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Profiling Public Affairs Programs

The View From the Top

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This research updates existing literature that describes the nature of public affairs programs. A profile of the top 50 public affairs programs, according to rankings from *U.S. News & World Report*, is identified. Programs are differentiated by type (master of public administration, master of public policy, master of public affairs, and *other*), and comparisons are made regarding total hours, hours in core, number of specializations, capital city location, accreditation, institutional home, required courses within core, numbers of core courses by category per the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, and variety of specializations within programs. The article statistically explores the relative importance of program characteristics in the status of the top 50 institutions.

Keywords: *public affairs programs; benchmarking; performance assessment*

The importance of benchmarking, report cards, and general performance assessment has received quite a bit of attention in the public administration literature (Ammons, 2001; Behn, 2003; Coe, 2003; Halachmi, 2002; Osborne & Gaebler, 1992; Osborne & Hutchinson, 2004; Wholey & Hatry, 1992). Public affairs, public policy, and public administration programs have not been exempt from this movement to measure, assess, and compare. Of particular note is the biannual *U.S. News & World Report* ranking of the top programs in public affairs (see "Best Graduate Schools," n.d.). These rankings provide a gross measure of standing and reputation within the academic community; students and faculty can use them as they

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choose institutions, as can administrators who monitor the performance of their academic units. In line with the importance of such rankings, this study provides a profile of the 50 highest-ranked public affairs–offering institutions (as identified by *U.S. News & World Report*); it identifies differences between programs in the 50 institutions; and it assesses the associations between the characteristics of the master of public administration (MPA) programs and the overall rankings.

This study reviewed Web sites of the top 50 public affairs programs cited by *U.S. News & World Review* in 2006. The general profile of the top programs is provided in regard to the number of credits required for the degree, the number of credits required for the core, the number of specializations, the ratio of core credits to total credits, the location (in state or federal capital or not), accreditation, and programmatic home. This last item, programmatic home, includes but is not limited to the following: separate unit within college of arts and sciences, separate unit within school or college of public affairs, part of political science department, and unit within an institute or center.

In addition to the profile of all programs, differences between programmatic offerings are identified: MPA programs, master of public policy (MPP) programs, master of public affairs (MPAf) programs, and *other* types of programs. Finally, the article statistically explores the impact of program characteristics on the rank of institutions, such as presence in capital city, accreditation, number of specialties, institutional home, and presence of specialty courses. Inferential differences are not reported, because data are accessed from the entire population from the 50 top institutions. A total of 76 different programs are offered at the 50 institutions cited by *U.S. News & World Report*.

Rating Public Affairs Programs

Ranking for public affairs programs is based on a survey of deans, directors, and department chairs representing 253 master's programs. Lists of schools and individuals surveyed by *U.S. News & World Report* were provided by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management. Respondents were asked to rate the academic quality of programs on a scale of 1 (*marginal*) to 5 (*distinguished*). The response rate for the survey conducted in 2004 was 57% (*U.S. News & World Report,* 2006). *U.S. News & World Report* employed a reputation-based approach to ranking institutions

Table 1
General Profile of the Top 50 Programs in Public Affairs

Sample size[a]	76
Mean total semester hours	44.3
Coefficient of variation (total hours)	.236
Mean semester hours in core	25.3
Coefficient of variation (core hours)	.395
Mean number of specializations	6.9
Coefficient of variation (specialization)	.492
Core as proportion of total	57.1%
Location (capital)	34.2%
Accredited	61.8%
In college of arts and sciences	2.6%
In political science department	1.3%
In unit of school or college	82.9%
In unit of institute or center	13.2%

Source: Various Web sites from top 50 institutions, 2006.
a. Master of public administration, master in public policy, master of public affairs, and *other* programs combined.

that offered graduate degrees in public affairs. This approach bears similarities to the strategy employed by urban scholars to identify community leaders (Hawley & Svara, 1972; Hunter, 1953; Presthus, 1964).

Reputation-based studies have been used to assess academic program quality. For example, a variety of survey instruments and measurement tools have been utilized to assess the prestige and effectiveness of public administration programs (Adams, 1983; Baldwin, 1988; Cleary, 1990; Ferris & Stallings, 1988; Morgan & Meier, 1982; Morgan, Meier, Kearney, Hays, & Birch, 1981; Uveges, 1987). Other methods of assessment have also been used—such as investigation of self-study reports (Elwood, 1985; Roeder & Whitaker, 1993), examination of journal article production (Legge & Devore, 1987), examination of curriculum (Thai, 1985), and numbers of Presidential Management Internships awarded (Adams, 1983).

