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# International Trends, Issues, and Responsibilities in MPA Programs

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INTERNATIONAL TRENDS, ISSUES, AND  
RESPONSIBILITIES IN M.P.A. PROGRAMS

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The enrollment of international students raises a number of important issues that need to be addressed by public administration programs. In most respects, the issues are the same as or similar to those faced by most kinds of academic programs enrolling significant numbers of international students. However, there are some important differences between the experiences of public administration programs and those of others, particularly the more traditional scientific and liberal arts programs. These include the issues relating to internship experiences with American government agencies and teaching a common body of knowledge likely to be rooted in the American experience with little attention to the issues prevalent in other parts of the world.

The first issue to be addressed here is simply that of the objective in recruiting international students. Most academic programs are enrollment-driven, with available resources determined at least roughly by the number of students. Consequently, there are strong incentives for the recruitment of international students. The incentive to pursue potential international students is likely to increase as the number of traditional, 18- to 25-year-old students decreases and colleges focus on less traditional groups of potential students. Indeed, there are signs that the competition for the highest-qualified international students is increasing as college recruitment efforts begin to focus on them.

If we can expect increased interest in and recruitment of international students, the issues of how their specific social, economic, professional, and educational needs may differ from those of American students and how current academic programs can answer those needs will become critical. These issues will require widespread administrative and faculty development if we are to meet the responsibility of offering adequate student service and relevant classroom learning.

Public administration programs offer particularly attractive skills and competencies to students from developing nations. Indeed, the attraction of public service employment in their home states, in terms of both the size of public sector employment and the relative security and stability of public sector careers, makes American public administration programs very attractive to international students. A number of supportive governments have scholarships and other inducements to study public administration

in the U.S. A few governments have been so successful in inducing students to enter American educational programs that they have experienced considerable difficulty getting them to return at the completion of their studies.

The expansion of international programs in American colleges and universities is being encouraged from a number of quarters, not least from their own recruitment and admissions officials. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) are both increasing their efforts to encourage international interaction. As NASPAA's relationship with the U.S. Agency for International Development winds down, the Association is increasing its interaction with public administration organizations in other parts of the world. There are signs that ASPA's Section on International and Comparative Administration is broadening its focus to include comparative and international administration, rather than simply focusing on development administration. A group of international scholars is also forming the International Institute of Comparative Government to facilitate cooperative research. Some few American universities are developing cooperative arrangements with foreign universities, including exchanges of public administration students and faculty. Those are the exceptions rather than the rule, however. While there are signs that American universities are expanding their international programs, the numbers of such programs are still relatively small.

What is more telling is the lack of international components in the NASPAA curriculum standards, unless one assumes that any standard that does not specify that it refers to the American legal, economic, and political context of administration should be construed to mean a treatment of such contexts in several or in many nations. At the risk of overgeneralizing, we would suggest that many if not most public administration faculty do not have formal training or practical experience in comparative or international administration. As a consequence, American students have little exposure to such topics in their classes, and international students may be receiving very little information on the application of administrative principles, theories, and skills to the kinds of problems they will encounter when they return home. The exceptions to these generalizations may be the M.P.A. programs that are based in political science departments which require international relations or comparative government components or permit electives in those areas and the M.P.A. programs that have considerable experience with international students and have developed comparative or international administration specializations.

How many international students are enrolled in American M.P.A. programs? What are the particular problems involved in recruiting and educating international students? And how are we responding to the special needs of such students? This paper focuses on those three fundamental questions, as well as a number of related issues.

### Methodology

During the winter of 1988-1989, questionnaires were sent to the directors of all 192 M.P.A. programs holding membership in the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration. Ninety-five of the directors, or 50 percent, responded to the first letter. This paper does not include the returns from a second mailing.

M.P.A. program directors were asked questions concerning how many international students were enrolled in their programs, how they were recruited, what regions they came from, whether the numbers of international students have been increasing or decreasing, what problems the programs have encountered in dealing with international students, how much knowledge of American government is required, levels of faculty and program involvement, what courses are offered, and how the programs became involved in international and comparative administration.

### Data Analysis

Of the 95 programs that responded to the questionnaire, 76 (80 percent) reported having international students presently enrolled in their programs. Numbers of international students in each program ranged from 1 to 140, with the median being the 13 schools that had three students each. Ten schools reported two students. Eight schools had either one or five students. Seven schools had ten. Six had six.

All programs indicated that the percentage of international students in their programs was 11 percent or less. Of the 20 programs that indicated that they actively recruited international students, three-fourths reported using alumni for both referrals and recruitment.

The greatest number of international students in M.P.A. programs come from East Asia, Africa, and the Middle East. Table 1 reflects these findings.

Table 1

Area	Total No. of Students Reported	Highest No. in One Program	No. of Programs With Students in Area (n = 76)
East/Southeast Asia	219	56	49
Africa	139	24	44
Middle East	133	42	29
South Asia	64	14	25
South America	55	14	21
Western Europe	23	5	12
Canada	5	5	5
Australia/New Zealand	0	0	0
Other	9	5	5

Over half of the programs (47) indicated that their numbers of international students had remained stable over the past four years. The other programs were evenly split between reporting increases (14) or decreases (15) in international enrollment. They reported the greatest increases to be in students from East and Southeast Asia and the Middle East and the greatest decreases coming from the Middle East and Africa, followed by East and Southeast Asia.

