

# **AMERICAN UNDERGRADUATE PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EDUCATION: CURRICULUM CHOICES AND PROGRAM EMPHASES**

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## **INTRODUCTION**

**This article summarizes the results of a nationwide survey by mail of the 71 undergraduate public administration programs listed in the 1983-84 NASPAA Directory. [1] The survey was conducted during late 1984 and early 1985. Although the immediate purpose in conducting the survey was to provide comparative standards of practice against which to assess the Edward Waters College (Jacksonville, Florida) undergraduate public administration program, the results are of more general interest since they address important aspects of the design and implementation of undergraduate public administration programs.**

## **SURVEY RESPONSES**

**Of 71 colleges and universities mailed the survey form, 51 responded. Eight of the respondents, however, did not complete the form, indicating that their institution does not in fact offer an undergraduate public administration degree. Six of these institutions reported having a political science major program, two with concentrations in public policy and two with minors in public administration, while one reported having a program in urban and regional studies. The remaining 43 responses, about 61% of the population surveyed, are included in the report of survey results. [2]**

Geographically, the survey results are fairly well distributed. The 71 programs surveyed are located in 31 states; about 80% of those states (25) are represented among the 43 institutions completing the survey form. About 65% of both the population surveyed and those who responded (28) are public institutions as opposed to private colleges and universities.

## **GENERAL FINDINGS—VARIETY WITHIN COMMONALITY**

A basic finding of this research, and not a newly discovered one, is that a great deal of variety exists among undergraduate public administration programs but that that variety exists within an identifiable common foundation of similar program elements. Undergraduate public administration programs are housed in a variety of departments, divisions, schools, and colleges. Yet the home for almost 45% (19) of the programs responding to this survey is a political science and/or government department. Clearly much of undergraduate public administration has its organizational roots in traditional political science. Nevertheless, nine programs are housed in a separate public administration department, one in a public policy department, five in a public affairs department, and one in a department of planning, public policy, and management. Four are located in or attached to a business school, one is in an economics department, and a few reside within a general social sciences division.

Another indicator of diversity within commonality is types of degree awarded. The most common degree offered by survey respondents is a bachelor of science in public administration (18). Nine schools offer a bachelor of arts in public administration (a few offer both BA and BS). Seven offer a bachelor of public administration degree (BPA). Another six offer a BA or BS in political science with a concentration in public administration. Variations on the more common degree titles utilized by other respondents include bachelor's degrees in business and public administration, public affairs, public policy and management, and planning, public policy, and management. At the undergraduate level, the BPA, similar in its professional orientation to the graduate MPA degree, appears to be the

norm. More common are BA and BS degrees utilizing a variety of names specifying or descriptive of public administration content. The emphasis in most of the schools responding is more on liberal arts and sciences education with a major concentration than on professional study at the undergraduate level. There is some indication in respondents' comments and program brochures that the BS degree is considered to be more technical skills oriented than the BA.

Still another indicator of similarities and differences among programs is the size of the student body and the number of faculty assigned to the program. Results in this area are less than accurate due to the approximation of figures by some respondents and incomplete returns from others. Nevertheless, a general picture of program size may be ascertained. Reported numbers of 1983-84 academic year graduates, enrollees, and faculty are summarized in Table 1.

The range for each item is broad, indicating a good deal of variety in size; yet the arithmetic mean in each case is well below the midpoint in the range and the median is lower yet, indicating that most programs are smaller, with a few being relatively quite large. Inclusion of the figures at the 75th percentile of responses further demonstrates the skewed nature of the data toward smaller programs. While the mean and median figures provide measures or average program size, the ranges indicate that the threshold numbers of students and faculty considered necessary for continuing the operation of an undergraduate public administration program are indeed minimal. Of course, other undergraduate and graduate programs in large institutions may make it feasible to continue programs which, if more exposed or with less surrounding support, might be discontinued. Similarly, stronger departments may be able to protect certain relatively weak programs and faculty assigned only part-time to such programs may be able to keep them afloat with minimal cost.

