

MPA CAPSTONE REQUIREMENTS: The Case of the MPA Programs at the School of International and Public Affairs at Columbia University

by Steven Cohen and William Eimicke
School of International and Public Affairs
Columbia University

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I- INTRODUCTION

This paper describes the approach to capstone instruction employed by the three MPA programs in one school. Its purpose is largely descriptive, although there are some brief sections of analysis where we discuss the objectives of the courses and compare them to each other. Our hope is to stimulate a conversation with colleagues about their own capstone courses in order to further develop and improve these important elements of public administration curricula.

Capstone courses are increasingly common in public administration programs, and the literature on public administration education has addressed the objectives and issues raised by these courses for some time. Although the courses vary in structure, they all aim to provide instruction in the professional norms, ethical standards and analytical skills integral to successful public management (Allard, 2002, p. 690).

The Graduate Program in Public Policy and Administration began at Columbia University in 1977. By the spring of 1982, a client-based policy workshop was undertaken and in the fall of 1983 the program began a management simulation workshop. This two-semester workshop sequence (management simulation in the fall and client-based project in the spring) continued until May of 2003 when the management workshop was dropped as the program deemphasized

management requirements in its core curriculum, and increased its emphasis on policy and analytic concentrations.

In 1999, Columbia began its mid-career Executive MPA program and developed a different type of capstone requirement for these more experienced mid-career professionals. We believed that a client oriented or a management simulation workshop would duplicate experiences the executive students had at work. Instead we decided to center the Executive MPA capstone experience around the student's place of work. We developed a new capstone course entitled the Portfolio Presentation Workshop. Students enrolled in the Portfolio course must write a piece of research, a case study or a plan for their place of work. They also must annotate five pieces of written work prepared while in the program and indicate how the lessons learned in the program are reflected in that work.

In 2002, the School of International and Public Affairs and the Earth Institute at Columbia University began its Master of Public Administration Program in Environmental Science and Policy. While the other MPA programs at Columbia designed their capstone courses to follow their core curriculum, this intensive one-year program could not afford that luxury. For that reason, the workshop program combined both core curriculum and capstone elements. The workshop was required in all three of the program's semesters. It included the same management simulation (fall semester) and client based (spring semester) workshop featured in the MPA Program in the 1980's and 1990's. All capstone

projects in this program address environmental policy and management issues, and in the summer before the fall management simulation, teams begin working on the proposed legislation or treaty that is the subject of the simulation. They explore the science of the environmental problem and its proposed solution, and learn to communicate that science to non-scientific policy makers.

This paper describes the capstone requirements in these three MPA programs, describes their role in the curriculum and their overall purpose and mission. We detail and analyze curricular issues raised by faculty and students engaged in these courses and conclude with lessons that may be applicable to other MPA programs.

II. THE MPA WORKSHOP: THE PLACE OF THE WORKSHOP IN THE CURRICULUM

In the design of the MPA program that evolved by the mid 1980's, the program had a core curriculum with first year requirements characterized by two semester sequences in quantitative analysis, microeconomics and policy analysis, and public/financial management. Students were also required to complete four electives on the political, social and economic context of public policy and four courses in an area of concentration. Concentrations included policy issue areas such as environment, social welfare, health and national security or analytic tools such as finance, management and policy analysis. In place of the traditional

masters thesis the program developed a two-semester workshop sequence. The only specific course requirement in the fall of the second year of the MPA program was a management simulation workshop and the spring was a client-based policy or management analysis. This continued until 2002, when the workshop sequence was dropped from two semesters to one and the management simulation was eliminated. Other curriculum changes in 2002 included dropping the second semester of quantitative analysis, adding a year-long course on the politics of policy making, creating the option of a more theoretical version of public management and changing financial management from a course requirement to a field requirement.

The Operation of the Workshop Pre-2002

The chief advantage of this Workshop experience is the practical training gained by working on real problems where student analyses and reports may have an impact on actual public sector operations. The basic objective of the Workshops in Applied Public Management and Applied Policy Analysis (pre-2002) was to teach students how to integrate knowledge and organize an effort to solve a public policy problem. Vining and Weimer note that: "Projects provide sufficient time for the discovery of proto-alternatives and their conversation into concrete policy alternatives." (Vining, and Weimer 2002, p. 699). Even experienced practitioners find it useful to reflect on the process of conducting policy analysis.

