Toward Becoming a Learning Organization: Outcomes Assessment, NASPAA Accreditation, and Mission-Based Capstone Courses

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ABSTRACT
This essay chronicles how a mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone course in the MPA program at the University of Baltimore was prompted by NASPAA’s accreditation focus and has put the MPA program on a path toward becoming a learning organization (Argyris, 1992; Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1999). Discussed is how the MPA program’s mission and design have evolved through systematically acquired feedback about the capstone course from faculty, students, and a NASPAA site visit team. The problems and pitfalls of trying to become a learning organization in this fashion are also reviewed.

Over the past 10 years, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) has required existing and aspiring Master of Public Affairs (MPA) and Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs nationally to perform mission-driven and outcomes-oriented assessments as part of the NASPAA accreditation process. As anyone who has participated in university, departmental, or program discussions on this topic can attest, however, these efforts have spawned a protean range of positive and negative reactions within the academy. They also have produced a variety of creative approaches to coping with the demands for accountability, none of which has had a lock on effectiveness.

To some, such a focus is eminently understandable, reasonable, and consonant with the tenor of the times. After all, citizens and their elected representatives increasingly hold public agencies to such a standard, and education for the public service takes place in public academic institutions. Why should they be exempt from similar demands? Moreover, many public administration academics put great effort into incorporating these concepts into their lectures and class exercises as they introduce students to the logic, tactics, and tools of priority-based, customer-focused, and results-oriented management in public agencies. Should they not be willing to apply the same concepts to their own work product? And does the application of an outcomes-oriented evaluative framework—despite its difficulties and the gaming of the evaluative system that can go on with it—not afford a “better evaluative conversation” than the one typically joined over inputs (e.g., dollars expended) and outputs (e.g., FTE-generated or number of graduates) unrelated to outcomes?

Others believe quite differently. Reminiscent of the concerns that many public managers and academics who are wary of outcomes-oriented management have expressed, some critics believe that results such as these are too difficult to track, too deferred to be meaningfully measured, and too problematic to ascribe to faculty and programs alone. Others view them, at best, as passing fads or nuisances to be tolerated—and, perhaps, finessed—and, at worst, as driving out or diminishing consideration of more appropriate program development concerns.
Elsewhere, I have argued that coping with outcomes assessment mandates need not be dreaded, done perfunctorily, or finessed (Durant, 1997). Rather, if approached creatively, these kinds of mandates can turn into exercises in program mission development, curriculum reform, departmental strategic planning, and faculty development. In the process, individual NASPAA programs can persistently and thoughtfully provide themselves answers to several important questions. The first is related to the relevance question that John Honey (1967) raised nearly 35 years ago: Is the MPA/MPPA education provided adequately meeting the nation’s evolving governance needs? The second question is more developmental and goal-oriented: What is the program’s mission and how well aligned is it with these evolving governance needs? The third is more instrumental: How well is the program realizing that mission and how might it improve its performance in doing so? To illustrate these points, I chronicled the early experience of the School of Public Affairs’ MPA program at the University of Baltimore (UB) during the 1993-1994 and 1994-1995 academic years as its faculty created and implemented a mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone course in response to NASPAA’s guidelines.

Capstone courses are, of course, common in NASPAA programs as a means for assessing the knowledge, skills, and abilities of students preparing to graduate. What was uncommon in this case, however, was that the UB capstone course was not only designed to assess students’ knowledge, skills, and abilities, but also to be a driver for strategic thinking about program development as a whole. Indeed, and perhaps uniquely, the UB capstone course was designed to replace the MPA program on a path toward becoming what popular consultants (e.g., Senge, 1990; Senge et al., 1999; Pande, Neuman, and Cavanagh, 2000) and scholars (e.g., Leavitt and March, 1988; Argyris and Schön, 1996; Argyris, 1999; Garvin, 1993) call a learning organization. These types of organizations develop mechanisms (also called enablers) for providing fast and accurate feedback on their performance (both overall and in terms of component parts). This information then informs critical reexaminations (or self assessments) of existing assumptions, ends, and means. Any changes made to these, in turn, become grist for similar feedback and modification in the future.

Applying this logic to the UB capstone course, faculty believed that they could use the information culled from it each semester—by and/or about students, faculty, stakeholders, and UB support services—to inform, make routine, and institutionalize a de facto strategic planning process for MPA program development. In doing so, the capstone could become a vehicle for faculty, students, and stakeholders to coproduce a learning organization, one animated by continuous critical self-reflection, assessment, and organizational renewal for the MPA program. The results of the deliberations about the first capstone course, and the initial feedback from the course, did not disappoint. These produced fundamental reassessments of what kind of student the program hoped to produce, how core courses could help develop such a student, and who would teach these courses, with what emphases, and bringing what pedagogical styles and techniques to bear.

How well has the UB capstone course since lived up to its initial promise? As this essay will chronicle, the capstone course has worked as designed, despite encountering many of the well-known obstacles to organizational learning that plague such efforts (see, for example, Argyris, 1999). In the process, the course’s focus, expectations, and aims have greatly evolved as a result of systematically collected feedback from faculty, students, and a NASPAA site visit team. This essay reviews how and why that evolution has taken place, how these changes have been linked to improving program design and mission, and what these dynamics suggest: about how MPA programs can use NASPAA’s mission-driven, outcomes-oriented accreditation approach in this fashion to become learning organizations. From this discussion, I cull broader lessons that others may find useful if weighing the advantages and disadvantages of taking a similar approach to organizational learning in their own programs.