Profile of Top Programs

Identifying a profile of the leading programs has value from the perspective of best practices. Public affairs programs that are not in the top echelon may use this profile to identify their relative strengths and weaknesses.

Table 1 summarizes data from the top 50 programs identified by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2006 for the four components of curriculum, location, accreditation, and programmatic home (see Appendix A). This includes 46 MPA programs, 18 MPP programs, 6 MPAf programs, and 6 degree programs that fall into the *other* category.[1] Numerous institutions offer more than one type of degree (i.e., MPA and MPP or MPAf). Each degree is included in the analysis.[2]

As reported in Table 1, the 76 programs offered at the 50 top institutions required an average of 44.3 credit hours for graduation (see Appendix B). This is higher than that found in studies that focused primarily on the MPA program.[3] It is consistent, however, with a general increase in credit requirements over time. For example, Thai (1985) discovered an increase in the average number of required credits since 1974–1975. This increase was confirmed in later studies (Cleary 1990; Roeder & Whitaker, 1993). The 2006 average for number of credit hours required to earn a public affairs degree suggests a continued increase in credit hour requirements. Overall, public affairs programs do not differ much in terms of total semester hours required, as indicated in the relatively low coefficient of variation value of .236.[4]

Over time, core requirements have increased. Thai's study (1985) revealed that in 1974–1975, the mean number of core hours required for programs reviewed was 11.1. By 1980–1981, this requirement increased to 20.4. The rise in core hour requirements suggests a desire for increased uniformity in skill sets, an aim of early supporters of accreditation (Henry, 1995; Jennings, 1989). Table 1 indicates that the highest-regarded public affairs programs are tightly focused with an average of 25.3 credit hours in their cores and with the core representing more than half of total program requirements (57.1%). The coefficient of variation for core hours is .395, a bit higher than that for total hours but still small, suggesting that public affairs programs differ somewhat more in core semester hours than in total semester hours.

The average number of specializations offered by programs in the top 50 institutions is higher than the average number of specialties previously found (Cleary, 1990). In general, data reported in Table 1 indicate change from earlier-reported profiles attributed to a higher number of total credits in the top programs, a higher number of core credits in the top programs, and a higher number of specializations in the top programs.

When location was considered, 34.2% of top rated programs are found in capital cities.[5] Because schools located in cities that serve as capital cities have greater access to government stakeholders, one might expect that location would affect program reputation and thus facilitate access to more state

resources. The data suggest that location in a capital might be helpful; however, high-quality programs can thrive elsewhere as well.[6]

The data displayed in Table 1 indicate that 61.8% of programs offered at the top institutions were accredited, which does not differ greatly from the national accreditation rate of 58% (NASPAA, 2006a). Accreditation does not therefore appear to be a strong indicator of a reputation for excellence. Highly ranked programs such as Princeton, the University of Michigan, Duke University, Georgetown University, and the University of Chicago were unaccredited, which suggests that other factors may be as important or more important than accreditation in determining the reputation of public affairs programs. This may also reflect continued controversy over the value of accreditation (Henry, 1995; Uveges, 1987). Apparently, many of today's most highly regarded institutions still do not consider accreditation to be the sine qua non for performance.

Program structure is another feature discussed in the literature profiling public policy and administration. The majority of programs analyzed in Table 1 are centered in independent schools and colleges of public affairs/government—in contrast to earlier findings, which identified a minority of programs housed in separate schools and colleges, with a larger proportion of programs housed in political science departments (Cleary, 1990; Roeder & Whitaker, 1993).

Similarities and Differences Between Public Affairs Programs

Table 1 provides a profile of all 76 programs offered by the top 50 institutions. Data described in this aggregate table, however, mask individual differences between the MPA, MPP, MPAf, and *other* programs—differences that are described in Table 2 (see Appendix C).