Determining curriculum emphasis is another way of differentiating among undergraduate public administration programs. Respondents were asked to select a program emphasis or emphases from among several choices offered and/or to characterize their own alternative emphases. The generalized

**TABLE 1**  
**GRADUATES, ENROLLEES, AND FACULTY**

	<u>Mean</u>	<u>Median</u>	<u>75th Percentile</u>	<u>Range</u>	<u>N =</u>
Total Program Graduates	32.2	17	30	1-200	40
Total Program Enrollees	78.4	50	75	5-400	41
FTE Program Enrollees	56.8	37	65	2-260	33
FTE Program Faculty	6.9	4	6	1-39	38

**TABLE 2**  
**CURRICULUM EMPHASIS**

<u>Emphasis in Program</u>	<u>Respondents Selecting this Emphasis (N = 41)</u>
Management Skills	32
Public Policy Understanding	26
Research Skills	19
Public Policy Analysis	19
Political Science	18

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results for the specified choices are presented in Table 2.

Most respondents identify with several of these emphases and, although management skills and public policy understanding are more frequently identified, there is no clear dominance of one emphasis over the others. Respondents having alternative emphases added the following:

- public finance/economics/accounting (5)
- technical skills/statistics/computer science (2)
- internship (2)
- urban politics and management (2)
- small/rural administration
- judicial administration
- labor relations
- program development
- program implementation
- administrative ethics
- organizational theory
- intergovernmental relations
- economic/political history
- business
- health care administration.

Some of these emphases are relatively specific. Still, they convey a sense of what subject areas are felt to be important by those operating undergraduate public administration programs around the country.

### **SPECIFIC FINDINGS—CURRICULUM**

A major portion of the survey was devoted to an attempt to ascertain patterns of course offerings among undergraduate public administration programs. This task is made hazardous because of differing course titles and varying combinations of contents among courses in different programs. To minimize these dangers, respondents were asked to correlate their curricula to a series of 24 suggestive course titles (some of which are partially redundant) and were given the opportunity to identify additional courses by title.

**TABLE 3**  
**REQUIRED CORE COURSES**

<u>Suggestive Course Title(s)</u>	<u>Respondents Checking "Required" (N = 42)</u>
Introduction to Public Administration	38
Organization and Management/Organizational Behavior	35
Governmental/Public Finance/Budgeting	33
American Government	31
Statistics	28
Introduction to Public Policy	24
Public Personnel Administration/Human Resource Management	23
Social Research Methods	23

**TABLE 4**  
**OTHER REQUIRED COURSES**

<u>Suggestive Course Title(s)</u>	<u>Respondents Checking "Required" (N = 42)</u>
Public Policy Analysis	20
Microeconomics	19
Principles of Accounting	18
State and Local Government	18
Introduction to Data Processing	17
Macroeconomics	17

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Some respondents completed this part of the survey in less than comprehensive fashion, thus compounding the built-in difficulties. The form requested information on required courses, elective courses, and courses taught outside of the department housing the public administration program. The directions encouraged respondents to check all appropriate items in each column, suggesting multiple checks for some courses. Although most respondents followed these instructions accurately, some checked only "out-taught" for certain courses, making it impossible to determine whether these were required or elective courses or neither. Despite these problems, the aggregate results are of some approximate value.

Considering required courses first, certain core subject matter does dominate the curriculum of undergraduate public administration programs, though there is more diversity beyond this level. The kinds of courses which make up that core curriculum are listed in Table 3.

Courses with titles similar to these are required in many undergraduate public administration programs. Thus there seems in most programs to be a general introductory course required for entry into the major field as well as a required course covering basic American government. Beyond these fairly obvious choices, the selection of core subject matter is of interest, especially the relatively higher priorities given to organization/management and to finance/budgeting than to public policy and to personnel administration. In addition, the importance assigned to learning the tools of statistical and research methods (but not of public policy analysis) is evident. Even at this core level, however, only the first three course titles (an "inner core") are required in as many as three-quarters of the programs responding.

Another clustering of required course titles, listed in Table 4, is found in slightly less than half of the responding programs, though naturally different courses appear in different programs.

More interesting about these required courses than their inclusion in this middle priority level is their exclusion from the core curriculum in many programs. In particular, the predominance of technical subjects among the middle priority courses (accounting, economics, analytical methods, data

processing) reinforces the finding that most undergraduate public administration programs do not heavily emphasize technical/professional subjects. Still, these courses definitely are considered to be important undergraduate offerings in some programs, not to be left exclusively for graduate study.

