

**Government Employer Assessment
Of the SWT MPA**

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Abstract

Universities today have more reason than ever before to document the results of their efforts. Accreditation bodies require evidence of assessment. Some state legislatures require outcomes assessment of public universities. The general business environment has organizations reaching out to customers to learn about themselves and how they can improve. For all these reasons, universities and their academic programs are attempting to learn about themselves from various stakeholders, including employers.

The Master of Public Administration (MPA) program at Southwest Texas State University (SWT) shares in the need for assessment. This program confers about twenty MPA degrees each year. This study reports the results of a series of interviews with government executives to explore the program's outcomes in the eyes of government employers. The interviews explored awareness of the MPA degree, the value of the SWT program curriculum, including the core curriculum as specified by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, the SWT MPA program mission statement, and other areas of skill and knowledge identified in a review of related academic literature. Further, the research explored how well the graduates measure up to the ideals of these government employers. Finally, the interviews sought suggestions from the government executives on how to improve the program.

The interviews showed that government executives value most of the curriculum of the SWT MPA program highly and believe that its graduates represent a high quality degree program. The research also uncovered several interesting and useful suggestions for improving the program.

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Chapter 1

Introduction

Universities today have more reason than ever before to take steps to document the results of their education efforts. Accreditation bodies require evidence of various forms of assessment. In some states, legislatures are requiring outcomes assessment of public universities. The general setting in for-profit business has organizations reaching out to customers to learn about themselves and how they can improve. For all these reasons, universities and their component academic programs are attempting to learn about themselves from students, alumni, faculty, and external stakeholders, including employers. Southwest Texas State University (SWT) is no exception. Assessment tools at SWT include a large variety of standardized exit exams, alumni surveys, employer surveys, and surveys regarding specialized services.

The focus of this research project is the SWT Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. It is accredited by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA). Accreditation guidance provided by NASPAA requires MPA programs to assess student performance and program accomplishment of objectives. The guidance suggests several examples of assessment activities, including use of employer questionnaires.

NASPAA requires program coverage of eight common curriculum components for the MPA degree. Additionally, the introduction to the list mentions the values, knowledge, and skills to act ethically. The core components in the body of the list are:

1. Human resource management in public service organizations;
2. Budgeting and financial processes in public service organizations;
3. Information management in public service organizations;

4. Policy and program formulation, implementation, and evaluation;
5. Decision-making and problem-solving;
6. Political and legal institutions and processes;
7. Economic and social institutions and processes; and
8. Organization and management concepts and behavior.

NASPAA points out that these core components neither prescribe individual courses nor imply equal time treatment for each area. It is only necessary that each area be covered to some extent by each university's program. This circumspect approach to standards allows programs to concentrate on their individual strengths ("COPRA Standards for Professional Masters Degree Programs in Public Affairs, Policy and Administration," 2001).

The literature review in Chapter 2 shows that there is considerable information about assessment of two- and four-year degree programs and institutions. Two-year institutions are particularly active in including employer assessment (Banta, 1993, p. 1). Four-year institutions are also highly active in assessment, but there is less emphasis on connection with employers (Astin, 1991, p. 46). The extent of literature on assessment of post-graduate programs drops significantly, and the amount of literature on the assessment of MPA programs is miniscule. What little there is adheres closely to the NASPAA core curriculum requirements as a measuring stick.

The literature review in Chapter 2 also shows that employer-based outcomes assessment indicates that employers are interested in responsibility and accountability, ethical values, time management and punctuality, analytical ability, and several forms of

communication skills. Presumably, some of these characteristics would also be valuable to public service careerists. This research project may begin to span both the specifics of MPA curriculum requirements and mission-based assessment as well as the general characteristics that make employees valuable in the workforce.

Research Purpose

This research is exploratory and examines several aspects of MPA education outcomes. First, the research examines the awareness of the existence and content of the MPA degree. Second, the research examines the value that government executives place in the core curriculum requirements defined by NASPAA for MPA programs. Third, the research examines the value that government executives place in the outcomes defined in the SWT MPA program mission statement. Fourth, the research examines what other employee characteristics government executives value in government careerists. Fifth, the research examines how closely the graduates of the SWT MPA program meet the ideals of the government executives.

The research purposes are expressed through these research questions:

1. What is the level of awareness of the existence and content of the MPA degree among government executives?
2. What is the level of value that government executives place on each of the core curriculum areas for the MPA defined by NASPAA?
3. What is the level of value that government executives place on the additional outcomes defined in the SWT MPA program mission statement?
4. What other areas of skill and knowledge (apart from the NASPAA core curriculum and SWT MPA mission outcomes) are valued by government executives?
5. How do SWT MPA graduates meet these ideal sets of characteristics?

Organization of the Report

The next chapter is a literature review covering the topic of outcome assessment for higher education, as gauged through the eyes of employers, and a review of assessment of MPA programs. Chapter Three provides a snapshot of the setting, Southwest Texas State University, and the government employment environment nearby. Chapter Three also covers the specifics of the mission statement of the MPA program, as this is a key yardstick in NASPAA accreditation assessment.

Chapter Four describes the conceptual framework of the research and the methodology that supports it. The chapter also contains a general description of the particular sources of information for the research. Chapter Five presents the research results. Chapter Six gives the researcher's conclusions and recommendations.

Chapter 2

Literature Review

Introduction

An appreciation of the value of the Master of Public Administration degree in public sector employment involves a basic understanding of some of the issues involved in the growing field of higher education assessment. Since many holders of Public Administration degrees are indeed employed as public administrators, another key concept is the relationship between Public Administration education and Public Administration practice. This chapter first examines some of the topics relating to higher education assessment, with a focus on data collected from employers. Second, the relationship between Public Administration education and its outcomes in Public Administration practice are explored.

From these, a subsequent chapter develops a conceptual framework to guide the construction of the research project. The research yields useful assessment data for an institution, as well as provides guidance on connecting a program's mission and its assessment.