Some differences were identified between MPA and MPP programs. MPP programs offered a greater number of specializations; a much larger proportion of MPA programs were accredited (80.4% compared to 22.2%); and a smaller proportion of MPA programs were housed within an institute or center. Total hours, hours in core, and the core as a ratio of total hours were almost identical between the MPA and MPP programs. The *other* programs, however, were likely to require a higher number of credits, a higher number of core credits, and a higher ratio of core courses to total credits.[7] In terms of coefficient of variation, it can be seen that MPAf programs are the most homogeneous in terms of total semester hours and

Table 2
Curriculum, Location, Accreditation, and Home by Program

Program Characteristics	MPA (n = 46)	MPP (n = 18)	MPAf (n = 6)	Other (n = 6)
Mean total semester hours	43.7	43.9	45.0	49.6
Coefficient of variation (total hours)	.210	.303	.116	.288
Mean semester hours in core	24.3	24.8	21.0	38.0
Coefficient of variation (core hours)	.377	.451	.239	.269
Mean number of specializations	6.4	7.9	7.0	7.0
Coefficient of variation (specialization)	.518	.466	.364	.614
Core as proportion of total (%)	55.6	56.5	46.7	76.6
Location (capital) (%)	32.6	38.9	66.7	0.0
Accredited (%)	80.4	22.2	66.7	33.3
In college of arts and sciences (%)	4.3	0.0	0.0	2.6
In political science department (%)	2.2	0.0	0.0	0.0
In unit of school or college (%)	82.6	77.8	100.0	83.3
In unit of institute or center (%)	10.9	22.2	0.0	16.7

Source: Various Web sites from top 50 institutions, 2006.
Note: MPA = master of public administration; MPP = master in public policy; MPAf = master of public affairs.

semester hours in core (lowest coefficient-of-variation values), whereas MPP programs are the most heterogeneous programs (highest coefficient-of-variation values).

In regard to location, two thirds of the MPAf programs were located in capital cities, as were 38.9% of the MPP programs, 32.6% of MPA programs, and none of the *other* programs. As previously stated, major differences were identified in terms of accreditation. The majority of all public affairs programs were housed in separate units in schools or colleges. Few of the programs in the top institutions were housed in the college of arts and sciences or in political science departments.

Table 3 focuses on differences between accredited and nonaccredited MPA and MPP programs. The data denote a slightly tighter focus in the accredited MPA programs when compared to the nonaccredited MPA programs. For example, accredited MPA programs required fewer total hours, a larger core, and fewer specializations. Accredited and nonaccredited MPP programs were similar with regard to total credit hours; however, in contrast to the MPA programs, nonaccredited MPP programs had a larger core. Nonaccredited MPP programs also had fewer specializations. As one would expect, the coefficients of variation for total and core hours show that accredited programs are more homogeneous than nonaccredited

Table 3
Differences Between Accredited and Nonaccredited MPA and MPP Programs

	Accredited		Not Accredited	
Program Characteristics	MPA (n = 37)	MPP (n = 4)	MPA (n = 9)	MPP (n = 14)
Mean total semester hours	43.3	44.5	45.7	43.7
Coefficient of variation (total hours)	.208	.181	.227	.336
Mean semester hours in core	24.9	22.8	21.9	25.4
Coefficient of variation (core hours)	.375	.141	.388	.498
Mean number of specializations	6.0	8.5	8.8	7.8
Coefficient of variation (specialization)	.541	.390	.339	.509
Core as a ratio of total semester credit hours (%)	57.5	51.2	47.9	58.1
Located in capital city (%)	37.8	50	11.1	35.7
In college of arts and sciences (%)	5.4	0.0	0.0	0.0
In political science department (%)	2.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
In unit of school or college (%)	86.5	75.0	66.7	78.6
In unit in institute or center (%)	5.4	25.0	33.3	321.4

Source: Various Web sites from top 50 institutions, 2006.
Note: MPA = master of public administration; MPP = master in public policy; MPAf = master of public affairs.

programs. This finding is even more pronounced for MPP programs than for MPA programs.

One half of the accredited MPP programs were located in capital cities. A much higher proportion of the accredited MPA programs were found in capital cities (37.8% accredited compared to 11.1% nonaccredited). A larger proportion of the accredited MPP programs were located in capital cities as well (50% accredited versus 35.7% nonaccredited).

When institutional homes were considered, the majority of the top programs were found to be housed as separate units in schools or colleges. This was true for accredited as well as nonaccredited MPA and MPP programs. None of the top MPP programs were housed in colleges of arts and sciences or political science departments. Only three of the top MPA programs were located in political science departments or colleges of arts and sciences (8.1%). Nonaccredited MPA programs were more likely to be housed in institutes and centers.

