finally, the PPA portfolio includes an element of reflection—you will be asked to assess your own professional development throughout the course of the program. You will have a chance to compile and refine your portfolio with periodic feedback in PPA 500, but you should pull together key course artifacts and professional documents prior to the start of PPA 500.

A completed PPA Portfolio must include the following components:

a) A title page with a title, your name, and year submitted

b) A table of contents that identifies the materials included in the portfolio

c) <u>A professional policy or administrative analysis (8-12 pages)</u> that applies a framework or structured set of lenses to define and explore—but not attempt to solve—a current problem or opportunity from multiple PPA perspectives (i.e., with attention to relevant politics, policy, economics/financial, administrative, and/or ethical considerations). Your finished analysis might look something like an abbreviated and more professionally crafted PPA 200 policy issue paper. The audience includes stakeholders and potential decisionmaker(s) who have limited experience with this particular topic or problem. The analysis should use an analytical and not advocacy-based frame and it might focus on the issue at any relevant level/in any sector (for example: state, regional, county, city, agency, division, department, public, private, or nonprofit). It can address a topic in public policy, administration, or both. It should include a concise summary of a particular issue (introduction and context) with an explanation of why this issue is important (the "so what?" question). It should outline some of the stakeholders and interests associated with this topic and explore some preliminary options and decision-making criteria without assessing or making recommendations. This analysis does NOT need to include original data

collection. It must, however, include evidence from reputable sources to support your descriptive analysis.

d) <u>At least three artifacts from multiple PPA courses</u> related to the systematic study of the policy or administrative topic you have elected to study. Examples of artifacts include cost-benefit analyses, stakeholder analyses, systematic literature reviews, relevant client project work (produced individually or with a team), interview or survey findings, CAM analyses, evidence-informed evaluations or plans, etc. If you completed artifacts that are not clearly associated with your policy or administrative topic during the course of the program, you may need to revise or develop additional artifacts leading up to or during PPA 500 to show how you would apply a particular theory or tool to better understand your topic.

e) <u>A 3-4 page reflective essay</u> in which you describe your professional growth during the PPA program with a focus on what you have learned about your primary topic of focus. Your reflective essay must clearly reflect how you apply theory to practice, if/how your perspectives on your topic have evolved throughout the course of the program, and if/how you anticipate continuing to explore this topic in your career or via other forms of service.

f) <u>A professional development plan</u> that includes a current resume, an example cover letter <u>or</u> professional bio statement/profile, and a brief description of professional development goals.

CULMINATING PROJECT OPTION 2: DEVELOPING AN APPLIED PROJECT OR POLICY REPORT

A second option is a policy report. The purpose of the policy report is to provide practical, clear, evidence-based analyses that will help a relevant audience(s) make a decision about an issue or problem. The audience is the decisionmaker(s) for the particular issue or problem. The report should be well-attuned to audience and should use an analytical and not advocacy-based frame. The policy report can address policy at any level/in any sector (for example: state, regional, county, city, agency, division, department, public, private, or nonprofit). It can address a policy issue in public policy, administration, or both. In that way, it can cross the historical divides of our discipline, but it does not need to. With regard to its structure, the policy report is a concise summary of a particular issue (introduction and context), it states why an issue is important (the "so what?" question), it explores options or alternatives to address the issue, it includes evidence and criteria used to make a determination about an optimal path(s) forward, and it ends with either recommendations or analyses of trade-offs and possible next steps. The report does not need to include original data collection and analyses of those data. It must include evidence from reputable sources that are relevant for your topic. Examples of such sources include the Legislative Analyst's Office, the Department of Finance, and the Public Policy Institute of California. Your use of sources does not need to be exhaustive, but it should cover the topic well (with at least 5-10 documents). Newspaper stories are acceptable, but the reference list must be more expansive than that and can include other policy reports and briefs, presentations from relevant entities, journal articles, books, chapters, and other similar sources. You should use the reference/endnote option and not citations in the text. Be sure to cite all evidence that you include and all references to others' writings.

It is important to be as concise and jargon-free as possible. The report can be no longer than 15 pages of text double spaced, including graphics and the reference list (excluding front/back pages and a table of contents). Your decisionmaker audience will not have time to wade through a long or complex report. Your analyses should be based on sound evidence, and you should focus on making meaning out of what you learned, not on describing the methods researchers used (decisionmakers are usually not interested in the methods). Graphical displays are not required, but should be considered, keeping in mind your topic and audience. It helps to have a catchy and pithy title that represents your content well and grabs your audience's attention, but catchiness and pithiness are not required. A title is required.

 A first draft of the policy report may be completed prior to enrollment in PPA 500 and it can be built off of a prior classroom assignment. During PPA 500, the instructor will support students in a) finalizing the draft and b) writing a short synthesis (fewer than 5 pages double spaced) that views the topic through the lenses stressed in the PPA program as applicable, such as economics, finance, and budgeting; politics; and organizational theory and administration. The instructor for 500 will be one of your readers; you can decide if the instructor is your first or second reader. You will need both.