Assessment in Higher Education

Assessment of higher education programs has taken place for years. During most of that time, undergraduate program quality has been seen as more or less synonymous with the amount of resources invested in the university program. Colleges and universities considered the best were often those that had students with the highest ability

and achievement, more books in the library, more faculty with higher degrees, lower student-faculty ratios, or larger endowments. Though there may be some connection between output quality and these indicators of program wealth, the emphasis in higher education assessment is no longer on the resources available to the institution or program (Terenzini, 1989, p. 645). Lucas (1996, p. 208), in a perhaps pejorative tone, described this old view of input-based assessment as based on resource “consumption.”

A similar taxonomy of assessment has suggested that there are three fundamental approaches to assessment: reputation, resources, and outcomes. The well-known popular rankings based on national surveys are examples of assessment based on the reputation approach (Hindi and Miller, 2000). Since the early years of resource-based assessment, perceptions of academic quality have become based more and more on outcomes (Terenzini, 1989, p. 645). This goal has now been picked up by state legislatures. By the late 1980’s, two thirds of all states had legal requirements that public institutions of higher education give evidence that they were producing desired outcomes for students (Lucas, 1996, p. 208).

Yet another taxonomy of assessment types is propounded by Astin (1993). His input-environment-outcome model has many adherents in the assessment community. What is different in this taxonomy is the inclusion of the education environment. The environment “might include the courses taken, the personalities and pedagogical techniques of the professors who teach these courses, the physical surroundings in the classroom and on other parts of the campus, the behavior of roommates and friends, the organizations and other co-curricular activities in which the student participates, as well as any special programs to which the student is exposed (e.g., orientation, registration,

counseling, remediation, and honors)” (Astin, 1993, p. 81). In further deconstructing the environment, Astin points out that there are environmental measures that are characteristic of the entire institution and others that are particular to certain educational experiences within the institution (p. 85).

With the rise of assessment based on outcomes, assessment has become an important tool for the improvement of institutions. Unlike the older resource-based model of assessment, outcome-based assessment allows educational institutions to determine if they are effectively accomplishing their objectives. In assessment parlance, assessment is a vehicle for educational improvement and should be driven by educational mission and values (Banta, 1996, p. 3).

Yet there remains a lack of consensus on what exactly “assessment” means. Terenzini (1989, p. 646) explains some of the views of assessment held in academia. One is that the term “assessment” refers only to testing individual student achievement in various educational areas. Another view is that assessment means a review of the general education program and the extent to which students are receiving a “liberal education.” Still another view of assessment is as a series of surveys to students, alumni, and employers for purposes of program evaluation and planning. And there is also a view that assessment means institution-wide self study, covering all aspects of teaching and management. A very different form of assessment, gatekeeping, represents the front end of the educational process¹ (Terenzini, 1989, p. 648).

¹ While outcomes assessment chronologically follows the educational “event,” gatekeeping precedes it. Gatekeeping typically involves the use of standardized tests as part of the decision-making process of determining who gets to partake of the educational program. Probably the best-known gatekeeping assessment is the Scholastic Aptitude Test (SAT) for college admission.

In a study of undergraduate accounting programs, Hindi and Miller (2000) found that the most widely used assessment instruments are exit surveys of graduating seniors, student evaluations of faculty, and surveys of alumni. Hindi and Miller discovered that most accounting departments are now using outcomes assessment to make changes in curriculum. The most commonly mentioned uses of assessment were for monitoring program effectiveness, guiding planning and improvement, and meeting accreditation requirements. All of these aforementioned forms and tools of assessment are consistent with the guidance for the Baldrige Award for Education, which says student and stakeholder satisfaction and dissatisfaction determination might include any or all of the following: surveys, formal and informal feedback from students and stakeholders, and complaints (*Education Criteria for Performance Excellence*, 2000, p. 18).

Web site searches indicate that many universities are engaging in assessment, but the number of scholarly articles about assessment of employment outcomes in four-year universities is small. Csete (1997, p. 2) also found in her review of the literature on employers and graduate surveys that most of the work was unpublished, and that there was considerable variety in the focus and quality of such surveys. Some surveys focused on the skills, knowledge and education considered desirable by employers, while others attempted to follow students after graduation to gather their feedback about college and its value in accomplishing employment goals. Banta (1993, p. 1), in a similar literature review, found that most studies of employer surveys in higher education are unpublished and encompass only a single educational institution. Interestingly, she also found that two-year institutions are much more active in gathering employer feedback.

There is some evidence that a significant segment of the higher education community remains uninterested or opposed to outcomes assessment. Banta (1996, p. 57) says that “those within the academy have not, for the most part, been receptive to the intrusion [of assessment].” She relates that many faculty “disdain accountability pressures and argue that to maintain the integrity of higher education, public agencies must not become involved in the affairs of educational institutions.” Administrators also have concerns about assessment, according to Lucas (1996, p. 206). He found that many top administrators find the notion behind the metaphor of higher education as a business buying and selling as “utterly repugnant.” Some administrators oppose any effort to assess students’ skills and knowledge whatsoever.

Two-year schools seem to have the lead in outcomes assessment. A large body of literature is available on assessment for two-year schools². Banta (1993, p. 1), as mentioned above, noted the lead held by two-year schools. Some two-year schools have gone so far as to leverage this better connection with the employer community by beginning to append “warranties” to diplomas³. Whatever objections there may be among some academicians, the American Association for Higher Education concludes that “through assessment, educators meet responsibilities to students and to the public.” (Banta, 1996, p.3)

² Although a large body of literature is available about assessment in two-year schools, I bypassed it as being of only marginal relevance to assessment of a master’s degree program. I would note that two-year schools are more vocational in nature, meaning that their emphasis is often on a narrow skill set that is relatively more concrete than that of a “liberal” bachelor-level education or beyond.