Elective courses present a picture similar to that for required courses. Table 5 lists those most commonly recommended.

These elective courses are, with one exception, courses also listed among the core or middle priority required courses. The one addition here is intergovernmental relations, certainly a subject of increasing importance and popularity in the curriculum of both political science and public administration in recent years. None of these electives is a technical course; they are concentrated instead in public management and political science theory.

Many other course titles are to be found in the required and elective curricula of undergraduate public administration programs across the country. None, however, was as frequently checked on the survey as the ones already mentioned. Notable entries among the less common courses are listed in Table 6.

A most interesting entry in this list is administrative ethics. Despite much discussion, by academics at least, about its importance, it does not appear as a high priority subject in undergraduate public administration curricula.

Respondents added many other course titles to the list suggested on the survey form. These are of great variety and none was mentioned more than a few times (except for administrative law, which appears above). For purposes of display and comparison, these have been generally categorized in Table 7.

In this miscellaneous course offerings, a mixed bag offering great variety is evident. Management skills courses, both general and urban focused, dominate, with political science courses holding a strong secondary position and courses in the areas of economics/finance and theoretical public administration being relatively less important.

A factor of importance in determining a faculty's control over the shaping of curricula is the organizational location of courses. To get a feel for the level of control undergraduate public



**TABLE 5**  
**COMMON ELECTIVE COURSES**

<u>Suggestive Course Title(s)</u>	<u>Respondents Checking "Elective" (N = 42)</u>
Governmental/Public Finance/Budgeting	26
Public Personnel Administration/Human Resource Management	22
Organization and Management/Organizational Behavior	19
Intergovernmental Relations	19
State and Local Government	16

**TABLE 6**  
**LESS COMMON REQUIRED AND ELECTIVE COURSES**

<u>Suggestive Course Title</u>	<u>Checked as "Required"</u>	<u>"Elective" (N = 42)</u>
Computer Programming (primarily BASIC)	9	6
Public Speaking	8	7
Administrative Law	7	3
Ethics in Administration	5	8
Intermediate Accounting	4	9

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TABLE 7

## OTHER COURSES BY CATEGORY

<u>Category of Courses</u>	<u>Checked as "Required"</u>	<u>"Elective" (N = 42)</u>
Management Skills Related	12	14
Urban Planning/Management Related	11	11
Political Science Related	6	14
Organizational Theory/PA Philosophy	6	9
Economics/Finance Related	5	6

TABLE 8

## INTERNSHIP CREDITS AWARDED

<u>Fixed Credit Internships</u>		<u>Variable Credit Internships</u>	
<u>credits awarded (semester hours)</u>	<u>number of respondents</u>	<u>credits awarded (semester hours)</u>	<u>number of respondents</u>
3	10	1 - 3	2
4	4	1 - 4	1
6	10	3 - 6	5
8	1	3 - 9	1
9	1	4 - 8	1
12	1	6 - 12	1

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administration programs have over their curricula, survey respondents were asked to indicate which of their required and elective courses are taught outside of the department housing the program. As expected, the results show that most of the core courses in most programs are taught by program faculty. Partial exceptions are statistics which in 15 programs reporting is "out-taught," organization and management/organizational behavior (15 programs), and governmental/public finance/budgeting (2 programs). Statistics is often one of those generic courses shared by students in several disciplines. The other two are housed in some cases in generic management and/or business administration programs but are utilized in public administration curricula.

Other non-core courses are more frequently "out-taught." Such courses include macro- and microeconomics, public speaking, accounting, computer programming, and introduction to data processing. Few issues of curriculum control are raised by the teaching of these kinds of courses outside of the program except in cases where utilization of specifically public administration oriented applications and examples are especially desired.

A special section of the survey form contains questions about an internship or practicum in the curriculum of the undergraduate public administration programs surveyed. Thirty-eight of the 43 programs responding offer such a course. Of these, only 15 require all students in the program to take the internship/practicum.

Credit hours awarded vary substantially among the programs. Some internships have fixed credits assigned; others have variable credits, allowing students a choice within a specified range. The variability within each category is suggested in Table 8. Similar variations were reported in contact hours required, as shown in Table 9.