There were a number of critical skills that the Workshop employed and a number of critical concepts it taught. The skills included:

- Working in groups and dealing with group conflict.
- Managing interdependent analytic projects.
- Highly focused data collection.
- Memo and report writing.
- Developing and conducting formal oral briefings.
- Operating under tight deadlines.
- Accepting criticism.
- Dealing with clients, bosses and bureaucratic clearances.
- Understanding and conducting analysis within the constraints of the political environment.
- Reading legislation, writing budgets and writing position descriptions.

The concepts include:

- The connections between policy intent, program design, organizational capacity and political feasibility.
- The relationship of program to organization and organization to budget.
- The design of studies that are methodologically rigorous and defensible within the constraints of available resources.
- The fundamentals of measurement and social science research methodologies.
- Administrative discretion.
- Program design.

- Organizational design.
- Financial controls and performance management.
- Total Quality Management.
- Developing and analyzing options.
- Developing and applying criteria.
- Measuring program costs and benefits.

(Cohen, Eimicke and Ukeles, 1995, p. 607-608)

The Workshop in Applied Public Management, taught in the fall, emphasized management issues. Students enrolled in small, faculty-advised project teams and designed a detailed operational plan for addressing an important public policy problem. Each workshop faculty member selected a piece of proposed but not yet enacted state, federal or local legislation (or a U.N. Resolution) and students were asked to develop a plan for implementing and managing the new program (Cohen, Eimicke and Ukeles p. 607).

In the spring semester Workshop in Applied Policy Analysis, new groups were formed and analytic projects were undertaken for real-world clients in government and nonprofit agencies. These teams, working under the supervision of faculty members, wrote a report analyzing an actual policy or managerial problem faced by a government agency. In both terms, second-year MPAs learned the craft of policy and management analysis, gave formal briefings,

conducted research on politically sensitive issues, wrote reports, and drafted policy memoranda.

This spring semester client oriented workshop continued after 2002 and was moved to the Fall semester. Since it began in 1982, over 100 government agencies and nonprofit organizations have requested and received analytic products from Columbia's Workshop. Students take the workshop quite seriously, and devote more time to it than a typical course. While the course requires little advance preparation by faculty, it usually occupies more faculty time than a regular course. The time is spent in small group meetings, large group meetings and discussions with the project's management team and task leaders. The faculty must review multiple drafts of each output and in the client workshop devote substantial time to teaching and managing client relations.

Columbia's two-semester workshop sequence lasted from the 1982-1983 academic year to 2002. In the late 1970's, the workshop was a one semester case-based course, and a client workshop was first offered in the spring semester of 1982. Workshops at Columbia have always had between 10-15 students on a team, a faculty advisor receiving full course credit for teaching the course, and a student project manager and deputy director. In the early 1990's clients for the spring semester workshop began to include nonprofit organizations that had significant relationships with government, as well as international organizations.

In the 1980's and 1990's, the workshop sequence at Columbia was a logical extension of the faculty's belief that the profession of public affairs is a craft and not a science. The workshop was built on the analytic competencies developed by the core curriculum. In that core, management was required because public policy is implemented by large complex organizations and one must understand how to influence the behavior of those organizations. Microeconomics has been required because it provides a formal and structured way of looking at alternative courses of action and the probable impacts of those actions. Quantitative analysis was required because with over 6 billion people on this planet we cannot understand the reality they create by looking at the world one case at a time. Statistics allows us to understand the world by looking at a random sample of it, rather than all of it.

However, all these analytic tools are just that-- tools-- they do not provide answers (Cohen, Eimicke and Ukeles 1995, p. 606). Although some analysts think that quantitative analysis alone provides answers, they are wrong. Judgment, experience, heart, intuition, values and rigorous analysis provide answers; and it takes an experienced craft person to bring all of those elements together. In the Columbia MPA curriculum during this period, it was in the workshop that our emerging public affairs professionals honed their craft. That was where they learned the limits to the use of the tools they had been taught

how to use. They also learn how to use the tools in combination and integrate them as they attempted to solve public policy problems.

Workshop Post-2002

While the MPA curriculum was modified to permit more flexibility and more of an emphasis on concentrations, the client-based workshop was retained as the program's capstone course. The workshop handbook describing the course's requirements since the fall semester of 2003 was identical to the spring workshop of previous years. The tradeoff made by those revising the MPA curriculum was to provide students with additional room to shape their own program of study from the 1,000 courses open to SIPA students. While the management and group process skills developed by the fall management simulation workshop was sacrificed, the client-based experiences of what had been the spring workshop were retained.