Table 4 addresses comparisons of core requirements among programs. The table identifies the percentage of MPA, MPP, MPAf, and *other* programs

Table 4
Percentage of Programs That Require at Least One of the Following as Part of Core

Requirement	MPA ($n = 46$)	MPP ($n = 18$)	MPAf ($n = 6$)	Other ($n = 6$)
Human resources management	32.6	0.0	0.0	0.0
Budgeting and finance	84.8	50.0	83.3	83.3
Microeconomics	37.0	61.1	100.0	50.0
Management information systems / information technology course	23.9	0.0	0.0	66.7
Ethics and leadership	58.7	44.4	0.0	83.3
Policy evaluation	87.0	94.4	100.0	100.0
Decision making / problem solving	34.8	61.1	33.3	100.0
Research methods	26.1	33.3	0.0	50.0
Public administration	73.9	50.0	0.0	33.3
Politics and legal institutions	52.2	50.0	100.0	50.0
Economics and social institutions	45.7	50.0	66.7	50.0
Organizational concepts and institutions	87.0	38.9	83.3	83.3
Capstone or final research project	28.3	44.4	50.0	66.7

Source: Various Web sites from top 50 institutions, 2006.
Note: MPA = master of public administration; MPP = master in public policy; MPAf = master of public affairs.

that maintained a requirement for any of 13 classifications of courses: human resources management, budgeting and finance, microeconomics, management information systems / information technology, ethics and leadership, policy evaluation, decision making, research methods, public administration, politics and legal institutions, economics and social institutions, organizational concepts and institutions, and a capstone or final research project.

A higher percentage of MPA programs (the traditional program for professional public managers) focus on course work in the applied skills-based courses, such as human resources management, budgeting and finance, general public administration, and organizational concepts. Not unexpectedly, a higher proportion of the MPP programs, as well as the programs in the *other* category, require specialized courses that are important to public policy analysis, such as microeconomics, policy evaluation, decision making, and research methods. Each of the top MPAf programs emphasized microeconomics and policy evaluation. The MPP programs were more likely than the MPA programs to require a capstone course or a research project.

Table 5
Core Requirements and Program Accreditation: Percentage of Programs That Require at Least One Course as Part of Core

	Accredited		Not Accredited	
Requirement	MPA (n = 37)	MPP (n = 4)	MPA (n = 9)	MPP (n = 14)
Human resources management	35.1	0.0	22.2	0.0
Budgeting and finance	66.7	75.0	89.2	42.9
Microeconomics	35.1	50.0	44.4	64.3
Management information systems / information technology course	29.7	0.0	0.0	0.0
Ethics and leadership	54.1	25.0	77.8	50.0
Policy evaluation	89.2	100.0	77.8	92.9
Decision making / problem solving	29.7	50.0	55.6	64.3
Research methods	32.4	25.0	0.0	35.7
Public administration	73.0	50.0	77.8	50.0
Politics and legal institutions	56.8	75.0	33.3	42.9
Economics and social institutions	43.3	100.0	55.6	35.7
Organizational concepts and institutions	91.9	25.0	66.7	42.9
Capstone or final research project	32.4	75.0	11.1	35.7

Source: Various Web sites from top 50 institutions, 2006.
Note: MPA = master of public administration; MPP = master in public policy; MPAf = master of public affairs.

Table 5 expands on the previous table for the two major public affairs programs: the MPA and MPP. In this table, distinctions in core requirements are made between accredited and nonaccredited programs. With regard to the MPA programs, a higher proportion of accredited programs required at least one course as part of the core in the following types of courses: human resources management, management information systems / information technology, policy evaluation, research methods, politics and legal institutions, organizational concepts and institutions, and capstone or final research project. This is consistent with the view that accredited MPA programs are more likely to emphasize professional skills. With regard to MPP programs, a higher proportion of accredited programs required at least one course as part of the core in the following types of courses: budgeting and finance, policy evaluation, politics and legal institutions, economics and social institutions, and capstone or final research project.

Policy evaluation was the most likely course to be required by MPA and MPP programs whether accredited or not. Budgeting and finance, public administration,

legal institutions, social institutions, and organizational concepts courses were also were required in a large number of programs. Fewer programs required management information systems / information technology courses, human resources management, research methods, and a final research project.

Accredited MPA programs are the only type of program to require coursework in management information systems / information technology, although less that 30% of these programs had this requirement. Ethics and leadership courses are required by 50% or more of all programs, with the exception of accredited MPP programs. Only one quarter of the accredited MPP programs required such a course. Courses that relate to decision making and problem solving are required by at least 50% of all programs, except for the accredited MPA programs. Nearly two thirds of nonaccredited MPP programs, compared to less than 30% of accredited MPA programs, included a decision-making course in their core. A requirement jointly shared by more than half the accredited MPA and MPP programs is found only in the area of politics and legal institutions. Less than 50% of nonaccredited programs required such a course.