³ Now at least one four-year liberal arts college even offers \$5,000 in cash in the event the graduate fails to secure employment within a half year after graduation (Lucas, 1996, p. 210).

Employers: Where Long-Term Outcomes Manifest

The most readily available sources of assessment information provide short-term assessment data, but others, such as employers, may provide long-term outcomes information. Employers hold a special place in assessment. In the employment setting, years of educational input may turn into even more years of educational outcome of various kinds and various uses, in what may be characterized as employee performance.

The external audiences for outcomes assessment in higher education include employers, graduate and professional schools, business leaders, governmental agencies, prospective students and parents, and finally, financial supporters (Banta, 1996, p. 58). On a similar train of thought, Heinfeldt (1998) listed the three main constituencies of business schools as students, business community, and faculty.

Ideally, the effects of higher education are expected to last for the lifetime of the student (Astin, 1991, p. 46). Or at least, it might suffice to say that college effects may not manifest themselves right away (Terenzini, 1989, p. 659). Nevertheless, most assessments used in higher education so far have tended to focus on relatively short-term outcomes that can be measured while the student is still in college (Astin, 1991, p. 46). These short-term assessment strategies would necessarily omit the input of the “business community,” and “business leaders,” or in other words, employers. Because of the expected long-term effects of college education, student assessments of instructors and exit surveys of graduating students cannot show long-term outcomes of the education experience. If college effects may last a lifetime, they should certainly endure two to five years after graduation, and into the graduate’s work career.

The effects of college education are often divided between cognitive and affective. Each of these may be divided between psychological and behavioral manifestations. The cognitive-psychological outcomes include subject-matter knowledge, academic ability, and critical thinking. The affective-psychological outcomes include values, interests, attitudes, and beliefs. Behavioral-cognitive outcomes include vocational achievement and awards. Behavioral-affective outcomes include leadership, citizenship, interpersonal relations, and hobbies (Astin, 1991, p. 45). Each of these outcome areas may manifest in the work world.

Information on employer assessment of graduate performance is important to institutions for several reasons. According to the stakeholder model of higher education, the employer is “an indirect beneficiary of the process, who needs trained staff, and is willing to pay for them.” In the “product process” model of higher education, the buyer of the product is the employer (Reavill, 1997). Information about the workplace and its requirements cannot be obtained from any source better than employers (Palomba and Banta, 1991, p. 217). For the higher education community, employer ratings also have the advantage of higher credibility to many constituencies, both on and off campus, than assessment based on the input of other groups (Hoey, 1999, p. 48).

Because employers are well recognized as valid stakeholders in higher education, there is considerable support for the gathering of feedback about higher education from employers. Roberts (2001, p. 20) found that “surveying area employers is an essential component of needs assessment that helps to determine whether the curriculum provides relevant job-related competencies and skills.” One reason for the importance of regularly gathering the input of employers to education programs is that the business environment

changes faster than curricula at colleges and universities. Tanyel (1999, p. 33) asserts that this is because of the cumbersome process often involved in curriculum revision.

In the case of a few professions, professional organizations review courses and certify those individuals of appropriate standard to enter the profession. With such certifying organizations, the involvement of employers in commerce and industry occurs through their involvement in the certifying organization (Reavill, 1997).⁴

Methods for Gathering Employer Input

Guidance provided by the Baldrige National Quality Program suggests that student and stakeholder input might include both a numerical rating scale and descriptors for each unit on the scale. “Actionable” satisfaction measurements are said to provide reliable information about student and stakeholder ratings of specific educational services (Educational Criteria for Performance Excellence, 2000, p. 18). Hoey (1999, p. 44) found that two sets of measurement constructs frequently appear, often in connected surveys of alumni and employers. One is concerned with evaluating the relative importance of a knowledge or skill area to a graduate employee’s professional position as a method for assessing the relevance of the curriculum. The other measurement construct centers on assessing the knowledge and skill levels of the graduates. Hoey describes the assessment program at North Carolina State University (NCSU), in which both alumni and employer assessment surveys share a common core of items on knowledge, skills, and abilities which should have been gained through the undergraduate programs at the

⁴ State licensing boards serve a similar function. Certified public accountants, medical doctors, and attorneys are the most familiar examples of professionals licensed by these boards. Law schools, for

university. In the connected surveys at NCSU, alumni and employers are asked to estimate the importance of each skill, ability, or area of knowledge to the employee's current work. Alumni are then asked to rate the level of preparation on each item in their academic program. Supervisors are asked to rate the graduate employees as compared with other employees at the same level and capacity. Palomba and Banta (1999, p. 185) share the view that if an assessment plan calls for separate surveys of several target groups, it is often useful to include a common core of questions shared by all the stakeholder groups. In addition to questions that are broadly applicable across multiple stakeholder target groups, faculty often have questions that are specific to a particular group (Palomba and Banta, 1999, p. 185).

There are three common methods for gathering survey input from employers. In the first method, the researcher attempts to accurately pinpoint individual managers with knowledge of the graduate employee. The researcher uses an existing alumni address list and contacts them to request manager names and permission to survey them specifically about the graduate employee. Then the researcher may use that manager as part of the sample. The second method, known as "broadside," relies on a general survey of employers in a geographic area served by the college or university, without targeting employers of the institution's graduates. The broadside method cannot call for specific responses about a particular graduate employee. The third common method targets employer managers with a degree of accuracy somewhat between the two previous methods. Here, the researcher uses a targeted list of employers, such as those that recruited on the campus. Those employers are asked a more general set of questions,

example, may be compared to one another on their pass rates on the bar exam. Interestingly (and probably appropriately), employers will never have the "opportunity" to pass judgment on those who do not pass.

which of course are not focused on an individual graduate employee, more like the broadside method. Banta (1993, p. 1) tells of a community college in New York getting a 47% response rate by using placement records to obtain the names of employers. Such lists may be maintained either in academic department offices or in placement offices. Knoblaugh (1989, p. 2) sent a survey instrument to recruiters of firms that hired at Cornell University, along with instructions to the recruiter to pass the survey on to a person more knowledgeable if the recruiter could not accurately answer the questions. A similar method to generically target employers is to use mailing lists from professional organizations, such as those of architects and urban planners (Palomba and Banta, 1999, p. 219).