III. THE WORKSHOP SEQUENCE IN THE MPA IN ENVIRONMENTAL SCIENCE AND POLICY

In June, 2002, Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs and Earth Institute launched the MPA in Environmental Science and Policy at the university's Biosphere II Center in Oracle Arizona. Four full time faculty and a number of part time and adjunct faculty were hired to teach the class which began with 43 students in June 2002 and graduated 39 in May, 2003. In the summer of 2002, a new Earth Institute Director, Jeffrey Sachs came to Columbia,

committed to developing a comprehensive set of educational offerings in environmental policy, science and sustainable development. He and Lisa Anderson, the Dean of SIPA, decided that the strategy of building educational offerings in this field at Columbia would be better served by moving the program to New York and to the university's Morningside campus in New York City and its Lamont-Doherty Earth Observatory in Palisades, New York. In June 2003, 46 students attended the program's first orientation session in New York. In May 2005, the program graduated its 137th student and by June, the class of 2006 had enrolled an additional 58 students.

The Environmental MPA Program has a typical MPA curriculum with economics, quantitative analysis, politics and management at its core. Its key distinction from the "regular MPA" is that all of its case studies, data and electives and projects deal with environmental policy issues. As Cohen noted in a paper he delivered at NASPAA's 2003 conference:

The analytic tools we develop [in the Environmental MPA program] are oriented to those most helpful to the environmental issue area. As they obtain knowledge about typical MPA analytic methods and context, students obtain a tremendous depth of understanding about this single issue-area. This depth of knowledge is not cost-free. It is "purchased" at the expense of a breadth of knowledge of other issue areas. It sacrifices the advantages of comparison between issue areas. However, it provides students with intense exposure to the field of environmental policy. In addition students in the program are exposed to a "summer of science" curriculum of three courses in environmental science. Environmental issues are very difficult to understand without a rudimentary knowledge of earth systems science, and as part of the program's concentration, we require an intense sequence in environmental science. (Cohen, 2003)

While the capstone courses in our other MPA programs follow the core curriculum, the intensive one-year format of the Environmental MPA program

requires the workshop to be taught simultaneously with the rest of the curriculum. This means that the workshop provides instruction in basic applied management and analytic skills, but also asks students to apply that instruction to policy problem solving as they master the techniques.

The basic objective of the Workshops in Applied Earth Systems Management and Applied Earth Systems Policy Analysis is to teach students how to integrate knowledge, and organize an effort to solve an earth systems public policy problem. It provides an opportunity to move beyond multi-disciplinary learning to integrative interdisciplinary problem solving. In the Workshop, Masters students integrate their understanding of natural science, social science, policy studies and management in a problem solving exercise.

Summer and Fall Semester: The Workshop in Applied Earth Systems Management

In the summer and fall semesters, the Workshop emphasizes management issues. Students enroll in faculty-advised project teams with 10-12 members and are asked to design a detailed operational plan for addressing an important public policy problem. Each workshop faculty member selects a piece of proposed but not yet enacted state, federal or local environmental law (or a U.N. Resolution) and students are asked to develop a plan for implementing and managing the new program. In the summer semester, the workshop focuses on

the science basis of the management problem and groups are required to write reports explaining the environmental science aspects of a management problem to political decision makers who are not scientists. In the fall semester, the workshop completes the operational plan for implementing the program. The emphasis in the summer workshop is to develop tools for managing the work of scientists and explaining science to policy makers. In both the summer and fall workshops the projects selected will be central issues in the two earth systems problem themes that the cohort will focus on throughout their three semesters of study.

Spring Semester: The Workshop in Applied Earth Systems Policy Analysis

In the spring semester, new groups are formed and analytic projects are undertaken for real-world clients in government and nonprofit agencies. These teams, working under the supervision of faculty members, write a report analyzing an actual environmental policy or managerial problem faced by a government or nonprofit organization. This spring workshop is the equivalent of the pre-2002 MPA spring semester client workshop, and today's current fall semester MPA capstone workshop class.