Overall, nonaccredited programs for MPA and MPP programs are more likely to require a core course in decision making / problem solving or microeconomics, whereas the opposite is true for politics and legal institutions or policy evaluation core courses. Students in nonaccredited programs have a greater propensity to study ethics and leadership. Compared to nonaccredited MPA programs, accredited MPA programs are more likely to require research methods, as well as course work in political institutions and organizational concepts.

Tables 4 and 5 identify individual core courses that fit within the broad curriculum mandates of the NASPAA: management and economics, quantitative and qualitative techniques, public policy and organizational environment (NASPAA, 2006b). Table 6 identifies the average number of core courses found in each of the three NASPAA categories. Course descriptions, as identified on Web sites, were used to determine course categories.

As indicated in Table 6, MPA programs and *other* programs were more likely to be oriented toward management and economics courses, whereas MPP programs were more focused on quantitative and qualitative methods courses. The relatively small number of public affairs programs emphasized public policy and organizational environment courses; however, the number of core courses in this category is still smaller than that found in MPA and *other* programs. As mentioned, programs in the *other* category have a higher core requirement; therefore, they have the largest numbers of courses in all three categories.[8]

Table 6
Number of Core Courses by Category per the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration

	MPA (n = 46)	MPP (n = 18)	MPAf (n = 6)	Other (n = 6)
Management and economics	3.23	2.33	2.00	4.67
Quantitative/qualitative methods	1.66	3.14	1.33	3.50
Public policy and organizational environment	2.74	2.53	2.67	3.42

Source: Various Web sites from top 50 institutions, 2006.
Note: MPA = master of public administration; MPP = master in public policy; MPAf = master of public affairs.

Table 7
Percentage of Programs That Offer Specializations

Specialization	MPA (n = 46)	MPP (n = 18)	MPAf (n = 6)	Other (n = 6)
Budget and finance	37.0	27.8	33.3	33.3
Criminal justice	15.2	22.2	16.7	16.7
Economic development	15.2	27.8	33.3	50.0
Environmental policy	39.1	72.2	66.7	33.3
General policy analysis	47.8	22.2	50.0	33.3
General public administration	75.0	55.6	66.7	16.7
Health policy	32.6	55.6	16.7	16.7
Human resources management	26.1	5.6	16.7	0.0
International affairs	28.3	72.2	50.0	33.3
Nonprofit management	50.0	50.0	50.0	0.0
Social policy	15.2	66.7	33.3	16.7
State and local government	45.7	27.8	50.0	66.7
Technology, information management, e-government	26.1	16.6	50.0	66.7

Source: Various Web sites from top 50 institutions, 2006.
Note: MPA = master of public administration; MPP = master in public policy; MPAf = master of public affairs.

Individual program concentrations allow schools to focus program content on areas of interest to students. Table 7 displays the percentage of programs that offer specializations in 14 areas.

One could hypothesize that MPP programs would be more likely to offer a specialization in clearly defined policy areas whereas the MPA programs

would focus on more general management. To a large extent, this is demonstrated in the data. MPP programs were more likely to offer specializations in the areas of criminal justice, economic development, environmental policy, health policy, international affairs, and social policy. The MPA programs adopted more of a general management orientation. When compared to the MPP programs, a larger percentage of the MPA programs focused on budget and finance, general public administration, general policy analysis, human resources management, state and local government, and technology/information management. MPAf programs offered relatively large numbers of specializations in economic development, general policy analysis, state and local government, and technology/information management.

Factors Contributing to Rankings

To determine factors contributing to the ranking of the top 50 programs in public affairs, two ordered logit regression models were run. Model 1 and Model 2 differ in what variables are excluded, because of multicollinearity between the type of program and the variable of the microeconomics core course, as well as whether the program is a unit of a school or college. Variables included in both models are as follows: a dummy for capital city, program accreditation, and number of specialties. For both models, the independent variable is the program rank. Estimation results for regression coefficients, standard errors, significance levels, and pseudo R^2 are reported in Table 8.[9]

The models show somewhat-mixed results for the accreditation variable. The coefficient estimate is significant in Model 2 at the 10% level,[10] but it is not significant in Model 1. A capital city location, however, does clearly not contribute to ranking. The coefficient estimates for a capital city location are insignificant in both models at the 10% level. The regression coefficients for the number of specialties are negative in both models and significantly different from zero at the 5% level. This indicates that a greater number of specialties correlate with a higher ranking.[11] Because the number of specialties can be interpreted as a proxy for program size, it can be said that, on average, within the cohort of the 50 top public affairs programs, the larger programs are statistically associated with a higher rank. Reasons for this result may be that a larger program provides a higher level of visibility in the field, better access to grants, more academic publications, and a diverse faculty that takes advantage of research synergies. In addition, the size and visibility of programs may also attract better students.