Mission-Driven Curriculum Reform: Round One

The MPA program at the University of Baltimore was established in 1975. With an overwhelmingly
part-time student population of predominantly state and local government employees (82 percent) averaging 32 years of age, the program grew from 113 students in 1975 to a peak of more than 250 students in 1980. Over the past four years, enrollments have ranged between 130-170 students. The sociodemographic, educational, and experiential characteristics of the MPA student body are diverse. Statistics for the beginning of the 2000-2001 academic year show enrollments of female students at 55 percent, African-American students at 41 percent, and international students at 6 percent. Most students are street-level, supervisory, or mid-level career bureaucrats, although currently enrolled and graduated students include county executives, health professionals, nonprofit program administrators, and other high-level government managers. Most of the 11 core faculty teaching in the MPA program are also involved in significant applied research and training for state and local governments in Maryland by virtue of their affiliation with the School of Public Affairs' Schaefer Center for Public Policy.

Responding to NASPAA's charge, as well as to legislative pressures within the State of Maryland for greater accountability in the university system, the MPA faculty sought in 1993 and 1994 to develop a mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone course. (See Durant, 1997, for an in-depth discussion of this effort.) As noted, however, proponents did not envision the capstone course as merely an instrument for evaluating student mastery of the knowledge, skills, and abilities acquired in the program. Rather, as summarized in Table 1, the capstone course was consciously crafted to advance the principles of learning organizations enunciated in the literature.

First, out of the deliberative process of crafting such a capstone course (Durant, 1997), proponents hoped to create a more clearly defined mission for the MPA program. They wished to see that mission reflect the knowledge, skills, abilities, and values necessary for success in an evolving public sector as well as the core competencies of the faculty. Thus, and in contrast to conventional approaches that link

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**Table 1. Applying “Learning Organization” Principles to the Capstone Course**

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<td>Three-person faculty review team; sharing of faculty workload</td>
<td>Discuss strengths, weaknesses, and needs in general faculty meetings</td>
<td>Students demonstrate KSAVs by integrating rather than compartmentalizing them; measurement of whole and component parts for continuous process improvement</td>
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<th>Principle: Gain a holistic sense of purpose</th>
<th>Principle: See mission as evolving</th>
<th>Principle: Experiment and learn</th>
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<td>Mission statement reflecting the critical environmental challenges facing PA and the core competencies of faculty</td>
<td>Use feedback from capstone to refine mission over the years (e.g., student performance, surveys, projects)</td>
<td>Take different approaches to capstone in order to “learn what to prefer” in program development</td>
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the capstone to a previously developed mission statement, proponents saw the process of creating the capstone course as a means for developing the UB mission statement as it applied to program development. They saw the capstone, as well, as a vehicle for helping to redefine that mission as feedback from the in-service students taking it and the faculty members facilitating it came in over the years. The result of the first steps in this process, as articulated in the mission statement of the MPA program’s 1997 NASPAA report, is presented in Table 2.

Second, and consonant with the performance measurement tenets of organizational learning, proponents wanted to require students to demonstrate their ability to apply skills, knowledge, and values acquired in the MPA program to real-life, case-based, and/or simulated situations. Included among the more traditional subject matter skills for assessment were those involving technology utilization, teamwork, and oral and written presentation skills. At the same time, proponents wanted to ensure that any capstone exercise designed would require students to integrate, rather than compartmentalize, these skills, knowledge, and value bases. A majority of the faculty felt that the historical exit experience for students—the MPA written exam—did not do any of these things very well.

Third, and consistent with organizational learning principles about transparency and open sharing of information, proponents also sought to use the information generated from the capstone course as a diagnostic tool for continuous mission and process improvements. The course would provide continual feedback that would prompt routine faculty discus-

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<th>Table 2. 1997 Mission Statement, UB MPA Program (Adopted Spring 1995)</th>
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| The MPA program at the University of Baltimore is dedicated to providing pre-service and in-service students with the substantive knowledge, skills, and values needed for effective public administration in the 1990s and beyond. In this challenging era, we feel that graduates of our program should be able to apply and persuasively communicate to citizens and elected officials a sense of public interest-oriented expertise geared toward solving management and public policy problems. We feel that they should be able to do so in ethically grounded, politically strategic, and customer-sensitive ways that can help inform, shape, and serve evolving national, state, and local priorities. Finally, we feel that they must also be able to reflect critically upon the role of public administration in a democratic society, upon the roles that they and their organizations play in running our Constitution, and upon the civic educational roles and responsibilities open to them as public servants.

We believe that the emergence of such trends as third-party government, cutback management, and technological innovation require a fundamental rethinking of the duties, obligations, roles and skills of contemporary public administrators. As such, we feel that students must understand the forces propelling these changes, demonstrate their ability to apply effectively the latest management tools associated with these trends, and critically evaluate the strengths and weaknesses of these techniques. We also believe, however, that fully appreciating and critically evaluating these trends, techniques, and philosophies can only come if students are well-grounded in the historical development, tools, and values of public administration, its subfields, and its leading scholars and practitioners.

To these ends, we feel that our students should be able to demonstrate their mastery of six general sets of literacies before leaving the UB program: organizational and interorganizational dynamics, policy and management decision-analytic, political, legal-ethical, communication, and historical. They are given opportunities to demonstrate this mastery in three ways: (1) in individual core courses; (2) in courses dealing with areas of specialization tailored to student interests; and (3) in a problem-solving, mission-driven, and outcome-based capstone course that requires them to integrate knowledge, skills, and values culled from the MPA core curriculum in an agency-based simulation exercise graded by a three-person faculty review committee.

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sion in an open forum each semester about the MPA program's strengths, weaknesses, and needs. Proponents believed that the capstone course would keep the MPA program's espoused mission and its six sets of core literacies (organizational and interorganizational dynamics, policy and management decision-analytic, political, legal-ethical, communication, and historical) prominent in the minds of faculty.