Surveying Employers of Identified Graduates

Institutions may employ several tactics to identify the employers who will be surveyed about the institution's individually identified graduates. In some cases, alumni are themselves surveyed about the institution they attended, and in the course of answering a survey, they are asked to provide their employers' names and addresses so they in turn can be contacted. Banta (1993, p. 1) says that many two-year colleges are using links to employers named by the graduates. When institutions request employer names from alumni, they should explain to the alumnus the purpose of the employer survey and the nature of the questions. The explanation is especially important if the survey will cover questions about job performance (Palomba and Banta, 1999, p. 219). Some researchers have chosen to gather a signed permission to contact the employer from the graduate-employee and attach the signed permission to the survey instrument

that is sent to the employer (Banta, 1993, p. 4). Banta (1993, p. 4) had a 39% response rate from employers of graduates of St. Louis Community College at Forest Park using this method. Other researchers have gathered such permissions through a telephone interview with the graduates. Csete (1997, p. 3), working on an assessment project in Hong Kong, used telephone permissions from alumni and got permission from 96%. All the same, this method has the disadvantage of not leaving documentation to show to the employer or a litigious employee's attorney.

In a three-year study of assessment methodologies using a different data collection method each year, Phillippi and Banta tried first to survey alumni with the gathering of their permissions to contact supervisors in a separate step. The separation of steps was detrimental to the rate of "permission" return. Subsequent joining of the alumni survey and permission to gather employer feedback improved substantially the percentage of graduates willing to give permission for employer contact (Phillipi and Banta, 1994).

Another twist in the quandary of how to get employer surveys into the hands of targeted supervisors is to send two survey instruments directly to the graduate employees, who are asked in the cover letter to forward the second copy to their supervisor. This method has been used at the Tennessee State Technical Institute at Memphis, Department of Chemical Engineering Technology, where both surveys ask for a description of the work done, the graduate employee's qualifications, and their potential for advancement (Palomba and Banta, 1999, p. 219).

When individual employees are identified, researchers typically target a graduate who has matriculated within some reasonable period before the administration of the

survey. This period typically ranges between two and five years. In their article comparing three different methods for contacting employers, Phillipi and Banta (1994) used the two-year waiting period mandated by the State of Tennessee's assessment program. The assessment that Hoey (1999, p. 46) describes at North Carolina State University concentrated on graduates from roughly two to five years earlier. Knoblaugh (1989, p. 2) describes Cornell University's employer survey as reaching back to recruiters who hired from the university up to five years earlier.

Format of the Survey

There are several useful points for the "packaging" of a survey instrument. The cover letter may make a major difference in the success of the survey. In Babbie's standard text on social research (1999, p. 241), he describes a cover letter that introduced a survey instrument. The letter introduced the study and its purposes and reasons and explained the sampling method, mechanics of returning the survey, the assurance of anonymity, and the auspices under which the survey was being conducted. Palomba and Banta (1999, p. 191) point out the need to capture the interest of potential respondents. It is helpful to provide a good explanation of the reasons for doing the survey and that the respondent's answers are valuable to the researcher. The cover letter should explain how the information will be used. If the instrument will reveal the identity of the respondent, the cover letter should indicate that responses will be kept confidential. If possible, the most responsible person in the organizational unit should sign the cover letter. College or university presidents often sign cover letters for alumni questionnaires that are sent to all graduates of the institution (Palomba and Banta, 1999, p. 191).

For employer surveys, Trudy Banta (1993, p. 3) has propounded a three-part questionnaire. The first section consists of employers' perceptions of the relative value of the courses and related academic experiences offered by the institution. The second section assesses the employee traits and skills, rated on importance, and rated by the graduate employee's performance. Finally, the third section consists of the employer's speculation about the identified employee's satisfaction with the work and pay, followed by global questions about the employee's performance and preparation.

Surveys often include a group of open-ended questions, to which the respondents can answer with their own writing instead of choosing from a slate of multiple-choice answers. This allows for unexpected information. Many alumni surveys also have open-ended questions, and the answers to these questions can be especially useful if sorted into categories using content analysis. Examples of quotes from the respondents can be useful to drive home a conclusion in the findings (Palomba and Banta, 1999, p. 189). To help get started on the survey, Hindi and Miller (2000) suggest that some departments save time by building their assessment instrument by starting with an instrument from a comparable school.



Findings From Employers

What do employers value? As Hoey's (1999, p. 48) results begin to reveal, employers place an emphasis on communication and interpersonal skills, calling those "vital attributes for all knowledge workers." In fact, in a salary prediction equation, communication, interpersonal and conceptual skills were significantly linked with salaries, as were technical and scientific skills. Knoblaugh (1989, p. 7) found that

employers ranked communications as the area of highest need for improvement. Courses emphasizing oral and written communication skills were deemed most important, followed by courses specific to the area of employment, computing experience, and paid work experience in the field of employment. Weaknesses in the graduates most frequently identified were writing skills, especially for conciseness, and limited willingness to relocate. Poor human relations skills and undervaluing a liberal arts education were also identified as weaknesses.

In some research, prospective employer respondents indicated that the most important attributes possessed by newly hired business school graduates are, in order of importance, responsibility and accountability, ethical values, interpersonal skills, oral communications, time management and punctuality, and analytical ability (Tanyel, 1999, p. 35). Given such a broad list, it is notable that the top traits are responsibility and accountability, and ethical values. Tanyel's literature review underscored the high importance to employers of entry-level graduates' oral skills, interpersonal skills, and written skills, as well as dependability and self-starter motivation.