IV. THE EXECUTIVE MPA PROGRAM PORTFOLIO PRESENTATION

CAPSTONE CLASS

In an earlier paper about Marketing Executive MPAs we noted that about 25% of the top 125 ranked MPA programs in the U.S. News rankings had executive or mid career programs. As we noted then:

The nature of these programs varies widely. Some are specifically tailored and feature specially scheduled course offerings, while others are tailored curriculum designs using existing course offerings. Some programs mix the two. Obviously, the cost of offering an executive program is much lower if it is possible to use existing courses rather than fielding new ones. Some executive programs are non-degree certificate programs such as those offered by the Heinz School at Carnegie Mellon. Most are courses of study leading to a Master of Public Administration.

Some Executive Programs, such as the one we have begun at Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs, offer a weekend or evening schedule. This type of program is designed to tap into a large local market in a major metropolitan area, or to a more concentrated market in a government capital where students are expected to continue working while going to school. Other Executive Programs such as those at the Kennedy School and the Maxwell School offer intensive one-year in-residence programs for students willing and able to leave their jobs for a year. Some programs such as those at Rutgers-Newark and the University of Utah have weekend schedules complemented by intensive weeklong sessions in the summer.

The notion of an Executive Program may seem peculiar to many traditional MPA programs, since much of their current constituency are part-time students who are currently "in-service" to government. Many NASPAA schools are located in state capitals and serve as a professional education and training resource to state governments. (Cohen 2000).

At Columbia and many other schools with executive programs this tends to be characterized by some or all of the following features:

- A curriculum that replaces internship requirements with work experience.
- An effort to allow the student to utilize their workplace as a subject for research projects, and assignments which require the student to use workplace examples in place of more traditional case material.
- A schedule that allows, and in fact requires, students to continue to work while in school.
- Additional support services such as automatic registration, assistance in obtaining reading materials, and additional help in quantitative courses.
- Conference –like amenities such as higher quality, professional-style classrooms and meals or snacks provided by the program.

Executive MPA students are given advanced standing for the part of the non-executive program's year long "Politics of Policymaking course" which features public sector speakers and discussion and analysis of the viewpoints presented by the speakers. They are also given credit for the required course in professional development. These courses, as well as the internship requirement and the workshop in applied public management/policy analysis, are considered unnecessary for these more experienced students. In place of the workshop requirement, Executive MPA students enroll in a Portfolio Presentation course.

The core curriculum of the Executive Program matched the “non-executive” program when it was established. It includes required courses in public management, financial management, applied microeconomics and quantitative analysis. In the non-executive MPA program prior to 2002, Columbia MPA students were required to complete four courses on the political, economic, social and historical context of public policy. Students could select these courses from over two hundred course offered each year by Columbia’s Arts and Sciences graduate departments in political science, economics, history and sociology and from the offerings of SIPA and Columbia’s other professional schools. In the Executive Program context, courses were folded into the concentrations, with a distinct set of proscribed contextual courses for each concentration.

In advanced management and finance concentration students enrolled in the following required context courses:

- The Political Environment of Policymaking
- The Economic Environment of Public Policy
- Public Sector Ethics

They were also required to enroll in five concentration courses

- Accounting
- Public Finance
- Public Sector Marketing, Strategic Planning and Communication
- Nonprofit Management and Finance
- Management Innovation

For the International Economic Policy and Management concentration they enrolled in the following context courses:

- Open Economy Macroeconomic Analysis
- International Political Economy
- Global Context of Policymaking

They were also required to enroll in five concentration courses:

- International Trade and Development
- International Finance and Monetary Policy
- International Economic Policy Analysis
- Accounting
- Advanced Management Techniques for International Policymakers

The portfolio capstone course is designed to take place in the student's final two semesters. In that course they work with a faculty advisor to develop a case study of a management problem faced by the organizations where they work, or some other piece of analytic work such as a plan of a policy analysis. They also are required to annotate at least five pieces of written work they drafted at their place of employment while at Columbia to indicate how their professional written work reflected lessons learned in the program. Students also provide progress reports and a presentation of the case and other written work to the student's faculty advisor and a small group of fellow students.

- **A case study of a management issue at the student's place of work or another piece of analytic work.**

Students develop a case study of a management problem or policy issue faced by the organization that they work for while in the program or worked for in the past. The project selected should have a life cycle of at least six months. The case study presents a problem that can at least be partially addressed through concepts or skills that are taught in the program's curriculum. Students can also develop a plan or analysis to be used by their employer. Several students have developed business plans and strategic plans for their portfolio paper.