Finally, you will follow all rules and deadlines the Office of Graduate Studies creates for theses and projects, including using the approved template, bringing it in for review/approval by that office, having your first and second reader sign your paperwork in time, and submitting it in time.

CULMINATING PROJECT OPTION 3: DEVELOPING A DRAFT JOURNAL ARTICLE

OVERVIEW

This portion of the document summarizes a new option for completing the PPA culminating experience requirement: developing a paper that potentially could be submitted to an academic journal. This alternative may be especially appropriate for students interested in positions oriented toward research and policy/administrative analysis, and/or who may be considering eventual pursuit of a doctoral degree.

GUIDELINES

The default approach for someone pursuing this option would be to revise a major assignment for a previous class (e.g. the final research paper for PPA 207, 220B, 240B, 272, etc.) to be suitable as an academic journal article. To pursue this culminating experience option, the student should secure the approval of the instructor of the course for which the assignment was completed. If the faculty member agrees the previous work has the potential for a journal article, that instructor will serve as the student's primary thesis advisor and the instructor of PPA 500 will serve as the secondary advisor (unless these are the same person in which case another PPA instructor will serve as secondary advisor).

The student's work in PPA 500 at the culminating experience stage would involve the following:

1. **Editing and tightening**. Articles for journal submission need to be very tightly argued and oriented toward advancing knowledge in the field. They also face strict length limitations: while there is some variance across outlets, academic articles generally need to be no more than about 25-35 double spaced pages including tables, figures, references, etc. Additionally, journal articles are designed for an audience that is presumably very familiar with appropriate methods and much of the appropriate literature. By contrast, our major assignments for the PPA program commonly aim to demonstrate general student competence in a variety of areas and are more permissive with respect to length. *Accordingly*, *a major part of pursuing this option would involve careful revisions designed to include only material appropriate for the article venue* and zeroing in on things academics care much about, such as intellectual contribution. In consultation with the primary advisor, the student should also pick a particular academic journal to target, in part to gain a better understanding of what venues are appropriate for different types of research.

2. **Going beyond prior work**. Since this option is to meet a culminating experience requirement, we care about students' ability to show that they can synthesize ideas and approaches across courses, appropriate to different audiences. Anyone pursuing this option therefore needs to demonstrate the ability to go beyond producing a tightly argued academic type article. We anticipate that students could fill this option in multiple ways including but not necessarily limited to the following:

a. <u>Drafting an op-ed</u>. This would involve developing an op-ed based on the research in the academic article that is potentially suitable for publication in a venue such as the *Los Angeles Times*, CalMatters, or "The Conversation." Such a piece would be about 700 words in length and focus especially on implications interesting to a broader public.

b. <u>Developing a policy brief</u>. This would entail a shorter summary of the work contained in the academic article that would be appropriate for a legislator or the like. It also might be similar to policy briefs developed by organizations such as the Public Policy Institute of California, Legislative Analyst's Office, etc.

c. <u>Making an oral presentation to faculty</u>. This would involve engaging in a discussion with the faculty in a way that can demonstrate a student can go beyond the material contained in the article, drawing on different aspects of the program. For example, if the article used analytical methods to determine a desirable approach to address a problem such as homeless, the discussion might involve whether the approach was politically feasible or capable of being implemented. The student would be expected to draw on ideas from PPA 210 and the public management series as well as the policy analysis classes.

EXPECTATIONS

Our expectation is that the students would be able to complete Option 1 and fulfill their culminating experience requirement in a single semester. The first required product would be the completion of the draft journal article that, in the judgment of two faculty readers, is of the quality that it could reasonably considered for publication in an academic journal (note that there is no requirement that it actually be submitted although that may be highly desirable). The second requirement is completion of a method of going beyond the article itself, per the prior section of this document. The student's advisor would have principal responsibility for determining if this latter requirement is fulfilled.

APPENDIX: UNIVERSITY CULMINATING EXPERIENCE REQUIREMENTS

California State University regulations require a culminating (capstone) experience for completion of a master's degree, with minimum standards. In the case of Public Policy & Administration, there are two overarching conceptual alternatives for the culminating experience:

> *A thesis is the written product of the systematic study of a significant problem. It clearly identifies the problem; states the major assumptions; explains the significance of the undertaking; sets forth the sources for, and methods of gathering information; analyzes the data; and offers a conclusion or recommendation. The finished product must evidence originality, critical and independent thinking, appropriate organization and format, clarity of purpose, and accurate and thorough documentation. Normally an oral defense of the thesis will be required.*

> *A project is a significant undertaking of a pursuit appropriate to the fine and applied arts or to professional fields. It must evidence originality and independent thinking, appropriate form and organization, and a rationale. It must be described and summarized in a written abstract that includes the project's significance, objectives, methodology, and a conclusion or recommendation. An oral defense of the project may be required.*