Proponents also felt that the transparency that a mission-driven capstone course would provide semester by semester was essential for curriculum development along the lines NASPAA had suggested. More precisely, they believed that feedback from the course would ensure that agreed-upon topics and skills were covered in individual courses and that it would advance a continual process improvement ethic in faculty members and help inform program thinking about future faculty and resource needs. Thus, rather than episodically engaging the faculty in high-profile, labor-intensive, and time-consuming strategic planning exercises, proponents saw the capstone course as making such a process routine in manageable, low-profile increments that would be less burdensome to faculty members.

Fourth, and related to the creation of incentives for gaining the commitment of participants to organizational learning, proponents hypothesized that the capstone course would enhance faculty ownership of the total curriculum rather than just the courses each member taught within it. Three components of the capstone course were designed to advance this purpose. First, the course afforded students an open-ended opportunity to evaluate in writing the entire MPA program as well as the capstone experience itself. Second, it initially involved a broad base of faculty each semester as members of a three-person faculty review board serving as a panel of judges reviewing the quality of student oral presentations. Third, faculty also were on call to serve as refresher lecturers and technical advisors should problems arise in their areas of expertise.

Over the UB capstone course's existence, all core faculty either have coordinated, served as members of three-person faculty review boards, or made presentations in class. Table 3 illustrates various analytical foci and class assignments pursued by different faculty members over the years, the kinds of problems identified in the process, and different kinds of initiatives undertaken to correct them. Despite these differences in focus and approach, however, everyone who coordinated the class stressed that they were facilitators or coaches and that the course was not predicated solely on passive learning conveyed through weekly lectures. Rather, all stressed that the capstone was an active learning experience in which students working individually and in groups applied core course concepts, frameworks, substantive knowledge, and skills to particular problems.

At the same time, all coordinators made it clear that literacies afforded in the core might be further elaborated and extended in the capstone course to add value to what students already knew from prior coursework. Facilitators also stressed that they must see—and respond critically to—drafts of both group and individual projects. In this role, facilitators told students that they were gatekeepers in determining whether the quality of work was ready to defend orally (substantively, analytically, grammatically, and stylistically). In most instances, faculty coordinators found that two—and sometimes three—drafts were needed to get student work into the defensible category.

As for the general format of the group-based exercises, three primary approaches were taken (applied often in various combinations): (1) faculty-developed problems or exercises, (2) case studies, and (3) client-based service learning projects. In the first two approaches, course facilitators either asked colleagues teaching courses in three general cluster areas—public administration and democracy, public management, and policy analysis—to submit problems or cases or to react to problems they designed. The key question asked in both cases was this: Can students who have taken courses in your cluster reasonably be expected to address these problems—i.e., have they been taught the skills, knowledge, and values needed to address them? In terms of client-based field projects, the facilitators worked directly with agencies to identify real life problems and projects that students could address based on their core coursework—for example, reengineering administra-
Table 3  Evolution of the UB Capstone Course as a Vehicle for Organizational Learning: A Sample of Capstone Foci, Assignments, Feedback, and Program Responses