Table 8
Factors Contributing to Rankings

	Model 1		Model 2	
Variable	Coefficient	*SE*	Coefficient	*SE*
Accredited	0.185	0.528	0.885*	0.485
Capital city	0.718	0.488	0.111	0.482
Number of specialties	–0.131**	0.067	–0.146**	0.067
Master of public affairs	–1.857**	0.875		
Master in public policy	–1.181*	0.606		
Government school or college			–1.323**	0.508
Microeconomics as part of the core			–1.848***	0.616
Pseudo R^2	0.219		0.394	

Note: Results for the ordered logit regression model using *U.S. News & World Report* ranking. A negative coefficient has a positive impact on ranking (higher ranking is signified by a lower rank value—that is, a value of 1 indicates the best school).
*$p < .10$. **$p < .05$. ***$p < .01$.

Model 1 also demonstrates that, everything else being equal, MPAf and MPP programs are more likely than the remaining programs to be housed in higher-ranking institutions. Their coefficients are negative and significant at the 5% and 10% levels, respectively. One possible explanation for that result can be traced to the types of courses in each program: As Model 2 reveals, at a 1% level of significance, the presence of a microeconomics core course causes the ranking to increase. MPAf and MPP programs require, in general, more microeconomics core courses than MPA and *other* programs do. Institutional home of the program appears to matter as well. Programs that are independent units within schools or colleges tend to be more visible and higher ranked, as indicated by the corresponding negative regression coefficient, which is significant at the 5% level. Interestingly enough, as soon as the regression model accounts for both the existence of a microeconomics requirement and the institutional home being in a government school or college, there is some weak empirical evidence that accreditation may matter—however, differently than expected: In Model 2, the accreditation coefficient is significant at the 10% level, but it is positive, which means that all else being equal, accredited programs rank lower among the top 50 institutions. This surprising result can be best explained with the fact that MPP programs, which tend to rank higher, are less likely to be accredited.

Other variables, such as number of quantitative and research-oriented core courses, were included in additional models, but they turned out to be nonsignificant.[12] Variables such as number of publications per faculty and their impact can also play a role in rankings, but they were omitted because of a lack of data.

In summary, program size, institutional home, and analytical rigor (represented as the presence of a microeconomic core course) are related to the ranking of public affairs programs within the cohort of the top 50 institutions. MPAf and MPP programs are higher ranked and are more likely to require analytical courses such as microeconomics in the core. Another factor to consider is that many of the most elite public affairs institutions simply prefer to offer MPP or MPAf programs. Accreditation and a capital city location, however, do not play much of a role in ranking (at least when controlled for program type).

Conclusion

This research updates an important tradition of literature, which concerns program assessment. It profiles and compares the top 50 public affairs programs, and it statistically evaluates the factors that contribute to ranking. The study reveals that the 50 top-ranked public affairs programs do not differ dramatically in their curricula. For the most part, they require about 45 semester credit hours, and approximately half the credits are required as core courses. MPP, MPAf, and *other* programs, however, have a larger number of specializations than do the MPA programs. Two thirds of MPAf programs are located in capital cities, whereas only one third of MPA or MPP programs (and none of the *other* programs) are found in capital cities. Roughly 80% of the MPA programs and two thirds of the MPAf programs are accredited. MPP and *other* programs are accredited at a much lower rate, approximately 20% and 33%, respectively. Almost all programs have their homes in a separate unit in a school, college, institute, or center. None of the MPAf and MPP programs and less than 5% of the MPA programs are housed in a college of arts and sciences or within a political science department.

Overall, MPA programs stress skill-based courses in organization and management, whereas MPAf, MPP, and *other* programs emphasize policy analysis with a focus on microeconomics and research-oriented courses. A similar pattern applies to the specializations offered in each program.

The data suggest that all the programs have much in common, especially in their formal structure; however, where they differ (mainly in size and

analytical rigor) is important in determining ranking within the top programs. The result of an ordered logit regression model reveals that academic ranking is statistically associated with the number of core courses in microeconomics, as well as with the number of specializations and whether the program is a separate unit located in a school or college. The regression results explain why institutions with MPAf and MPP programs, which are more likely to require microeconomics, rank higher than MPA-based institutions. Accreditation and whether the program is in a capital city, however, do not appear to matter.