Kretovics (1998, p. 27) began to apply a taxonomy to the overbroad "communication skills." The first component of communication in this breakdown is social effectiveness, which Kretovics describes as working effectively in teams, coaching, leadership, sales ability, problem-solving, organizational skills, and crisis management skills. The second major component of communication skills is presentation skills, consisting of both oral skills and writing skills, as applied in e-mail, memos, technical reports, and personal correspondence. Kretovics rounds out the communication skills taxonomy with "other skills," an area that includes basic

understanding of economics and the global economy, along with skills in foreign languages. This third area was not considered highly important by employer focus groups.

Generic communication skills are frequently ranked highly by employers, and the focus generally is on the employee's ability to transmit ideas and enthusiasm to others, and less often on the employee's ability to receive information intact. When Banta (1993, p. 4) offered employers a question on ranking the value of listening effectively, she found that effective listening was the highest ranked skill of all (mean score of 2.94 on a 3 point scale).

Computer skills are also important. Kretovics (1998, p. 27) found that employers preferred that new hires have good understanding about how to use common software. But since technology was changing rapidly, it was not important that the employee enter the organization knowing the particular software in use at the organization. The conceptual knowledge of similar software was more important than specific knowledge.

No matter whether employers are working with graduates of two-year schools or four-year schools, the same set of employee traits are valued equally. The employers of four-year graduates, though, believed that these employees possessed more of the valued characteristics than did employers of two-year graduates (Banta, 1993, p. 5). In the 1997 National Education Survey, employers were asked to rate their experiences with hiring two-year and four-year graduates. Employers were neutral on the quality of two-year graduates, but found that four-year college graduates' preparation was "more than adequate" ("Understanding Employers' Perceptions of College Graduates", 1998).

Employers are pleased that colleges and universities are asking them about the schools' graduates. Smith and Demichiel (1996), for example, found in an open-ended question on a survey that all stakeholder groups were "excited" to see their opinions being solicited.

Two general points become clear in the overall availability of literature. First, at lower levels of academia, the record and scholarly writings on assessment was richer. Two-year colleges have a rich literature on direct subject-matter assessment content⁵. There is also a large body of literature about assessment in four-year institutions, but that literature generally departed from the subject-matter or "departmental perspective," instead concentrating on "general education" as embodied by a whole institution. The exception is in the business disciplines (as opposed, for example, to the sciences or liberal arts). Several of the articles about assessment of four-year institutions cited in this literature are focused on business disciplines.

The converse of the assertion that the lower levels of the education system have increasingly greater bodies of assessment literature is that the ever-higher levels of the education system have ever-smaller bodies of literature on assessment. Indeed, the literature on assessment of master's and doctoral degree programs is scant. Perhaps this scarcity of literature could have a relationship to the fact that the early phases of education are better connected with students' formative years. Post-graduate higher education may be harder to assess because the students enter the programs as more fully formed individuals, whose characteristics are difficult to associate with the post-graduate degree program, or whose transformations may be more incremental and subtle. On the

other hand, the presence of assessment web pages at many universities indicates that the assessment is being done, but not written about in scholarly publications.

Methodology Problems

Institutions of higher education have a difficult time obtaining valid, actionable feedback from employers. Whatever method of sampling employers the institutions use, there are serious design flaws that threaten the validity and usefulness of the data. Where employers are accurately targeted as knowledgeable about the graduate employees, clear biases appear. Both of these biases seem to give unrealistically high marks to the institution and its graduates. First, Banta (1993, p. 6) found that where employers were given closed-ended questions and a multiple-choice response mode in a mail survey, the employers' responses were so positive that they showed signs of being systematically biased. Banta speculated that the graduate employees only gave the researchers permission and contact information about their supervisors when they felt confident that the employer was "the type of person who will say positive things about them." Or, she concedes, the high ratings could reflect reality.

Phillipi and Banta (1994) conclude that high response rates from employers indicate that the employers are interested in sharing their opinions about the employment preparation needed and being received by graduates. Perhaps reflecting their satisfaction over being asked for input, the employers tend to respond positively on almost every item typically asked by colleges and universities when questionnaires name individual

⁵ Many two-year programs are focused on clear and unambiguous work skills, such as surgical technology or computer-aided drafting. I would assert that higher levels of educational attainment are less measurable than these vocational areas and therefore make poor comparisons to post-baccalaureate degrees.

graduate employees and the questionnaire methodology allows it. On the other hand, methods which do not closely target employers who are knowledgeable about graduate employees run the risk of gathering information from unqualified respondents.

Csete (1997, p. 9), performing a linked survey of alumni and employers, found similar results. The target graduates had no more than 24 months experience, and generally indicated that they wished they had more extensive practical knowledge in their field. The employers tended to rate all skills as important. Csete noted that asking graduates to supply employer names reduced the response rate and biased the study sample. Csete concludes, “given what we learned from conducting these surveys, there are also some things we would change.” She concludes that the heavy use of the positive end of the response range is “troubling.” In the future she would “attempt to better control for this by augmenting standard closed-response scales with other kinds of questions.” Two possible methods she proposes are rankings of values of skills or distributing a fixed number of points across a list of skills.

Banta’s (1993, p.6-7) conclusion was similar. She says the multiple choice questionnaire to employers is a methodology with “inherent problems.” Although alumni who did grant permission to contact employers did not differ on basic demographics from their peers who did not return permissions, the group giving permission did appear to be more gregarious and involved in their careers, as evidenced by their contacts with faculty while in college and their greater subsequent involvement in professional organizations. Such distinctions might fall into the highly valued area of “communication skills.” Banta’s conclusion indicates that critical feedback cannot be expected from employer surveys: “Surveys of employers generally produce positive findings, regardless of the

type of institution or the survey methodology applied. Employers rate most employee attributes as important and most specified employees as good or very good.”