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<td>Reinventing the EPA/Environmental Justice</td>
<td>Assessing the Impact of Welfare Reform</td>
<td>Develop and defend personal philosophy of public management.</td>
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<td>(Note: See Duranc, 1997, for an extensive review of foci, assignments, lessons, and responses)</td>
<td>Metropolitan Regional Planning Exercise</td>
<td>Transition to Managing for Results (MFR) focus consistent with School of Public Affairs core competency and mission statement.</td>
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<td>Group project assessed statistically whether federal environmental expenditures between 1983-1991 were allocated in a discriminatory manner.</td>
<td>Administrative Systems Analysis of Department of Human Resources and Department of Corrections</td>
<td>All courses use analytical frameworks afforded by instructor to inform projects (e.g., Hass, Rosenbloom, Bardach, Wamsley, Zald, etc.).</td>
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<td>Based on this analysis, students justified the existence, shutting down, or &quot;reinvention&quot; of EPA's Office of Environmental Justice (OEJ) in the face of congressional efforts to eliminate it.</td>
<td>Case Study Exercises Relevant to Various Administrative Problems</td>
<td>Welfare Reform Example. Groups updated and retested Charles Murray's Losing Ground model with data from 1981 to 1996. Each group replicated trend analyses to see if similar patterns held that Murray found.</td>
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<td>Students presented and defended their analysis before 3-person faculty review board.</td>
<td>Ecosystem Performance Measurement Exercise</td>
<td>The group report critiqued the underlying assumptions of Murray’s model (including substantive assumptions, misspecification, and underspecification), and the methodological problems more generally of pretest-posttest trend analysis.</td>
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<td>Students also responded individually in memoranda to three management problems affecting OEJ: do an organizational capacity assessment; respond to different decentralization proposals; and develop a budget for OEJ after a ten percent cut in funds for OEJ.</td>
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<td>The group then built and tested a more robust and statistically sophisticated model incorporating cultural and structural variables (William Julius Wilson’s model culled from When Work Disappears).</td>
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<td>Based on their analyses, the group presented and defended policy and administrative reform recommendations in front of 3-person faculty board.</td>
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<td>First iteration of changes: Each student wrote, presented, and orally defended a series of 3- to 5-page papers on their individual management philosophy. The paper included (1) a statement of personal philosophy, (2) the theoretical and empirical foundations of that philosophy, and (3) the application of that philosophy to their agency/policy of interest.</td>
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<td>Second iteration as transition to MFR begins: Students worked in groups and individually with a specific reform initiative from any of four sets of generic recommendations issued in President Bush’s 2001 Management Agenda. These included Management and Performance Improvement, Information Technology and E-Government, Civil Service Reform and Human Resources, and Procurement and Contracting. Each analysis addressed four questions: (1) What progress has been made over the past 10 years to improve the way government programs address this issue? (2) What challenges remain to be addressed before additional progress can be made on this issue and why do they exist? (3) If you could make one recommendation for future action based on your analysis, what would it be? (4) What are the likely obstacles and facilitating factors you would expect to encounter as you tried to implement your recommendation?</td>
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<td>Illustrative Feedback</td>
<td>Some students complained that capstone was too &quot;academically&quot; focused; students wanted more &quot;real world&quot; applications.</td>
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<td>Programmatic shortcomings identified by faculty included:</td>
<td>Students needed more structured analytical frameworks to enhance their ability to do organizational diagnoses.</td>
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<td>• non-value-added overlap in some core courses;</td>
<td>Students complained that the labor-intensive nature of the original data-gathering and analysis enterprise was too demanding for in-service students working full time.</td>
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<td>• inconsistencies in course content;</td>
<td>Students complained about the &quot;transaction costs&quot; of coordinating the efforts and gaining commitment of some students (some free-rider problems).</td>
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<td>• need for more computer-based exercises across courses;</td>
<td>Faculty decided it needed to &quot;rethink&quot; the aims of the curriculum and the capstone course in light of its large in-service student body.</td>
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<td>• need to improve library data-based skills;</td>
<td>Faculty noted some evidence of grade inflation and strategic course-taking by students (after inspection of student transcripts).</td>
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<td>• need for more logical understanding of statistical analysis as it applies to managerial situations;</td>
<td>NASPAA site visit team observed that the capstone course left a minority of students frustrated with program. Some felt standards were too high, while others felt that they were ill-prepared from course work to handle capstone assignments.</td>
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<td>• weak diagnostic abilities among some students;</td>
<td>Faculty found too many students having difficulty in articulating and defending a personal management philosophy.</td>
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<td>• need for remedial writing courses for some students, and general improvement in writing skills for many more;</td>
<td>Some students demonstrated difficulty in integrating full range of journal research articles into their projects.</td>
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<td>• free-rider problems identified in some groups;</td>
<td>Faculty found that writing problems still existed among small cohort of students.</td>
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<td>• entitlement (rather than merit) ethic present among some students;</td>
<td>Some students argued that there was no discernible and coherent philosophy to the MPA core curriculum itself. Faculty disagreed. They diagnosed the problems as students failing to see how the course work interrelates, as well as why they are taking what they are taking.</td>
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<td>• Information Technology (IT) as missing component of curriculum, yet key component of new public management (NPM);</td>
<td>Other students said that philosophy of mission statement was definitely there, but that faculty could do a better job of relating course content to the mission statement as it relates to changes in public service paradigms. If all faculty did this, program philosophy and course integration would be more easily discernible.</td>
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<tr>
<th>Illustrative Program Responses</th>
<th>Faculty reframed ends of MPA program to include having the overwhelmingly in-service student body leave the program as critical self-reflective practitioners.</th>
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<td>Hiring IT faculty person and adding IT as core course given heightened importance in making public organizations priority-based and information-centered</td>
<td>This required students to have a well thought out philosophy of public management that they could defend by the end of the program. This did not mean that KSA evaluation would be dropped, only approached with different analytical exercises.</td>
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<td>To free up course hours to expand/reframe course offerings, faculty did the following:</td>
<td>Consistent with NASPAA mission statement, as well as with faculty KSA's, &quot;Managing for Results&quot; was explicitly identified as the core competency of the MPA faculty and of the program.</td>
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<td>• combined administrative law and ethics courses into one course (Legal and Ethical Studies);</td>
<td>Faculty created series of professional development seminars that explicitly focused on MFR as the integrating concept for the MPA curriculum. First forum had Schoeller Center faculty engaged in Maryland MFR consulting make presentations. They reviewed the specifics of MFR and how the courses in the MPA curriculum directly relate to preparing students to work</td>
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<td>• combined policy analysis and evaluation into one course (Analytical Techniques in PA);</td>
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Initiatives addressing course content and student deficiencies included:
- requiring more computer-based exercises in courses;
- shift from statistical course grounded in calculation to course emphasizing logic and application to public management issues (Statistical Applications in PA);
- discussion of GRE as requirement for admission and other diagnostic tools;
- decision to incorporate some "service learning" aspects into capstone course.

Review of course content began as it relates to mission-driven capstone requirements.

Consensus was that faculty needed to do more in terms of having students apply what they learn to concrete cases throughout the program.

Discussions over relative weight of "computational" versus "logic" approach to statistics course continued.

Consensus on need to supplement "politics" of budgeting emphasis with more "hands on" analytical techniques of budgeting. Decision made to propose hiring of junior faculty member, position for "distinguished practitioner in residence," or practitioner adjunct with these skills. [Two contracted adjuncts hired for 2002-2003 academic year].

Entering students to be told during a newly designed MPA orientation that they will be expected not only to master KSAs, but also to develop, refine, and defend a philosophy of management in the capstone course related to New Public Management initiatives in government.

Faculty decided to incorporate written and statistical exercises for diagnostic and counseling purposes in a day-long MPA orientation.

Faculty agreed to "Two-C" rule—no student may graduate with more than two Cs on record—to address course "shopping" problem.

effectively within this new environment.

Faculty continued transition of the capstone course into a full-fledged exercise in MFR. Elements in the second transitional course included developing a strategy for successfully implementing any one of President Bush's management reform proposals in the student's agency.

The project included:
- developing a communications strategy for "selling change" to internal and external stakeholders;
- identifying obstacles and facilitating factors and developing a strategy for overcoming using them to carry out reform;
- developing a series of performance measures for measuring the success of the reform selected.
tive processes and metropolitan growth management. In an effort to link theory with practice, facilitators had students reflect in class and in writing how their readings helped them understand or were applicable to their projects.7

As anticipated, faculty deliberations in developing the capstone, as well as systematically collected feedback from the 1994-1995 capstone courses, identified a variety of student and programmatic strengths and weaknesses. Many, although not all, of the weaknesses were subsequently addressed. These included curriculum reform premised on eliminating redundancies in order to make room for new courses and emphases, the identification of the need for hiring at least one faculty member in the information technology (IT) area, and the use of more computer-based and group exercises throughout the curriculum.