Fixed credit and fixed contact hour internships are more common than those with variable credits and contact hours. The most frequent choices are three or six credits or a range of 3-6 credits and either 20 or 40 contact hours or a range between 10-20 or 15-20 hours. There is a general but inexact relationship between programs with 3-6 semester credits and those with

**TABLE 9**  
**INTERNSHIP CONTACT HOURS REQUIRED**

<u>Fixed Contact Hours Internship</u>		<u>Variable Contact Hours Internship</u>	
<u>contact hours required per week</u>	<u>number of respondents</u>	<u>contact hours required per week</u>	<u>number of respondents</u>
8	1	10 - 20	5
10	1	10 - 35	1
15	1	15 - 20	2
16	1	16 - 20	2
18	1	20 - 40	1
20	7		
25	1		
27	1		
36	1		
40	4		

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**TABLE 10**  
**POST GRADUATION ACTIVITIES**  
**(N = 34)**

Graduate School in Public Administration	19.2%	Range = 0-100%
Graduate School in Other Fields	8.0%	0- 30%
Military Service	3.1%	0- 25%
Private Sector Employment	22.7%	0- 80%
Federal Government (nonmilitary) Employment	3.8%	0- 25%
State Government Employment	13.9%	0- 70%
Local Government Employment	19.3%	0- 60%
Other	9.6%	0- 60%

**TABLE 11**  
**KINDS AND LEVELS OF EMPLOYMENT**  
**(N = 22)**

Entry Level Direct Service Delivery	35.9%	Range = 5- 80%
Supervisory Direct Service Delivery	8.9%	0- 25%
Entry Level Finance/Budgeting/Policy Analysis	11.1%	0- 40%
Supervisory Finance/Budgeting/Policy Analysis	3.9%	0- 25%
Entry Level Personnel	14.3%	0- 40%
Supervisory Personnel	5.5%	0- 25%
Entry Level Other	16.0%	0-100%
Supervisory Other	4.1%	0- 30%

10-20 contact hours per week as well as between those with 6-12 credits and those with 20-40 hours.

Respondents were asked whether a seminar is attached to the internship/practicum course. On this subject undergraduate public administration programs are split, 18 answering affirmatively and 19 negatively. Apparently there is mixed feelings on whether debriefing in the classroom on "real world" practicum experience is a useful academic exercise.

Respondents were also asked whether intern/practicum students receive remuneration for their contact hours of "work." Only six programs answered affirmatively while 15 answered negatively. Fifteen programs have some combination of paid and unpaid placements either simultaneously or over time. Overall, there is much variation with few evident patterns in the use of practical experience courses in the undergraduate public administration programs responding.

## **SPECIFIC FINDINGS—PROGRAM GRADUATES**

The final section of the survey contains questions concerning post graduation life choices of those completing undergraduate public administration programs. First, respondents were asked to identify by approximate percentages what graduates do following graduation. Seven alternative post graduation activities were suggested and space was provided to identify additional alternatives. The aggregate results are summarized in Table 10.

Clearly, undergraduate public administration graduates in the aggregate are not being channeled or selecting themselves into one or even a few life choices following graduation. Private sector employment (not government) is the most popular single employment choice but employment in state or local government is the choice of many. Few, on the other hand, are seeking/finding employment with the federal government or in the military. Graduate study in public administration and, to a lesser degree, in other fields continues to be another popular but not dominant option. Among the "other" post graduation life choices listed are law school, health administration, educational administration, international administration, and

nonprofit or third sector employment. While the first of these might have been incorporated into the category of graduate school in other fields, the others are unique and partially overlapping but apparently are not attracting large numbers of undergraduate public administration graduates.

It is also clear from these results that significant variation exists among undergraduate public administration programs in terms of what their graduates do after graduation. The ranges for each category are broad, indicating that most programs have reported high percentages in certain categories but zero percentages in others and that the high percentage categories vary among programs. This finding would seem to indicate that individual programs do channel their graduates, some into graduate study, others to state or local employment, and others into the private market place, but that various programs tend to channel in different directions.

Finally, respondents were asked to identify by percentages their graduates entering the public service, the kinds or levels of employment in which these graduates tend to start. The aggregate results are presented in Table 11.