- **A collection and annotation of written work from the student's place of work.**

A collection of at least 5 pieces of written work the student has produced on the job, since the beginning of their course of study at Columbia. Each piece of written work is accompanied by a brief discussion (no more than two pages), of the specific skills and concepts learned in the curriculum that were of use to produce that particular piece of work.

- **Presentation of written work.**

The Portfolio Faculty Advisor convenes three sessions with all of the students they are advising.

- At the first session, which takes place in late January, students present a progress report on the case they are studying and discuss the non-case study portion of the portfolio.
- At the second session of the course in late February, each student makes a 10-minute presentation of the degree to which skills learned in the EMPA program are reflected in the written work they include in their portfolio.
- At the third session of the course, which takes place in Mid-April each student makes a ten-minute presentation of their case study before the faculty mentor and the rest of the faculty member's Portfolio advisees. After the presentation, students revise their case study to reflect points raised by faculty and student comments.

V. A COMPARISON AND ANALYSIS OF THE MPA CAPSTONES AT COLUMBIA

In the three programs discussed here, the capstone has played a different role in each program. In all cases the capstone plays a key and integral role in the curriculum. The chief function of the capstone is to allow the student to integrate and apply the techniques and knowledge gained in the remainder of the curriculum. In the executive program this is done by applying this knowledge to problem solving in the student's work environment. In the other programs application and integration is achieved by addressing a real or simulated public policy or management problem.

All three capstone experiences share the goal of applying enhanced analytic tools to public sector problem solving. They emphasize the need to tailor these tools to the particular needs of the organization and situation that is using them. They all require the use of project planning and work planning. In the case of the workshop classes, there is an emphasis on group work, and learning to deal with tight deadlines.

The environmental workshop is both a capstone experience, meant as a conclusion to the program in its final semester and an exercise in immersion education: an opportunity for learning by doing. The “regular” MPA workshop is no longer offered in the final semester of study and so in some respects it is not a capstone course. However it is a second year course that is offered in the fall semester and is designed to follow the program’s core curriculum and apply it to real-world policy and management problems.

Traditionally, Masters degrees culminated in a masters thesis that performed many of the educational functions of a Ph.D. dissertation. Fifty years ago, the masters degree was seen by many as a terminal research degree, many faculty at universities did not hold Ph.D.s. During this era, when a masters was offered in an arts and science subject, it was seen as a step on the way to a doctorate or as a less developed version of the same material that a doctorate would cover.

With the development of professional education, the concept of a practitioner-oriented, non-academic degree was institutionalized. Professional education in business, law, public administration and policy, public health and other subjects developed from arts and science origins to train practitioners (Brown and Benson, 2005, p. 674). The pedagogic roots of these programs (conscious or not) were in medicine where MDs did not write theses or dissertations, but interned as prospective practitioners. Unlike Ph.D. education, professional school faculty do not try to replicate themselves as scholars, but educate future public sector practitioners. As Francine Romero observes: “They emphasize training students not as scholars or philosophers, but as public service professionals whose responsibility is to collect and assess reliable information for clients in need of feasible advice” (Romero, 2001, p. 773). Workshop capstone courses provide an element of this clinical experience. This clinical learning is reinforced when coupled with an internship experience, particularly one that requires a degree of reflection on lessons learned. It is further reinforced through the use of case studies and other forms of applied education.

Executive MPA students are already practitioners and so the purpose of their capstone is to apply the new skills they have learned to their daily work and also to reflect on the process. The goal is to provide an opportunity for these students to develop a degree of self-consciousness of the types of problems they and their colleagues work on for their portfolio. This will enable them to recognize types of policy and management problems and methods for addressing those problems.

At Columbia's School of International and Public Affairs all of this was developed in the past quarter century. The original curriculum proposed in 1977 for the MPA program did not have a workshop, and the first client workshop did not begin for another five years. In the past twenty-three years SIPA has added the capstone workshops described here as well as workshops for concentrations in:

- International Economic and Political Development (featuring projects outside the U.S. for development NGOs and UN units)
- International Banking and Finance
- Environmental Policy Studies
- Energy Management and Policy

This form of learning adds an important dimension to the curriculum and one that we are still learning how to deliver.

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