"What's All That Screaming About?"
Or, Revisiting the Capstone: Round Two

Although reviews of information garnered from the capstone occurred annually, the mission and program-related lessons that the faculty culled from students, each other, and a NASPAA review team were collated and reviewed en masse in 1999. As Table 3 suggests, four analytically distinct categories of issues emerged from this process. First, because of unevenness in grading and course content, as well as the long three- to five-year matriculation of the overwhelming majority of in-service students in the MPA program, students simply did not come to the capstone with the same level of skills, knowledge, and abilities that was necessary for the original model to work as designed. Second, basic writing skills were too often sub-par. Third, and directly contrary to the hypothesis of capstone proponents, the onus for grading students more rigorously—i.e., the bad guy factor—shifted to faculty teaching the capstone. Finally, the rigor of the capstone course, combined with its focus on group projects, had the students screaming foul. Most notable among their complaints was that the labor-intensive nature of the enterprise along with some free-riding by colleagues was too demanding for serious students working full time.

With these concerns in mind, in the fall of 2000 the faculty revisited the issue of whether or not to continue the capstone course. Should the capstone be dropped? Was there something about the nature of a largely in-service student population that made the existing format of the capstone too onerous for in-service students? Were there ways to modify the capstone experience to address the concerns that had accumulated since its inception, while still allowing a faculty-driven exit experience that tested the knowledge, skills, and abilities the program had committed to provide its students in its original NASPAA mission statement?

This discussion inevitably led the faculty to wonder if the MPA degree should serve different purposes for in-service versus pre-service students. With 82 percent of its MPA students already employed in agencies, the program’s mission clearly was not preparing students for their first jobs in government. Rather, the program was preparing students to advance to positions of greater responsibility. To be sure, the aims of the MPA program’s original mission statement remained as salient as ever for pre-service and in-service students alike. As such, the program recommitted itself at this point to affording all students the latest thinking about traditional issues in public administration and to adding value to what in-service specialists knew in their field. But faculty also believed that they could add value to the education of busy and upwardly mobile in-service students by helping them become self-reflective practitioners with a well thought out philosophy of public management.

With this end in mind, the faculty’s evolving understanding of the MPA program’s mission meant adding the following emphasis to its mission statement:

Students graduating from the UB MPA program should leave it having developed their own philosophy (or way of thinking) about and doing public administration/public management. They ought to be able to articulate that philosophy, marshal evidence to support it (both from the literature and from empirical research), defend it publicly, and show its applicability to their own agency.

In terms of the capstone per se, the faculty felt that if students had not developed a philosophy before taking it, the capstone would be their last
chance to do so. Moreover, they would benefit at the same time from listening to their colleagues articulate, support and defend, and apply their philosophy.

What was meant by a philosophy of management? Students, faculty felt, should have coherent normative, assumptive, and instrumental ways of thinking about and approaching different challenges that public managers face daily. Broad categories of management philosophies include, but are not limited to, the following: (1) a philosophy of leadership—in new agencies, in established agencies, etc.; (2) a philosophy of resource acquisition, allocation, and forecasting—e.g., human resources, budgets, strategic information resource management; (3) a philosophy of organizational change; (4) a philosophy of cutback management; (5) a philosophy of partnering with other private and nonprofit organizations; (6) a philosophy toward rationality-based analytical techniques; (7) a philosophy toward dealing with external stakeholders; and (8) a philosophy of turning public organizations into priority-based, cost-effective, learning organizations.

Within these broad categories, students might stake out a variety of particular positions and defend them. For example, a student might argue that “outcomes-oriented management is not worth the time and effort that goes into it.” Alternatively, they might argue that “the major accomplishments of most organizations come down to the efforts of individuals, not teams,” that “public entrepreneurship is the essence of budget acquisition,” or that “reinventing government in public agencies requires simultaneously reinventing the legislative bodies that oversee them.” The possibilities, of course, are endless.

Several steps were taken in the 2000-2001 academic year to begin implementing this shift in capstone focus. First, entering students were told during a newly designed MPA orientation what would be expected of them in the capstone. Hypothetically, this should get students thinking about developing a philosophy of public management early in their matriculation in the program and as they approach and evaluate the utility of their coursework. This also affords an additional dimension to faculty accountability as students evaluate individual classes that they take. Second, a portion of the new orientation was dedicated to exercises through which writing problems could be identified early; the university provided remedial aid. Finally, one major component of the revamped capstone required students to write and orally defend a 25- to 30-page paper using the following format: statement of management philosophy; theoretical foundation of that philosophy; obstacles to realizing it in public agencies; and application of the philosophy to their agency or policy interest.

BACK TO THE FUTURE? ROUND THREE

After only two iterations of the revised capstone course during the spring 2001 semester—one on campus and one off campus—feedback from the faculty members who facilitated the course and the 30-plus students involved suggested the need to revisit several key aspects of the MPA program. First, and perhaps unsurprisingly because the program had not emphasized this point in the past, students did not come to the capstone course with anything approximating a philosophy of management. Moreover, many struggled throughout the semester to understand what was meant by this term, with several reporting that it did not click with them until the last four weeks of the semester. Second, and most ironically, it also became clear that students did not see the MPA program itself as having a coherent philosophy of its own. Third, and related, students were still compartmentalizing their core coursework, not seeing it as an integrated whole with common themes related to the enduring questions of public administration in a democracy—an emphasis in the MPA program's initial mission statement.

Interestingly, the seeds of a potential solution to these findings came out of the capstone itself. As mentioned, the School of Public Affairs has close ties to the Schaefer Center for Public Policy. Indeed, most of the MPA faculty at UB are affiliated with the Schaefer Center and participate as instructors in the Maryland Governor’s Managing for Results (MFR) training program, through which more than 900 state employees to date have learned the basics of becoming results-oriented managers. As such, the two entities (i.e., the School of Public Affairs and the Schaefer Center) comprise a virtually seamless organization, with much of the faculty hiring over the
past five years pursued with both the academic needs of the MPA program and the public service needs of the Schaefer Center in mind.