Phillipi and Banta (1994) deduced about employer surveys that “lack of variance seemed to stem from something inherent in the questionnaire design.” In this research, investigators determined that the employer questionnaire should be modified in a way that would increase response variance.

The literature on this topic gives researchers strong reason to eschew Likert scales. Working on three variations of the employer survey over a three-year period, Phillipi and Banta (1994) eliminated the use of Likert scales in the third year. To solve the methodology problem, a forced-choice methodology was instituted. In this case, respondents first had to divide 100 points among ten job characteristics, ranking by value to the job. Second, another 100 points had to be divided in a similar way, but based on the performance of a named graduate. Employers’ response rates dropped somewhat using this method, perhaps because of the extra mental effort and time required of the respondents. In fact, some survey respondents specifically complained about the time it took to complete the questionnaire, but the response rate was still acceptably high. This method did have the desired result of increasing the employer response variability.

The named-graduate method, which relies on the graduate-employee’s agreement to provide the supervisor’s name to the researcher, has both a tremendous advantage and fatal disadvantage. On the one hand, it gets the researcher directly to a person who is best able to provide information based on direct experience. On the other hand, there is strong evidence that the method systematically excludes those persons whose feedback would be unfavorable to the graduate employee or the institution of higher education.

Trudy Banta has recognized the difficulties and bias that have been shown to be characteristic of employer surveys. In order to overcome those problems, Banta now recommends using a personal form of information gathering, such as focus groups or personal e-mails. She suggests using employers known to the researcher or in the local area (Banta, 2001).

Are Employer Surveys Necessary?

Since there are significant obstacles to getting useful assessment data from employers, one should stop to consider whether the feedback from employers is different from other groups, such as alumni or faculty. If it is easier, quicker, and less costly to gather information from alumni, and alumni and employers share the same opinions, one might have a valid option of neglecting employer opinion. The results of comparisons of the assessment data gathered from various stakeholder groups are mixed, but there are enough differences to raise concern.

Smith and Demichiell (1996) found that there were no significant differences between alumni and the business community. Baker (2000), on the other hand, found that students and faculty do not fully understand a set of seven top characteristics valued by employers of accounting students. Baker also described how students vastly underestimate the value of personal integrity to employers. In the first National Employer Survey (NES) in 1994, it was documented that there is a fundamental disconnection between employers and schools, including colleges and universities. In later surveys, additional questions in the NES attempted to calibrate the link between

work and school and to relate employers' impressions of schools to the quality of their graduates ("Understanding Employers' Perceptions of College Graduates", 1998).

Hoey (1999, p. 46) provided comparative lists of characteristics thought important in graduates by employers and by alumni. Alumni favored work skills and abilities; planning and problem-solving skills; communication and interpersonal skills; and technical and scientific skills. Employers, on the other hand, favored work skills and abilities, communication, interpersonal, and conceptual skills, and technical and scientific skills. One surprise in Hoey's alumni/employer survey was that corresponding alumni rated the level of their professional preparation considerably lower than did their employers. Another surprise about employer preferences is that they do not seem to care about the reputation of a job applicant's school ("Understanding Employers' Perceptions of College Graduates", 1998). Since no one can reliably proxy for employers, researchers must continue to gather assessment information directly from employers.

The Master of Public Administration Degree

The Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree is just one of many master's degrees that may gain from the introspection of employer-based assessment. The MPA degree is nationally accredited by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA). NASPAA acknowledges that there are other degrees with similar names⁶. Roeder and Whitaker (1993, p. 513), perhaps less concerned than

⁶ Other degrees recognized by NASPAA include the master of governmental administration, master in public affairs, master of international relations. The information NASPAA offers on its web pages seems to indicate that the degrees known by these several different names are interchangeable and stresses that each degree has a core curriculum that teaches skills for effective public management including budgeting,

NASPAA about making a marriage between Public Administration and public affairs education, describe public affairs education as two relatively distinct approaches. The first is traditional Public Administration, which is more “institutional-management.” The second approach is policy analysis, which is more analytical in focus.

Nationwide, NASPAA’s roster shows 136 member universities with master’s degree programs in Public Administration or some variant. NASPAA describes Public Administration as a “unifying field” that “draw[s] on a wide variety of academic disciplines such as political science, economics, business administration and law.”

NASPAA requires a core curriculum, which consists of the following areas:

- Political and legal institutions and processes
- The economic and social systems and forces
- The organizational and managerial skills and practices
- Concepts and techniques of financial administration
- Techniques of analysis, including quantitative, economic and statistical methods and computer systems.

NASPAA’s accreditation self-study review guidance to schools is more specific about the curriculum content than its introductory materials. Here, content areas are prescribed as including

- Human resources
- Budgeting and financial processes
- Information, including computer literacy and applications
- Policy and program formulation, implementation and evaluation
- Decision-making and problem-solving
- Political and legal institutions and processes
- Economic and social institutions and processes
- Organization and management concepts and behavior.

ethics, policy analysis, nonprofit management, and more (“What is the Master of Public Administration Degree?”, 2001).

The verbiage accompanying the list also emphasizes the importance of ethics in the curriculum. But the guidance is not intended to prescribe individual courses, nor even portions of courses. Universities are free to devote as little time to each core curriculum area as they choose, short of none at all. Additional curriculum components can be added with a clear rationale for doing so, giving each program the opportunity to create its own special emphasis. No minimum number of hours is prescribed.

NASPAA calls for programs to be mission driven. Each should have a clear mission statement that gives the program its educational philosophy and mission, as well as a means for developing strategies and objectives to carry out the mission. NASPAA calls on each university's Public Administration program to assess its students' performance and the accomplishment of objectives in supporting the mission. A narrow interpretation of the first part of this assessment requirement could be merely that students must be graded. Finally, NASPAA provides guidance that assessment information should help to direct and revise program objectives, strategies, and operations in carrying out program missions ("COPRA Standards for Professional Masters Degree Programs in Public Affairs, Policy and Administration," 2001).

