

# NASPAA Accreditation: Does Membership Have Privileges?

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*The central purpose of this research was to determine why MPA programs value accreditation by NASPAA in the face of the fairly limited rate of accreditation among graduate programs in public administration. Academic prestige turned out to be the primary reason for seeking accreditation. This has both positive and negative implications for NASPAA. Positively, accreditation is perceived as an important benefit by a substantial number of programs. However, the importance of academic prestige is decidedly limited for two very different types of programs. First, those in institutes or centers evidently are, perhaps surprisingly, less interested in accreditation, presumably because of their “applied” orientation. Second, many programs at premier universities do not have much interest in accreditation because their academic prestige is already assured. Consequently, unaccredited MPA programs in general do not feel that a lack of accreditation has impaired their programs. In large part, this may result from the fact that the vast majority of public sector employers do not consider the accreditation status of a program when hiring employees. Our research, therefore, leads us to believe that accreditation is not as significant as it should or could be given the role that NASPAA has taken in accrediting programs. Overall, employers as well as MPA program faculty were not confident that the benefits of NASPAA accreditation outweighed the efforts needed to secure it. As a result, a large number of programs that appeared to meet the minimum qualifications for accreditation and those who could work toward achieving that goal chose not to do so. Hence, this suggests to us that NASPAA is limited in its ability to grow and should make accreditation more inviting to programs and employers. This is particularly true for programs which believe that the reputation of their university overrides the need for accreditation.*

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## Ensuring Professional Qualifications and Competence

Providing students with a solid foundation in formal education is at the crux of the development of many professions. These include law, medicine, business, as well as public administration programs. One important method of guaranteeing that professional programs at universities provide such education is to provide oversight of their quality through formal accreditation by professional or educational associations. Thus, as stated by Muuka and Hassan (1998), accreditation is “the process whereby an organization or agency recognizes a college or program of study as having met certain predetermined qualifications or standards” (p. 35). Yet, program accreditation of their educational courses of study is not the only means for evaluating the qualifications

and competence of people entering professions. They can, for example, be required to demonstrate professional competence by passing individual examinations for licensure or certification.

Table 1, for example, suggests that licensure may be far more important than accreditation for most professions in the United States today. This table includes data on eleven prominent professions that accredit university programs. In only two of these fields, medicine and education, is graduating from an accredited program essential for students planning to enter the profession. Rather, it is much more common for professions to require licensure as six of the eleven in Table 1 do: education, health administration, law, medicine, nursing, and social work. In addition, certification, such as the CPA in accounting or OB/

**TABLE 1**  
**Accreditation, Licensure and Certification**  
**in Professional Academic Majors**

	Accrediting Body	Program Accreditation Required	Licensure
Accounting	Yes	No	No
Business Adm.	Yes	No	No
Criminal Justice	Yes	No	No
Education	Yes	Yes	Yes
Health Adm.	Yes	No	Yes*
Law	Yes	No**	Yes
Medicine	Yes	Yes	Yes
Nursing	Yes	No	Yes
Public Adm.	Yes	No	No
Social Work	Yes	No	Yes
Urban Planning	Yes	No	No

\* All but 5 states require the passage of an external exam.

\*\*Students from non-accredited will face limitations and restrictions when attempting to take the bar exam in many states.

Sources: Administrators from the relevant programs at the University of Memphis, the University of Tennessee, and Auburn University.

GYN in medicine, can be used without being mandatory for all accountants or medical doctors to display a proof of a specific professional competence. Consequently, accreditation may not be as vital to a professional program as would normally be expected. For example, less than a fifth of the MBA programs in America (303 out of an estimated 1,600 in 1995) are accredited by the American Assembly of Collegiate Schools of Business or AACSB (Muuka and Hassan, 1998: 35); and, at least in absolute numbers, there is even less emphasis on accreditation in public administration programs. For example, in 2003, only 247 university programs were institutional members of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA); and of these only 141 or 57% were fully accredited (NASPAA, 2003).