In the spring of 2001, the two faculty facilitators of the capstone course incorporated visits from other faculty who were instrumental in designing or delivering the Governor’s MFR program. One such session was dedicated to the logic and execution of outcomes-based performance measurement. In this presentation, the visiting faculty member showed how each of the courses in the core MPA curriculum contributed to better understanding the promise versus the performance of MFR programs in public organizations.

Students in the class reacted quite positively to the presentation, stating that they saw for the first time how the core courses were an integrated whole when articulated within the context of MFR. Listening to this feedback, the faculty facilitators saw the potential of using MFR as a conceptual framework for providing philosophical coherence to the program. The MFR construct was easily understandable by in-service students in the program, took advantage of what had become over the years the core competency of the faculty, and succinctly summarized and incorporated the disparate components of the program’s evolving MPA mission statement.

Thus, aside from revising the mission statement to incorporate the MFR construct, the 2002-2003 academic year will again see the program offer an MPA orientation geared explicitly around MFR and how the program components relate to it. The capstone course itself is also making the transition into a full-blown MFR exercise. Bridging students’ philosophies about various components of MFR into a coherent whole, the fall 2001 capstone was dedicated toward assessing President Bush’s Management Reform Agenda on normative, assumptive, and instrumental grounds. The spring 2002 capstone, in turn, has been organized around developing a coherent strategy for implementing an MFR initiative in the student’s agency.

**Lessons for MPA Program Administrators**

One question, of course, is whether the advantages outweigh the costs involved in offering mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone experiences to MPA/MPPA students in order to advance NASPAA’s program development aims. On balance, the UB program has decided so far that the benefits have outweighed the costs. However, as noted earlier, the program has had to move aggressively (and sometimes unsuccessfully) on several fronts to attenuate some of the capstone course’s downsides in order to favor continuing it. Thus, others entertaining a capstone course like UB’s, which is designed to routinize organizational learning, must understand, weigh, and accommodate both the advantages and considerable challenges facing MPA programs trying to deliver such an exit experience to their students.8

**Mission-Driven Capstone Courses Can Foster Learning-Based Program Development**

Evidence garnered over the years suggests that UB’s answer to NASPAA’s program development aims—a mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone course—has done largely what proponents expected of it. The capstone has, indeed, gotten faculty and students to think in terms of course, topical, and curricular integration; provided continuous feedback on program strengths and weaknesses; and afforded information to guide strategic planning for new courses, faculty hiring, and curriculum revision (again, see Durant, 1997).

Diagnostically, the course has identified many things that the program is doing right, as well as issues and concerns requiring attention. Initially, for example, some students had considerable difficulty with certain knowledge, skills, and abilities deemed critical for public managers (see, for example, Van Wart, Cayce, and Cook, 1993, for a comprehensive listing of these elements).

Among these were
- dealing with ambiguity;
- applying what they had learned from the literature across all courses to concrete situations;
- defining problems and thinking in terms of cause-effect relationships when it came to public policy and public management strategies;
- understanding and applying statistical analysis and program evaluation to public administration and policy problems.
In addition, capstone coordinators were able over the years to identify various programmatic concerns for discussion and remedial efforts by the full faculty:

- student frustration over inadequate computer, team-building, and presentation skills and training throughout their coursework;
- the need for more writing in class generally and for remedial writing in particular cases;
- ascertaining whether time demands meant that the capstone course would work better for pre-service students than for in-service students;
- worries that not enough attention was paid in coursework to recent innovations in public management or to the key role of information resource management in agency priority-setting and results measurement.

Premised partially on feedback from the capstone course since its inception, the MPA program has successfully addressed many of the concerns facing it. For example, the program added two new courses—Innovations in Public Management and Information Resource Management—and eliminated or consolidated others to make room for them. Likewise, it revised the content of its statistics course to emphasize more logic of application rather than solely computation. Meanwhile, some faculty began emphasizing "policy (and program) as hypotheses" approaches in their courses. Others began stressing such things as problem formulation, writing assignments involving literature reviews, and more computer-based or team-premised class exercises. Finally, as part of its strategic planning, the department began recognizing its recruiting needs in various areas (especially in the instructional technology, public budgeting and finance, and policy analysis areas); identified its strengths in other areas; and rethought the relationship between in-service student needs, faculty core competencies, and program mission.

Understand the Resource-Intensive Nature of the Process

As readers have no doubt discerned, however, a mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone course like UB's can be a resource-intensive enterprise. Indeed, UB's experience suggests that both client-based (service learning) and faculty-based capstone courses are labor-intensive for facilitators. A mission-driven capstone course can involve heavy investments in reviewing and reacting to individual and group projects in multiple drafts. Similarly taxing are arranging for faculty visits for reviews when necessary; coordinating the paper flow to, and the convening of, faculty review teams; and developing and implementing unexpected twists in scenarios if simulations are involved. For example, in the capstone's early years, the UB program found that refresher lectures on statistical techniques, computer and software uses, and building data sets were almost de rigueur each semester. Likewise, if the course is team-taught, as all but one at UB have been because of labor intensiveess due to size of classes, a considerable amount of effort also goes into coordinating the facilitators' work. For example, students need and expect timely feedback on their papers, so the mere logistics of getting papers back and forth between course facilitators in timely ways can be quite trying. Finally, when field-based capstone course was used, considerable effort went into matching and coordinating student schedules and project timetables with agency needs and expectations.