While NASPAA motivates programs to engage in various forms of assessment for accreditation purposes, another irresistible motivation toward outcomes assessment is legislation intended to enhance the accountability of public universities. Such legislation centers on accountability of the institutions as a whole rather than by academic department. The legal requirements for outcomes assessment concentrate much more strictly on outcomes than do the requirements of accrediting bodies such as NASPAA.

One might expect that the outcome assessment of an MPA graduate should be based on the knowledge, values, and skills present in the MPA graduate⁷. Jennings (1989, p. 442) makes a case that the MPA program can be assessed on the amount of overall change effected on the student during her time in the education program. This approach is known as the “value-added” approach (Jennings, 1989, p. 442). The importance of the value-added approach is more apparent when the career stage of MPA students and graduates is considered.

Blunt and Spring (1991) found that 67% of MPA graduates worked in the public sector. Another 19% worked in the private sector, and 14% worked in the nonprofit sector. Of those MPA graduates working in the public sector, 39% worked in state government, 41% in local government, 13% in the federal government, and 7 % in county or regional government. Cleary (1993, p. 266-7) made similar discoveries about the numbers of Public Administration graduates working in government. Of all Public Administration graduates, with degrees at bachelor’s, master’s, or doctoral level, less than 3% were federal employees. Those Public Administration graduates who do find jobs in federal government are mostly at the master’s degree level.

In 1987, Lewis reported that graduate education was growing among federal employees. He discovered that graduates with advanced Public Administration degrees were benefiting from this higher education by earning higher salaries. Using a sample of federal personnel records from 1974 and 1982 maintained by the Office of Personnel Management, Lewis found that the average GS salary level for persons with graduate degrees was 12.2, and the average for lower degrees (bachelor or lower) was 8.0. For

⁷ The self-study review of the MPA program itself is largely based on the individual program’s mission statement. This being the case, it is conceivable that an MPA program could set itself a very low standard

MPA graduates, the average GS level was 12.45, a bit higher than 12.29 for MBAs. These advantages have driven growth in in-service programs, at the expense of pre-service programs. On a somewhat less statistical basis and with more recent findings, Roberts agrees that the MPA degree has a significant beneficial influence on student career progress and development (Roberts, 2001, p. 26).

As the literature on stakeholder and outcomes assessment is sparse for the graduate level, it becomes even sparser as we hone in on a particular graduate degree, in this case the MPA degree. Roberts (2001) provides an up-to-date study of outcomes assessment for MPA education. Fifty-seven percent of alumni respondents indicated that the MPA degree was critical to advancing their profession; 62% that it was critical in obtaining a new job; 52% that it was critical in increasing their value to an employer; 81% that it was critical in increasing their marketability; and 57% that it was critical in facilitating a better understanding of organizational functioning (Roberts, 2001, p. 26).

Like the well-documented guidance in the literature on undergraduate assessment, MPA outcome assessment should be linked to a conceptual framework that addresses mission, goals, and objectives. Roberts (2001, p. 28) recommends that employer surveys should be done only once every two to three years. Consistent with assessment efforts at the undergraduate level, assessment using surveys at the graduate level in Public Administration experiences low response rate from employers, and therefore problems with validity. Roberts' methodology honored the practice of measuring the relevancy, job-relatedness, and practicality or applicability of the curriculum content. Unfortunately, only 28 available responses were obtained in the research at Fairleigh Dickinson University (Roberts, 2001, p. 24), so the findings are less

useful than they could be. Roberts notes that employer surveys also serve as an additional curriculum validity check. Low response rates are recognized to be a serious problem in alumni-, exit-, and employer surveys. And Jennings (1989, p. 443) cautions that supervisors may be without qualification or ability to adequately assess the graduate employee.

Roberts (p. 28) suggests giving the job of assessing to MPA students themselves, and that the effort include additional methods such as focus groups and exit interviews. He further recommends that program directors be sure to provide alumni with the results of surveys. Finally, MPA programs wishing to use the methodology of surveying employers via supervisor referrals provided by alumni must keep up-to-date alumni mailing lists.

Perhaps one big reason outcome assessment of the MPA, and indeed all graduate level education, stymies the academic community is because the master's degree is awarded to more fully matured individuals than are undergraduate degrees. Many recipients of the MPA degree earn that degree when they are many years into their careers. Outcome assessment that assumes the education experience created the entire set of personal qualities would always represent a certain amount of academic hubris, but such an assumption would be even less appropriate for mid-career graduates.

Denhardt (2001) recognizes such a distinction between pre-service and in-service MPA students. He asserts that pre-service students generally move into technical or analytical positions such as budget analysts, personnel analysts, or administrative assistants. On the other hand, says Denhardt, in-service MPA graduates are more likely

to be in management jobs. Therefore, he declares that students at different stages of their lives and careers require different kinds of knowledge and skills.

Summary

This chapter has shown some of the reasons for outcomes assessment based on employer input. Gathering such input is highly important for its point of view and its validity, but there are huge methodology problems that have not been overcome in practice. This chapter has also exposed some of the general requirements that employers seek in college graduates. At the master's degree level, the body of assessment literature is very scant. The accrediting body that prescribes curricula for Master of Public Administration programs has defined a core set of curriculum that scholars have recognized as a target or ideal type in their studies. These two bodies of knowledge—the study of higher education assessment and the study of MPA assessment—could be fused to broaden the area of inquiry for future assessment.

The next chapter discusses the particulars of the research setting at SWT and emphasizes the particulars of the MPA program and its mission.

Chapter 3

The Setting: Southwest Texas State University and its MPA Program

This chapter describes Southwest Texas State University (SWT) and its region, as well as the SWT Master of Public Administration (MPA) program. The mission statement of the MPA program is deconstructed, with an eye toward building the conceptual framework for the research.