By applying an ordered logit regression model, this research goes beyond what has been done in past program assessment literature. It isolates important factors from insignificant factors that contribute to program ranking and thus sheds light on how to interpret differences in public affairs programs.

Appendix A: Top 50 Programs Identified by *U.S. News & World Report*

The institutions ranked as the top 50 by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2004 were as follows, in descending order: Syracuse, Harvard, Indiana University–Bloomington, University of Georgia, Princeton University, University of California–Berkeley, University of Southern California, Carnegie Mellon University, University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, American University, Duke University, George Washington University, State University of New York–Albany, University of Kansas, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, University of Texas–Austin, Georgetown University, New York University, University of Chicago, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Columbia University, University of California at Los Angeles, University of Maryland–College Park, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, University of Pittsburgh, Arizona State University, Florida State University, Georgia State University, Johns Hopkins University, Rutgers State University–Newark, University of Nebraska–Omaha, University of Washington, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, University of Kentucky, Cornell University, Indiana University–Purdue University—Indianapolis, Northern Illinois University, Texas A&M University, University of Colorado–Denver, University of Delaware, University of Missouri–Columbia, Cleveland State University, Naval Postgraduate School, Ohio State University, University of Pennsylvania, City University of New York–John Jay College, George Mason University, University of Arizona, University of Illinois–Chicago, and University of Utah.

Appendix B: Methodology for Assigning Credit Hours

Because uniformity does not exist in regard to the amount of time required to complete a credit hour in different programs, a standardized criteria for assigning credit hours to a program was calculated. Standardized data do not differ greatly from the unstandardized number of credit hours reported in Table 1.

Standardization was accomplished by utilizing minutes of instruction time as the basis of determining numbers of credits. In the absence of standardization based on instructional time, wide variation exists in credit hour requirements, with some programs requiring as few as 16 credits and with others requiring as many as 48 or more credits to complete a degree. In addition, the length of the academic term varies considerably by institution. Most programs operate on 15-week semester terms; however, several operate on quarter systems with a 10- or 12-week term.

The majority of programs operate on the traditional 15-week semester, offering approximately 150 minutes of instruction a week for three credits (3 hr plus break time). Programs that operate as such were not converted, because the credit counting was accepted as the norm. To standardize the credit hours for other programs, we first determined the amount of classroom instruction time needed to earn one standardized credit using the following formula: instruction time needed for one standardized credit hour = (weekly instruction time × weeks in term) / number of course credits.

Based on this model, for most 15-week semester courses worth three credits, one credit would require 750 minutes of classroom instruction time: (150 × 15) / 3 = 750. Time requirements in other programs were calculated and then used to calculate number of credits based on the 750-minute norm. For example, the master of public policy program at one of the *U.S. News & World Review* institutions operates on a quarter system and requires 18 credits (as well as 18 courses) to complete the degree (i.e., 1 course is worth 1 credit). Each course meets approximately 160 minutes per week, and the term is 12 weeks long. One credit at this institution therefore requires approximately 1,920 minutes of classroom instruction time: (160 × 12) / 1 = 1,920.

The next step in converting this institution's credit requirements to credit requirements in other programs is to determine total instruction time. To determine this figure, we multiplied the amount of instruction time for one credit by the number of credits required to complete the degree. This figure represents the minimum amount of instruction time in minutes required to complete the degree: total minutes of time = 1 credit instruction time × number of credits for degree.

This number represents actual in-class time and does not reflect outside classroom time, such as lab requirements and internship hours, unless that time is included as part of the instruction time listed in class schedules. To complete a degree at this institution, students are required to complete approximately 34,560 minutes of instruction time (1,920 × 18). These figures are based on published class schedules. The actual amount of time may differ on the basis of individual instructors and other factors not available for this analysis. To compare program credit hours, a standard credit was calculated utilizing the following formula: standard credits = total minutes of instruction time / 750.

This figure represents a standardized credit value that is useful for comparing programs. When this formula is applied to the institution in question to complete the master of public policy degree, students do not take 18 credits but the equivalent of 46.1 credit hours (34,560 / 750).

This standard credit score allows for significant improvements in the ability to compare program credit hours. Comparing credit requirements of typical programs with programs that operate on 10- or 12-week quarters is more meaningful after conversion.