Expect Emotions to Run High

Perhaps less obvious is the time that facilitators may need to deal with student emotions, intra-group scheduling conflicts, and intra-group personality conflicts. At UB, facilitators experienced, and NASPAA site visitors warned of, a high level of anxiety and sometimes anger among students taking the capstone course in its early years. Moreover, while students wanted feedback on their work product as drafts emerged, some became quite frustrated—and emotional—when they did not get the positive feedback they anticipated in a timely way. Many students tended to see the need for revisions of their work as a questioning of their abilities, as repeated rebukes, or as indications of program (not personal) shortcomings. Unless directly addressed, these beliefs can sour some graduates on their total experience in the program. Should this happen, some of the best recruiters for program-mpa graduates—may be lost.
Toward Becoming a Learning Organization

Telegraph Expectations Early to Students

The above discussion underscores the need for the logic and performance expectations of mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone courses to be conveyed as early as possible in an MPA program. Preferably, both of these things should occur in the MPA orientation for new students. Those who do not understand that revisions of work product are standard in the capstone course may see them as personally punitive and rebel accordingly. By the same token, students who expect that they will not be asked to do things in the capstone course that they have not been taught in MPA core courses may believe that a psychological contract unfairly has been broken should facilitators introduce new material. Thus, to the extent that facilitators intend to add value to core courses and assess student performance on them, these expectations also must be made clear to students as early as possible in their programs. Moreover, even if facilitators do not intend to do this, students must have repeated opportunities throughout the core courses to engage in the same kinds of problem-solving challenges that they will encounter in the capstone course.

Model the Desired Behavior Throughout the Curriculum

A mission-driven capstone course has—or should have—ripple effects throughout an entire curriculum. For example, mathematically based statistics courses bereft of exercises showing their logic and application to a focus on managing for results can inadequately prepare students for capstone courses premised on MFR. Asking students to work in teams in capstone courses also is problematic unless they have had opportunities to do so previously in core coursework. Likewise, having students only do literature reviews of organization theory and bureaucratic politics topics ill prepares them for a mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone course premised on applying concepts learned to concrete situations. Moreover, asking students to integrate what they have learned from core courses when faculty have not asked them to think in this fashion previously (or worse, have not done so themselves) is a prescription for student frustration, failure, and ire.

Be Serious about Consequences

Armed with an appreciation for the kinds of negative feedback that a mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone course can furnish, it is important for visible consequences to flow from this information. Department heads or program directors unprepared or squeamish about airing and doing something about any problems uncovered probably are better off not beginning the process at all. Once students decide that the feedback they give in class or in open-ended program evaluations is for naught, they can grow cynical about the process, tell their colleagues, and become more circumspect about giving feedback in the future. Meanwhile, course facilitators who fail to see changes stem from the information the course generates can grow equally cynical, may relax their efforts and rigor, or may refuse to participate in the future. Finally, under-performing faculty may quickly decide that they can continue doing so with impunity, despite the rhetoric of the program's mission-driven and outcomes-oriented philosophy.

Faculty Expectations Must Be Realistic

Experiences with performances in capstone courses in other universities indicate that students can have great difficulty applying what they have learned in classes to concrete projects. Faculty must keep this in mind and understand that much of the work of facilitating the course will involve dealing with these shortcomings. At UB, for example, it quickly became apparent that refresher work often was needed for some students simply because of the long matriculation times (three to five years) of many of the program's in-service student body. Moreover, if different faculty members have taught core courses during the students' years of study in the program, refresher and value-added approaches may be unavoidable. The rub, of course, lies in the negative emotions that the reporting of this situation by facilitators can kindle among faculty. Some faculty members may get defensive—or worse—when these developments are reported to them because they perceive that their teaching is being questioned. Of course, there are situations in which teaching failures by individuals must be acknowledged and root-
ed out—no matter how hurt the feelings of the faculty member involved. Other less egregious, but nonetheless serious, problems can be handled more astutely by warning colleagues ahead of time that the capstone may reveal them, that they are generic to MPA programs, and that if discovered, they merit programmatic attention rather than personnel or professional rebuke. Indeed, these types of problems can serve as motivators for MPA programs to finance professional development opportunities for their faculty members.

Trust But Verify

The UB experience suggests that everyone should encourage and trust student feedback in the course but verify its accuracy before acting or not acting upon it. For instance, students may try to shift responsibility for their own shortcomings to the facilitators, to other faculty, or to the curriculum. Sometimes their complaints will be valid and should be acted upon; other times their charges will lack any foundation and should be dismissed as attempts merely to game the system in their favor. Knowing the difference will require independent verification on the program's part. To facilitate this process while preserving anonymity, all capstone students should be given an opportunity to complete an open-ended evaluation at the end of the semester. Students may choose to make this evaluation as broad or as narrow as they like, but they should be encouraged to assess the capstone course, the MPA program more generally, and the faculty if they wish. In this fashion, a de facto exit interview about the program as it relates to its mission statement should be afforded to all students.

Be Prepared to Deal with Equity Issues

One of the constraints the department head placed on those proposing the capstone course at UB was that the class not impose unreasonable burdens on particular faculty members. As noted earlier, faculty participation in the capstone has been well and widely shared. However, responsibility for coordinating the course has been less widely shared. To some extent, this is a function of what some faculty see as the heavy workload involved, demands in other aspects of the MPA program requiring their services, and (frankly) a lack of interest in teaching the course. But regardless of the reasons, an inequitable sharing of capstone course responsibilities can become a serious problem. Workload equity problems, for example, can erode the faculty curriculum ownership goal that is so central to the course's rationale. Such problems also can give students the (mis?)impression that faculty routinely uninvolved with facilitating the course are somehow inferior in quality to those who are involved. Conversely, inequities inaccurately may convey the message that the course is not important enough for the involvement of top faculty. Moreover, those repeatedly charged with facilitating the course can grow weary and believe that they are inequitably treated compared to their colleagues.