This certainly raises the question of whether, for the field of public administration, NASPAA membership has privileges. The relatively small number

of accredited programs implies that many Master of Public Administration or MPA programs seemingly are not exerting much effort to gain accreditation. This paper, hence, explores why programs seek accreditation. The first section briefly reviews how NASPAA assumed the position of the official accreditation body for the field of public administration; the second applies statistical analysis to test several explanations for why "institutional members" of NASPAA either are or are not accredited; and the last two then explicitly focus on perceptions of the advantages and disadvantages of accreditation. In general, we found that enhancing academic prestige provides a strong motive for seeking accreditation, but that there are widespread perceptions that accreditation does not play much of a role in helping graduates enter the profession of public service. Consequently, a significant number of high quality programs display little interest in NASPAA accreditation.

## The Evolution of Accrediting Public Administration Programs

The movement toward the formal accreditation of graduate programs in public administration and public affairs evolved fairly gradually over the postwar era, culminating in the mid-1980s. The Council on Graduate Education for Public Administration (CGEPA) was formed in the late 1950s by the Deans of Public Affairs Schools and the Directors of MPA programs in conjunction with the Annual Meetings of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA). In 1970, CGEPA reconstituted itself into the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) which gradually moved toward greater institutional independence from ASPA and, with some controversy between small and large programs, toward becoming the agency for the formal accreditation of MPA programs.

NASPAA agreed on a somewhat loose set of program standards in 1977; institutional reviews of individual programs commenced during the 1978-1979 academic year; and the first listing of programs found to be in substantial conformity with these standards that occurred in 1980. In 1983, the process was converted to formal accreditation; and, as the culmination of the accreditation process, the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation recognized NASPAA as an official accrediting agency in 1986. Accreditation came to be based on a detailed self-study of a program, followed by an intensive peer review. Substantively, accreditation required the development of core curricular elements (but not a common curriculum), a minimum faculty of five full-time core members, adequate institutional support, and various other indicators of program quality (Breux, et al., 2003; Cleary, 1990; Henry, 1995; NASPAA, 2003).

NASPAA's membership grew rapidly during the 1970s from 65 when the organization was founded in 1970 to just over 210 years later. However, there was almost no growth during the 1980s; for example, in 1989 NASPAA had 215 institutional members. Since then, institutional membership has grown

gradually to the current (as of June 2003) 247 institutional members. Not all institutional members seek accreditation, though. At present for example, only 141 programs or 57% are accredited (Cleary, 1990; Henry, 1995; NASPAA, 2003). Since NASPAA membership itself involves significant costs and demonstrates a considerable interest in and commitment to the goals of the organization, the question certainly arises as to why over four in ten institutional members are not accredited.

### Three Explanations for Why NASPAA Institutional Members are Accredited

There are, thus, three categories of MPA programs. First, there are approximately 140 programs that are fully accredited by NASPAA; second, another 100 or so programs are institutional members of NASPAA but not accredited; and, finally, the vast majority of graduate programs in public administration, affairs, and policy have no association with NASPAA whatsoever (Clark and Menifield, 2004). The basic approach to explaining why programs are accredited is to compare accredited to unaccredited programs. Ideally, all three categories of MPA programs would be used in such an analysis. However, because of the problem of identifying and sampling all programs not associated with NASPAA, most studies focus on the differences between accredited and unaccredited NASPAA members (Breux, et al., 2003; Clark and Menifield, 2004; Cleary, 1990). Even given the clear limitations of such analyses, they have produced insightful and convincing results.

Here, we use data from a survey of 207 NASPAA members in 1999-2000 (see Clark and Menifield, 2004, for a more detailed description of this survey), supplemented by objective data on MPA programs from NASPAA and the Carnegie Foundation (Carnegie Foundation, 2000; NASPAA, 1997, 1998 & 2003) to test three explanations or hypotheses about why some NASPAA institutional members are accredited, while others are not. In particular, we hypothesize that 1) program size, 2) prestige and resource base, and 3) institutional setting should all affect accreditation:

#### H1 Program Size

The larger the faculty a program has, the more likely it is to be accredited both because of NASPAA's requirement for a minimum number of core faculty and because of the greater resources available to larger programs.