Program respondents ranked language skills as the most problematic issue, followed by the determination of admission eligibility, obtaining adequate financial aid, and internship placement. Table 2 reflects these rankings.

Table 2

Issue	No. of Times Ranked as #1 Problem (n = 76)	Sum of Ranking as a Problem (Ranked 1- 5)
Language skills	32	62
Determining admission eligibility	12	58
Obtaining adequate financial aid	15	50
Internship placement	3	44
Lack of faculty sensitivity to cultural differences	0	37
Lack of administrative sensitivity to cultural differences	0	36
Providing adequate student services	3	35
Other (lack of student sensitivity to cultural differences; community acceptance; job placement; health benefits; writing skills)	0	8

Respondents were asked if they require that international students have the same level of understanding of American government as U.S. students and, if so, how they ensure that they do. Most programs (28) apparently do not have any special requirements in this area. They require the students to demonstrate the same knowledge in their tests and comprehensive exams. Several in this group indicated that, though they find that the students do not have the same understanding and consider it a problem, they have no formal procedure for remedying it. Fifteen programs have remedial or prerequisite courses for international students. Two programs have background seminars, and one requests that students read an introductory American government text.

Most of the programs (96 percent) reported that they do not require students to take a course in international or comparative administration. Although only three programs reported a requirement in this area, more than half (56 percent) offer one to fifteen courses in the general field of international or comparative administration. The most frequent courses offered fell under the general title area of comparative administration. Second in frequency was international administration. (See Table 3.)

Table 3

n = 45

Course Area	Identified as a Course Offering	
	No.	%
Comparative administration	36	80
International administration	23	51
International relations	22	49
Comparative public policy	12	27
Comparative politics	5	11

Programs reported varying degrees of involvement in comparative and international public administration. They most often described themselves as having no formal involvement but stated that the areas may be mentioned peripherally by individual instructors (37 programs). The second descriptor most often identified (29 programs) was that of having formal program involvement by offering their own courses in international or comparative public administration. Twenty-two programs described their formal involvement as permitting students to take as electives courses in international or comparative public administration offered by other units of the college or university. Fifteen schools reported offering a tract in one or both of these areas. Eleven programs thought it unlikely that individual instructors even mentioned these topics in their courses.

Only eight programs not now involved in international or comparative administration planned to develop any offerings in these areas. Twenty-five did not. The remaining fifteen programs were uncertain.

Programs involved in international or comparative administration indicated that faculty interest most often influenced that involvement (mentioned 29 times). Institutional interest or mission was identified by 30 programs, and the numbers of international students by 18 programs, then American student interest (16) followed by geographic location (10) and other (2).

Only four of the respondents indicated being involved in overseas programming. Two institutions offered programs in Western Europe, and there is one each in East and Southeast Asia, South and Central America, and Canada.

### Conclusions and Recommendations

We expected that our survey would reveal a very uneven attention to international students among M.P.A. programs. What we found was that most of our respondents were not directing a great



deal of attention to international students and programming. With a few exceptions, international student enrollments were a rather small percentage of program enrollments. Our findings confirmed our expectation that very few programs would have well developed recruitment processes and that most recruitment would be indirect or passive, i.e., that the programs would simply wait for applications rather than cultivate client groups. We also confirmed our second expectation, that most programs would be experiencing the same kinds of difficulties with the determination of whether international students meet admissions criteria, the availability of financial support for such students, the availability of suitable internship opportunities, and communication problems. The problem most often mentioned in our survey was that of language skills. We did not attempt to determine whether other programs would have better mechanisms in place to alleviate those problems, but we suspect that they would.

We expected differences among the M.P.A. programs in how interested they would be in attracting international students, how effectively they deal with their unique problems, and how well they address the professional and educational needs of those students. A principal expectation was that larger programs, particularly those accredited by NASPAA, would have better-developed mechanisms to recruit international students actively, deal with the interpretation of grades from foreign universities and the assessment of admissions test scores, provide adequate financial support, secure appropriate internships, and deal with international students with some sensitivity to language and cultural differences. Knowledge of visa requirements and other logistical and procedural problems might vary radically from one university to another, for example. This was not the case. We found very little difference between NASPAA accredited programs and other programs.

More importantly, however, we expected that the interest in international students might be associated with the organizational structure or disciplinary foundation of the M.P.A. programs. Logic would suggest that M.P.A. programs based in political science departments would tend to be more theoretically focused while those based in more management-oriented programs would be more practically focused. As indicated earlier, there were expectations that political science-based programs might be more likely to have international relations and comparative government components, and that larger programs might be more likely to have comparative and international administration components. Frankly, the expectation was that the overwhelming majority of the programs would be rather parochial, i.e., that they would offer few if any international and comparative components, despite having international students. Further study of the data is necessary before these expectations can be said to have been confirmed or refuted.

In conclusion, M.P.A. programs do not appear to be experiencing dramatic changes in their international admissions or programming at the present time. One of our respondents provided this bit of insight:

International students greatly enrich a program, especially the older mid-career ones who are on funded programs through their national governments or AID sponsorship. But they also require a substantial amount of extra work. And a faculty needs to understand that when it commits to building an international cohort. If this commitment of faculty is lacking, [we] think it best to not admit foreign students. (Respondent #60)

Finally, it might also be suggested that the doctoral programs that prepare public administration faculty might provide better grounding in comparative and international administration to broaden the perspective of the field and better prepare public administration students for the kinds of international challenges they will encounter in the future.