CONCLUSION

As Jennings (1989, 443) has argued, an “assessment process that serves only as a mechanism of accountability may... have limited impact on the program operations; one that serves educational purposes must involve faculty, students, alumni, and public-service employers in a process of renewal to lead to educational improvements.” By all accounts, UB's experience with a mission-driven and outcomes-oriented MPA capstone course suggests that NASPAA's approach to accreditation can be turned into a useful exercise in program development. Moreover, this can be done along the more profitable lines that Jennings suggests. More precisely, these kinds of capstone courses can hold up an unflinching mirror to the strengths and weaknesses of an MPA program, aid in program development, afford information for strategic faculty development and recruitment, and help refine mission statements to reflect more accurately the core competencies of a department. UB's experience also suggests that mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstones can create pride among students in jobs well done, involve them in coproducing the curriculum, and enhance their identification with program development.

At the same time, however, UB's experience also suggests how trying and angst-provoking such courses can be in terms of the kinds of information they
can reveal, the resources and reforms they may require, and the emotions that these can engender among faculty and students. Resource, personnel, and pedagogical problems that might otherwise fester for years, unaddressed or unarticulated, cannot hide, be hidden, or be shunted aside in mission-driven and outcomes-oriented capstone courses. Most tellingly, the experience suggests that MPA programs that are serious about having the capstone course be mission-driven and outcomes-oriented may find themselves confronted by the kinds of tough program, resource, and personnel choices that the outcomes-oriented management literature requires of other public and private sector organizations.

Taking these kinds of action, of course, make many faculty nervous and can challenge the fortitude of even the most committed proponents of such exercises. Indeed, some may judge these challenges and the potential unpleasantness that might arise as too high a price to pay in faculty and student comity for the benefits derived from program self-reflection, learning, and accountability. On balance, however, the UB experience suggests that these challenges can be coped with and offers ways to head them off before they begin. In the process, NASPAA’s emphasis on mission-driven and outcomes-oriented accreditation can lead programs to approaches that afford a degree of critical program self-examination, learning, and accountability that students and taxpayers expect and deserve for their education dollars.

Notes
1. Over the decades since the ‘Honey Report’ was issued, a robust literature has offered programs guidance on how best to address each of the questions noted in this section. Among other things, this literature has addressed the specifics of MPA curricula and course content; the aims, content, and purposes of capstone courses; strategic thinking about changes in the public sector and how programs ought to respond to them; and suggestions for strategic planning for program development. This literature is too vast to reference in its entirety in this article. Representatives of this literature as it has grown in each decade include Henry (1979), Gibson and Moore (1977), Nagle (1978), Golembiewski (1979), Kerrigan and Hinton (1980), Helmovics and Rizzo (1981), Denhardt and Nallbadian (1982), Olufs (1982), Sherwood (1983), Duranti and Taggart (1985), Grizzle (1985), Duranti, Taggart, and Horne (1986), Kramer and Northrop (1989), Jennings (1989), Cleary (1990), National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (1992), Broadnax (1997), Reid and Miller (1997), Williams, Plein, and Lilly (1998), Hebert and Reynolds (1998), Klimgner and Washington (2000), Denhardt (2001), Denhardt, Lewis, Raffle, and Rich (1997), Perry (2001), Boyle and Whittaker (2001), Lauch (2001), McSwite (2001), and Williams, 2002. There exists, however, an absence of literature on how mission-based and outcomes-oriented capstone courses can be used as levers for institutionalizing strategic planning and organizational learning in MPA programs.

2. A review of programcatalogues indicates that descriptions of the capstone course commonly emphasize that students must demonstrate competency for public service by synthesizing and applying core course knowledge, skills, and abilities to public service problems. A variety of ways to demonstrate competence also exist, ranging from research papers on given topics, to group reports on projects, to analytic exercises related to students’ areas of specialization, to full-scale service learning experiences.

3. Data collected in the capstone course as outcome measures include, but are not limited to, surveys (students), operational information (e.g., service activities), qualitative judgments (e.g., faculty evaluation rankings), quantitative data (course evaluations), and performance measures (grades, etc.), and student transcripts.

4. This is not to suggest that the faculty eschewed other well-known methods of conceptualizing and assessing outcomes relative to program missions in addressing NASPAA’s accreditation standards (e.g., value added, career success, and impact approaches (see Jennings, 1989, for a thorough discussion of these approaches). Among value-added, career, and impact approaches, for example, the UB program continues to test the level of students’ attainment of knowledge, skills, and abilities in both absolute and, less consistently, developmental senses in courses and the capstone. Through periodic surveys of students—but not yet employers and other stakeholders as Roberts (2001), among others, suggests—it also attempts to assess the impact of the MPA education on their work performance.

5. The kinds of information routinely culled from the capstone would include, but not be limited to, faculty impressions and grading of knowledge, skills, and abilities, reviews of student transcripts, informal feedback from students about program strengths and weaknesses, and open-ended student evaluations of the program, individual classes, and university services as a whole.

6. Strengths of the MPA program, faculty, and students were also repeatedly identified from information garnered from the capstone courses over the years. Table 3 concentrates only on issues and concerns raised in order to help the reader see the link between them and responses to date.

7. See Bushouse and Morrison (2001) for a more robust discussion of the forms that service-learning exercises like these can take.

8. Some of the problems and lessons identified attend to all NASPAA programs seriously pursuing outcomes-based assessments of the impact of their curriculum and labors on student knowledge, skills, and abilities. Moreover, they occur whether capstone courses are used or not. What makes them especially distinctive when a capstone course is used as a lever for becoming a learning organization is the constant evaluation and public feedback that takes place each semester. This incessant transparency keeps the front burner program problems that might otherwise escape notice or be addressed only episodically (e.g., during a NASPAA self-study year). These problems might include needs for remedial writing, poor analytical skills, grade inflation, or course content updating. This, of course, is also its value.

References
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