NASPAA requires accredited programs to maintain a minimum of five full-time faculty members with responsibilities lying primarily within public administration (NASPAA, 2003). Clark and Menifield (2004) found in their survey of MPA programs that faculty size was a major deterrent to programs seeking accreditation. Further, they found, using statistical analysis, that accreditation was correlated to faculty size. However, once faculty size reached six, size was virtually unrelated to accreditation.

#### H2 Prestige and Resource Base

Programs in universities with higher Carnegie rankings will be more likely to be accredited because of their higher prestige and greater resource bases.

Initially, we decided to use a "type of university" variable identical to that used by Muuka and

Hassan (1998) when developing this hypothesis (p. 37). Our initial analysis indicated that type of university was correlated to accreditation (gamma -.43 at the .02 level of significance). However, we decided to use Carnegie rankings rather than "type of university" because *a priori* programs at research universities with their almost inevitable greater resource base would have an easier time securing accreditation. Hence, this variable would serve as a better proxy for prestige.

#### H3 Institutional Setting

Programs that are institutionally independent (i.e., located in their own school, department, or institute) will be more likely to be accredited because their public administration identity is more distinctive and because they don't have to compete for resources from non-public administration constituencies.

We predict that independent MPA programs would place a higher value on accreditation than programs that are situated in and administratively subordinated to other departments, colleges, and schools because of their unit's

**TABLE 2**  
Accreditation by Faculty Size

		Number of Faculty					
		<5	5	6-8	9-15	>15	Total
Accred.	Yes	6%	54%	75%	78%	70%	(117)
	No	94%	46%	25%	22%	30%	(74)
N=		(31)	(26)	(61)	(50)	(23)	(191)
Gamma = .54 Approximate Significance = .000							

**TABLE 3**  
Accreditation by Carnegie Status

		Carnegie Status			
		Master's	Doctoral	Research	Total
Accred.	Yes	60%	59%	64%	(126)
	No	40%	41%	36%	(81)
N=		(84)	(46)	(73)	(203)
Gamma = .07 Approximate Significance = .55					

**TABLE 4**  
**Accreditation by Institutional Location**

		Institutional Location					Total
		School or College	Dept. of PA or Policy	Institute or Center	Political Sci. Dept.	Other	
Accred.	Yes	68%	71%	48%	53%	50%	(126)
	No	32%	29%	52%	47%	50%	(81)
N=		(50)	(56)	(21)	(70)	(10)	(207)

Cramer's V = .19 Approximate Significance = .107

exclusive identification with public administration. Cleary (1990) found a direct correlation between "organizational setting" and core MPA requirements.

Our first hypothesis that larger programs would be more likely to be accredited is clearly confirmed by the crosstabulation in Table 2 with its strong positive correlation (Gamma = .54; approximate significance = .000). As would certainly be expected from NASPAA's "five core faculty" rule, almost none of the programs (only 6%) with less than five full-time faculty are accredited. For programs with just five full-time faculty, barely half (54%) are accredited. Conversely, three-quarters of the programs with more than six or more faculty have NASPAA accreditation. However, once this critical threshold of six is reached, faculty size has no impact on accreditation rate. In stark contrast, Table 3 shows that the type of university in which an MPA program is situated, indicated here by its Carnegie ranking, is totally uncorrelated with accreditation (Gamma = .07).

Our final hypothesis that institutionally independent programs would be more likely to be accredited is supported by the data in Table 4. However, the relationship is clearly less pronounced than for program size; and a significant caveat must be made to the hypothesis. Overall, the strength of the relationship in Table 4 is only weak-to-moderate (Cramer's V = .19; approximate significance = .107). Substantively in terms of the different type of institutional arrangements, MPA programs in schools or individual departments of public

administration, affairs, or policy are much more likely to be accredited than those in political science departments or other non-independent institutional settings (70% to 51%). The one surprise, though, is that MPA programs associated with institutes or centers have a low rate of accreditation (48%) despite their independence. Moreover, this is not a result of their being small since 83% of the institutes and centers have more than six faculty, a higher percentage than for any of the other types of programs. This suggests that such institutes (which tend to have applied emphases) may be less concerned with academic accreditation than MPA programs with more direct academic ties.

