

Panel Proposal

Matching Competencies to Program Requirements: Approaches and Challenges in Accreditation

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Abstract

Accreditation is now a normal part of the MPA/MPP world, both in North America (NASPAA and CAPPAA) and in Europe (EAPAA). In recent years, accreditation bodies have made greater efforts to link curriculum with outcomes, and in particular, to map curriculum against competencies. NASPAA's approach is reflected in its five Domains of Universal Required Competencies (Standard 5.1).

Mapping programs to competencies makes a good deal of sense, but also raises a host of questions. What is a "competency" in the first place? What are the competencies that should be expected of graduates of MPA/MPP programs? How detailed should they be? How can they be demonstrated and verified? How can they be matched to program content that is arranged around subjects and topics, not competencies (at least not in the first instance)? What are the pedagogical implications?

Most of these questions have been addressed in some fashion by accrediting bodies, and this panel will not rehearse those findings. Instead, it will explore four fresh aspects of the issue.

1. Are there alternative ways to conceive of "competencies"? For example, to borrow Kahneman's language, the NASPAA standards clearly focus on System II competencies. Yet a good deal of evidence suggests that effective judgment often depends on System I competencies.
2. Are there ways to conceive of MPA programs at a more granular level – rather than "course subjects," the topics of which those courses consist? An 18-course program might in fact have hundreds of "topics." Analyzing programs in this fashion would permit much more precise mapping of competencies.
3. What is the impact of competency focus on pedagogy? If accreditation encourages a better mapping of content to competency, it implies that there will be more attention to teaching those competencies, but how?
4. How is competency based accreditation evolving outside of NASPAA? CAPPAA, as a sister organization, has been addressing these issues within its own jurisdiction.

Panel

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Papers:

Ian D. Clark (University of Toronto, Ontario, Canada), "Normed Topics: A Method for Adding Granularity to Required Competency Standards in MPP and MPA Programs"

Leslie A. Pal (Carleton University, Ontario, Canada), "MPA Competencies: Are We Assessing the Right Cognitive Abilities?"

Ken Rasmussen (University of Regina, Saskatchewan, Canada), "Be Careful for What You Wish For: What The Move Towards Competency-Based MPA Programs Means For How We Teach"

Michael Atkinson (University of Saskatchewan, Saskatchewan, Canada) and Kathy Brock (Queen's University, Ontario, Canada), "Accreditation and Competencies: The Canadian Experience"