The majority of programs operate on the 15-week semester term. The majority of those programs offer three-credit courses that meet for 150 minutes of instruction time per week. These programs did not require any conversion.

Universities that required conversions to standard scores include the following: Harvard University, Princeton University, University of California at Berkeley, University of Southern California, Carnegie Mellon University, State University of New York–Albany, New York University, University of Chicago, University of California at Los Angeles, University of Minnesota, University of Washington, Cleveland State University, Naval Postgraduate School, Ohio State University, University of Pennsylvania, and the University of Illinois at Chicago.

In addition to adjusting for the amount of time required to complete a credit hour, adjustment was made for length of time required to complete programs. Nine outliers were identified on the basis of duration and thus eliminated from analysis: Carnegie Mellon, Naval Postgraduate School, Princeton University, University of Georgia, University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, University of Pittsburgh, University of Texas–Austin, and University of Washington. Most of these programs were accelerated and/or executive programs that coexist separately from the traditional degree programs. All the traditional degree programs at these institutions were included in the analysis. When both corrections were made, total hours required for all programs decreased to 41.5 and mean semester hours in core declined to 24.6.

Appendix C: Top 50 Programs by Type

The master of public administration programs originated from Syracuse University, University of Georgia, University of Southern California, University of Michigan–Ann Arbor, American University, George Washington University, State University of New York–Albany, University of Kansas, University of North Carolina–Chapel Hill, New York University, Columbia University, University of Minnesota–Twin Cities, University of Pittsburgh, Arizona State University, Florida State University, Georgia State University, Rutgers State University–Newark, University of Nebraska–Omaha, University of Washington, Virginia Polytechnic Institute, University of Kentucky, Cornell University, Northern Illinois University, University of Colorado–Denver, University of Delaware, University of Missouri–Columbia, Cleveland State University, Ohio State University, City University of New York–John Jay College, George Mason University, University of Arizona, University of Illinois–Chicago, and University of Utah.

The master of public policy programs were based in Harvard University, Princeton University, University of California–Berkeley, University of Southern California, University of Michigan, American University, Duke University, George Washington University, State University of New York–Albany, Georgetown University, University of Chicago, University of California Los Angeles, University of Maryland, University of Minnesota, University of Pittsburg, Arizona State University, University of Kentucky, and University of Utah.

The master of public affairs programs were found in Indiana University–Bloomington, Princeton University, University of Texas–Austin, University of Wisconsin–Madison, Indiana University–Purdue University–Indianapolis.

Other programs included those from Carnegie Mellon University, Johns Hopkins University, Texas A&M University, Naval Postgraduate School, and University of Pennsylvania.

Notes

1. Programs in the *other* category include two programs at Carnegie Mellon University and one from each of the following: Johns Hopkins University, Texas A&M University, Naval Postgraduate School, and the University of Pennsylvania.

2. Some programs have different requirements for preservice and in-service students. In these cases, programs were considered separately.

3. Data from Table 1 were also calculated when nine outliers were deleted from the analysis. Outliers were calculated on the basis of length of program for completion of degree.

4. The coefficient of variation measures the ratio of the standard deviation to the mean.

5. Capital cities include state capitals and Washington, DC.

6. In this context, it is important to emphasize that location is a resource endowment to the program rather than a controllable design feature of the program.

7. These differences are largely due to the influence of two outliers. When they were removed, total hours declined to 38.6, and mean semester hours in core declined to 28.5. In addition, when the two outliers were eliminated, none of the four remaining *other* programs were accredited, and the number of specializations ($n = 5$) was lower than the number of specializations in the other three program types.

8. The relatively small number of cases in this category and the presence of an outlier may have skewed these data. More credence is placed on comparisons between the large master of public administration and master of public policy groupings.

9. An ordered logit regression model has many analogies to ordinary least squares regression: Logit coefficients, standard errors, and significance levels can be interpreted in a similar way, and a pseudo R^2 statistic is a measure of goodness of fit. Unlike ordinary least squares regression, however, ordered logit regression assumes an underlying binomial distribution rather than a normal distribution, and the relationship between dependent and independent variables is not modeled linearly.

10. Model 2 shows some weak evidence demonstrating that many of the highest-ranked public affairs programs are not accredited. A visual inspection of the data confirms this finding.

11. A negative coefficient value has a positive impact on ranking because the highest-ranked program has the lowest rank value (i.e., 1 stands for the best school).

12. Additional regressions were run with the exclusion of outliers. Results from these regressions do not differ greatly from the results reported in Table 8.

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