### The Benefits of Accreditation

Responses to our survey of MPA Directors allows us to go beyond the aggregate statistics about what factors

are or are not associated with being accredited to get a more explicit picture of what are seen as the primary benefits of accreditation. When the respondents were asked about specific benefits of accreditation, they clearly indicated that the NASPAA "stamp of approval" brought greater institutional prestige and helped improve the quality of faculty and students. Table 5 shows prestige among peer programs was by far the most important reason for seeking and achieving accreditation, as it was cited by 92% of the MPA Directors who responded to the question. In addition, 67% felt that accreditation improved the name recognition and national ranking of their program. Similarly, about 40% felt that accreditation improved the quality of the students applying to their programs and of the applicants for faculty positions.

These benefits of increased program prestige and quality, moreover, do not appear to come at the cost of unwanted NASPAA interference in the structure and operations of MPA programs. In the field of business, for example, many programs do not seek accreditation by AACSB because that agency is viewed as limiting innovation in MBA programs and stifling the diversity of business curricula (Muuka and Hassan, 1998). Table 6, in contrast, shows that such views are rare among the Directors of unaccredited programs in our study. Rather, the lack of faculty members was the primary reason why programs do not seek accreditation, as an overwhelming

**TABLE 5**  
**Perceived Benefits of Accreditation**

	#	%		#	%
<b>1. Faculty Quality</b>			<b>3. Institutional Status</b>		
Stronger candidates applying for faculty positions	37	42%	Prestige among peer programs	81	92%
More research orientated faculty	16	18%	Improved name recognition (national ranking)	59	67%
<b>2. Student Quality</b>			More grant funding	6	7%
Better Students	35	40%	Leverage for additional university resources	6	7%
Better placement of students	18	21%			
Useful in student recruitment	7	8%			
Total Programs Responding	88				

\*\*Voluntary written response in addition to the other responses that were provided on the survey.

83% of the respondents cited this factor.

Despite this evidently overwhelmingly positive benefit-to-cost ratio, many unaccredited programs are quite satisfied with their current status. As reported in Table 7, three-quarters (76%) of the Directors of unaccredited programs who answered the question stated that the absence of accreditation did not impair their program's performance. The reasons for such perceptions are probably too scattered to be very meaningful. Still, it is suggestive that the most cited reason by one-fifth of the relevant respondents was that the program's own reputation ensures its success. A good example of this implied lesser interest of programs at top-tier universities in gaining NASPAA accreditation is provided by the pattern of NASPAA membership in the state of California. As Table 8 shows, only one of the seven University of California Schools (UCLA) is an Institutional Member of NASPAA (but not accredited), while 16 of the 23 Cal State universities are Institutional Members (13 accredited). More generally, this is certainly consistent with the finding in the previous section that Carnegie status was almost completely unrelated to accreditation.

This indicates that one important reason for the limited enthusiasm about accreditation among public administration programs is that some universities obviously feel that their own reputation provides the "mark of quality" which is normally assured by professional accreditation. Two programs at high quality universities were quite terse in expressing such an attitude:

"We are reviewed by external parties. We have 500 applicants for 100 slots. We have no trouble attracting faculty."

"[The] reputation of the University overrides the lack of accreditation."

Even a program at a second-tier state university can feel that it has an academic reputation equivalent to formal recognition by NASPAA:

"While we are pursuing accreditation and will be glad to have it, (and of course advertise that we have it), the reputation of our program spread by word-of-mouth by our students and alumni and the general reputation of our university keep our enrollments high and our classes

full. We seldom get a question about NASPAA."

### The Disconnect between Accreditation and Placement

Perhaps even more troubling for NASPAA is the fact that some schools question whether the profession itself cares much about accreditation, as suggested by the two following quotations from participants in our survey:

"Unfortunately, outside government

agencies either do not know of accreditation or do not care. From an academic point, it's positive to be a member of NASPAA, but outside of academia it's of little significance for students seeking government jobs. NASPAA would be more helpful if they would inform "governments" regarding the value of students who seek employment from a NASPAA accredited institution."