As would be expected, most undergraduate public administration graduates enter the public service in entry level positions. Nevertheless, some, especially in direct service delivery, are able to begin at a supervisory level. Neither finance/budgeting/policy analysis nor personnel seems to be as open for undergraduate public administration graduates as direct service delivery; however, the personnel area seems slightly more accessible than finance/budgeting/policy analysis. This finding appears to be inconsistent with the finding of a relative bias in aggregate undergraduate core curriculum choices toward finance and personnel administration. Care must be taken, however, not to overemphasize a relatively slight difference in percentage results.

Respondents were again given the opportunity to write in "other" categories at both the entry and supervisory levels of employment. Other entry level categories identified include planning and analysis, research, hospital administration, the military, and general administration. Other supervisory levels identified include administrative assistant and health commis-

sioner.

As with the results on what graduates do after graduation, the ranges of percentages identified by respondents for various public employment categories are wide, especially for entry level categories. Once again, the differences among undergraduate public administration programs becomes evident even within patterns of general consistency across the country.

## CONCLUSION

In conclusion, then, one is brought back to the basic finding of this survey research—the existence of great variety within a foundation of commonality. How solid, however, is that foundation? In terms of organizational structure, political science maintains some degree of influence. Yet the curriculum diverges into higher priority subject areas such as management skills, financial management, personnel management, and public policy. Technical subjects such as accounting, economics, computer use, and policy analysis hold a secondary status in most program curricula and political science curricula are often relegated to a status of strong contender among elective courses. Although most core courses are controlled and taught by program faculty, many elective courses, especially technical subjects, are often taught by faculty in other academic units. Most program curricula include an experiential internship or practicum course, yet the approach and contents vary considerably, as measured in terms of it being required, its credits awarded, contact hours required, inclusion of a seminar, and compensation of students.

If organizational structures and curricula tend to vary considerably, most undergraduate public administration degrees offered retain the aura of the liberal arts and sciences, rejecting a fixed BPA-to-MPA professional educational ladder. Beyond this degree of similarity, however, some programs have elected to focus on particular directions such as public affairs, public policy, planning, or urban management.

Whatever the curriculum choices and program directions, programs around the country also vary considerably in size, some being truly minimal and most having less than 75 students



and six faculty. They also vary in their channeling of program graduates into a variety of employment and graduate life choices and, for those choosing public sector employment, a variety of areas and levels of starting positions.

The 43 institutions responding to this survey are all members of NASPAA. If any mutually accepted foundation exists for undergraduate public administration, NASPAA's standards surely are that foundation. Yet the results of this survey demonstrate more diversity than similarity in practice. From the point of view of a particular institution seeking to review and improve its undergraduate public administration program, these results leave basic questions unanswered and major choices open; yet they do raise those questions and lay out those choices with clarity for consideration.

Furthermore, they suggest that the design of any particular program is and probably should be unique and situational, within the limits of the generally applicable standards which constitute the NASPAA foundation (actually more of a framework). Situational factors may be both institutional and environmental, having to do with academic organization and faculty expertise and responsibilities as well as with student body characteristics and expectations and public labor market realities. The challenge for each individual program in undergraduate public administration is to identify the parameters of generally applicable standards, then to isolate those situational factors which locally should influence choices within those parameters, and finally to join the two into a unique program design which yet retains the strength of the common standards.

This article has reported on survey research seeking to define the parameters of the NASPAA framework. This information should be generally useful for many undergraduate programs. However, it offers no guidelines for defining local situational factors or for how to incorporate them into a program's design. Although by its nature defining uniqueness cannot be reduced to formulas and rules, an additional research task worthy of consideration is the development of useful guidelines for identifying important situational factors and for building their curriculum related imperatives appropriately into programs based on the NASPAA framework of generally applicable

**standards.**

## **NOTES**

- 1. This article was originally written as a report to the Edward Waters College Public Administration Advisory Council. Subsequently, it was presented in expanded form at the Eighth National Conference on Teaching Public Administration in St. Louis, Missouri (April, 1985). The author would like to acknowledge the comments of an anonymous referee which were helpful in revising the report into this article.**
- 2. Persons interested may receive a list of the responding institutions as well as the survey form used upon request to the author at Edward Waters College, Jacksonville, Florida 32209.**

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