**TABLE 6**  
**Reasons for Not Seeking Accreditation**

No Advantages in Accreditation	#	%	Program Shortcomings	#	%
Benefits don't outweigh time and effort**	4	13%	Not enough PA faculty	25	83%
No adverse impact of nonaccred**	2	7%	Faculty not professionally qualified	1	3%
NASPAA stifles curriculum devmt	3	10%	No internship program	1	3%
NASPAA stifles classrm innovation	2	7%	NASPAA's common curriculum has not been met	1	3%
Disagree with NASPAA Mission Statement	0	0%	No program director	0	0%

Total Programs Responding 30

\*\*Voluntary written response in addition to the other responses that were provided on the survey.

**TABLE 7**  
**Responses to Whether Non Accreditation Impairs Program**

Does lack of accreditation impair your program's performance in some way?					
Yes	24%	(12)	No	76%	(35)
					N= (49)

#### Specific Reasons Given

	N	%
<i>Non Accreditation Impairs Program</i>		
Hurts regionally when other programs are accredited	3	25%
Students want accreditation	2	17%
Less able to get internal resources	2	17%
Threat to end program by university	2	17%
Drop in student enrollment	1	8%
<i>Non Accreditation Does Not Impair Program</i>		
Program's reputation ensures success	7	20%
Students aware of non accreditation	5	14%
No problems attracting faculty	2	6%
Employers not concerned with accreditation	2	6%
No competition in region	2	6%
Accredited by another organization	1	3%

**TABLE 8**  
**NASPAA Members**  
**in California**

**University of California System**

Berkeley, Not a Member  
 Davis, Not a Member  
 Irvine, Not a Member  
 UCLA, Institutional Member,  
 Not Accredited  
 Riverside, Not a Member  
 San Diego, Not a Member  
 Santa Barbara, Not a Member

**Other PAC-10 Universities**

Southern Calif., Institutional Member,  
 Accredited  
 Stanford, Not a Member

**California State University System**

Bakersfield, Institutional Member, Accredited  
 Channel Islands, Not a Member  
 Chico, Institutional Member, Accredited  
 Dominguez Hills, Institutional Member,  
 Accredited  
 Fresno, Institutional Member, Accredited  
 Fullerton, Institutional Member, Accredited  
 Hayward, Institutional Member, Accredited  
 Humbolt, Not a Member  
 Long Beach, Institutional Member,  
 Accredited  
 Los Angeles, Institutional Member,  
 Accredited  
 Maritime Academy, Not Accredited  
 Monterey Bay, Not Accredited  
 Northridge, Institutional Member,  
 Not Accredited  
 Pomona, Institutional Member,  
 Not Accredited  
 Sacramento, Institutional Member, Not  
 Accredited  
 San Bernardino, Institutional Member,  
 Accredited  
 San Diego, Institutional Member,  
 Accredited  
 San Francisco, Institutional Member,  
 Accredited  
 San Jose, Institutional Member, Accredited  
 San Luis Obispo, Not a Member  
 San Marcos, Not a Member  
 Sonoma, Not a Member  
 Stanislaus, Institutional Member, Accredited

**Other Institutional Members**

Golden Gate University, Not Accredited  
 Monterey Institute of International Studies,  
 Not Accredited  
 Naval Postgraduate School, Accredited  
 University of La Verne, Not Accredited

SOURCE: NASPAA, 2003.

“It is hard for an accredited program of say 48 credits to compete with non-accredited programs which provide their students with a master’s degree after only 30 or so credits. We know the value of NASPAA accreditation, but neither students nor the workplace do.”

The question of whether or not accreditation is important for the professional placement of MPA graduates is certainly a very important one. Thus, we conducted a follow-up survey of 100 government officials divided fairly equally among the federal, state, and local levels and 30 MPA directors divided equally among Master’s, Doctoral, and Research universities using the Carnegie rankings. Table 9 presents their responses to the question, “Does Accreditation matter in the hiring process?” Clearly, accreditation is not seen as being very relevant for student placement. The government officials at all levels overwhelmingly (81% overall) stated that accreditation did not affect their recruitment processes. This perception was shared by over two-thirds of the MPA Directors, although Directors at universities with Master’s Carnegie rankings were slightly more likely than those at higher ranking universities to report that accreditation made a difference in student placement.

Several government officials were quite explicit in indicating that they paid little attention to NASPAA recruitment when recruiting MPA students:

“During my three years as a unit director I have never considered whether or not an applicant came from an accredited MPA program. We usually look at the name of the

university and go from there. Fortunately for us, we have a large pool of applicants from very prestigious schools.” — Director of a unit in the federal government  
 “Despite the fact that I have worked in the federal government for over twenty years, I have been quite active in professional associations and have many contacts with universities around the country. When one of my colleagues sends me a student seeking employment, I don’t consider the question of accreditation. I trust my colleague and the reputation of the school based on my past experiences with them.” — Federal Agency Division Director

“We hire MPA students on a fairly consistent basis and a large number of them had interned with us while they were in school. So, we had the chance to see what they could do prior to employing them full time. Thus, we didn’t consider whether or not they came from an accredited program. They could do the job and had a degree and that was good enough for us.” — Chief Financial Officer in a large urban city  
 “I decide whether to hire students based on their grades, references and personality. Most of them are from well known schools, and I assume that they are all accredited.”  
 — Federal administrator

**Implications**

As indicated in the introduction, the central purpose of this research was to determine why MPA programs value accreditation by NASPAA in the face of

**TABLE 9**  
**Does Accreditation Matter in the Hiring Process?**

	Yes	No		Yes	No
Local Officials	14%	86% (n=35)	Master’s Inst.	50%	50% (n=10)
State Officials	29%	71% (n=35)	Doctoral Inst.	30%	70% (n=10)
Federal Official	13%	87% (n=30)	Research Inst.	30%	70% (n=10)
N=	(19)	(81)		(11)	(19)

the fairly limited rate of accreditation among graduate programs in public administration. Academic prestige turned out to be the primary reason for seeking accreditation. This has both positive and negative implications for NASPAA. Positively, accreditation is perceived as an important benefit by a substantial number of programs. However, the importance of academic prestige is decidedly limited for two very different types of programs. First, those in institutes or centers evidently are, perhaps surprisingly, less interested in accreditation, presumably because of their "applied" orientation. Second, many programs at premier universities do not have much interest in accreditation because their academic prestige is already assured. Consequently, unaccredited MPA programs in general do not feel that a lack of accreditation has impaired their programs. In large part, this may result from the fact that the vast majority of public sector employers do not consider the accreditation status of a program when hiring employees.

Our research, therefore, leads us to believe that accreditation is not as significant as it should or could be given the role that NASPAA has taken in accrediting programs. Overall, employers as well as MPA program faculty were not confident that the benefits of NASPAA accreditation outweighed the efforts needed to secure it. As a result, a large number of programs that appeared to meet the minimum qualifications for accreditation and those who could work toward achieving that goal chose not to do so. Hence, this suggests to us that NASPAA is limited in its ability to grow and should make accreditation more

inviting to programs and employers. This is particularly true for programs which believe the reputation of their university overrides the need for accreditation.

Despite the evidence that has been presented, we cannot ignore the inherent value of seeking accreditation to a MPA program. The process itself clearly provides program administrators with an opportunity to delve into every facet of their program. At a minimum, a self study can help a department evaluate the mission and objectives of a program. The process also forces administrators to examine the program's focus in view of other programs and standards that have been set nationally. Specifically, teaching pedagogy, curriculum development, faculty research, and technical skills can be reviewed. Once this data is collected, administrators and faculty members can critically assess and analyze the faculty, program, and the students in order to determine the direction of the program. Hence, the benefits of seeking accreditation are not mutually exclusive. On the contrary, students, employers, and faculty can benefit from the process.

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