SWT is a large, public university in San Marcos, Texas, approximately 35 miles south of the state capitol in Austin, the sixteenth largest city in the United States (Census-Ranking, 2001). Numerous state agencies employ approximately 59,000 people in Austin⁸ (Workforce-Employment, 2002). Fifty miles to the south of SWT is San Antonio, the nation's ninth largest city (Census-Ranking, 2001), and home of five military bases. The San Antonio metropolitan statistical area employs over 130,000 people in all levels of government (Workforce SA-MSA, 2002). San Marcos itself is a city of approximately 35,000 population (Census-San Marcos, 2001). The Austin-San Marcos metropolitan statistical area employs approximately 144,000 people in all levels of government (Workforce Austin-MSA, 2002).

In the 2001 Fall Semester, SWT enrolled 22,471 students (SWT-Enrollment, 2001). SWT is a Master's I class school under the Carnegie Foundation classification scheme⁹ (Carnegie, 2001). In 2001, SWT awarded 754 master's degrees (SWT Masters,

⁸ Actually 59,233 for all of Travis County in fourth quarter of 2000, according to Texas Workforce Commission. <http://www.twc.state.tx.us/lmi/lfs/type/coveredemployment/coveredemployment2000.html>

⁹ A Master's I university awards at least 40 master's degrees per year. Other Texas Master's I universities include Angelo State University, Sam Houston State University, and University of Texas at San Antonio. The next step up from Master's I is "Doctoral/Research University-Intensive." Although SWT awards doctoral degrees, it neither offers a doctorate in enough disciplines, nor confers enough diplomas to meet

2001). In all, SWT offers eighty masters degree programs and two doctoral programs (“Dean’s Welcome”, 2002).

The university opened its doors in 1903 as Southwest Texas State Normal. Since then, the institution has been renamed several times, most recently in 1968, before which it was Southwest Texas State College (SWT-History, 2001). Now, the university’s president is leading an effort to change the name again, this time to Texas State University, with the expectation of a gain in stature for the university (SWT-Name, 2001).

SWT exists in a milieu rich in excellence in higher education. Other public universities in Texas include Texas A&M University and the University of Texas at Austin, both of which are classified as first-tier “national universities” by *U.S. News and World Report* (US News-National, 2001). Texas is also home to such bastions of higher education excellence as Texas Tech University, Rice University, Texas Christian University, and Baylor University. The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), the accrediting body for such schools, has thirteen members in Texas offering master’s programs, seven of which are accredited (NASPAA Texas, 2001).

In recent years, the SWT MPA program has produced around twenty¹⁰ MPA graduates per year (MPA Count, 2001). Each graduate will have completed a program of 39 semester hours, consisting of a core of ten courses, with the following titles

- Public Finance Administration
- Organization Theory
- Problems in Public Personnel Administration

the doctoral class requirements. All SWT doctoral degrees to date have been in Geography, with a total count of graduates at five, as of November, 2001.

¹⁰ In 1998 there were 25 MPA graduates; in 1999, 21; in 2000, 22; and in 2001, 18.

- Public Management and Ethics
- Problems in Federal Intergovernmental Relations
- Problems in Public Law
- Problems in Quantitative Analysis
- Problems in Research Methodology
- Applied Research Project
- (and one of the following)
 - Problems in American Public Policy
 - Seminar in the Policy Process
 - Seminar in Program Evaluation.

Additionally, each graduate completes nine more semester hours in one of ten career support areas. These additional subject matter areas include government information systems, international relations, legal and judicial administration, public finance administration, general public administration, administration of allied health services, administration of criminal justice systems, human resources administration, public personnel administration, and urban planning. Depending on the student's prior coursework, additional background courses may be required.

The SWT MPA program resides in the Political Science Department, in the College of Liberal Arts, and is taught by a core faculty of six. Other faculty of the Political Science Department also teach MPA program coursework (MPA Requirements).

Perhaps it would be natural for the SWT MPA program to bear some comparisons with the NASPAA-accredited neighbor program at the University of Texas at Austin, just 35 miles away. In its mission statement, the SWT MPA program defines its service area as Central Texas (SWT MPA, 2001). The University of Texas at Austin, with its prestigious Lyndon B. Johnson (LBJ) School of Public Affairs, is clearly within the Central Texas area served by SWT. The LBJ School, also accredited by NASPAA, differs from the SWT MPA program in that it offers a master's degree in Public Affairs instead of Public Administration. In the *U.S. News and World Report* rankings, the LBJ

School is ranked seventh place nationwide in the public affairs category (US News-PA). Consistent with its ranking as a national university, the mission statement of the LBJ School has no language confining its service area to a particular region (UT-LBJ, 2001), like that of SWT's MPA program.

Capstone papers written by SWT MPA graduates have won a disproportionate number of regional and national awards. Since 1998, SWT MPA graduates Kevin Baum, Shivaun Perez, and Ana Lisa Garza have won national awards for their respective "applied research projects," as the SWT capstone paper is called. And since 1996, SWT MPA graduates Ralph Revello, Rebecca Short, Carey Welebob, Christine McCormick, and Jena Whitley Pratt have been awarded the McGrew Public Policy Research Award by the CenTex chapter of the American Society for Public Administration. Welebob's paper also won the Southeast Conference on Public Administration Policy research award (SWT-ARP, 2002).

One possible indication of the stature of a public university in Texas is a subtle performance outcome goal embedded in the state appropriation for each university. The Texas Legislature gives most of the public universities a goal for the percentage of graduates who are first-generation college graduates. Lower percentages for this goal could be seen as indicating a university suitable for a more elite class of educated families. For SWT, the goal is 49% for the fiscal year ending August 31, 2002. For the University of Texas at Austin, as another example, the goal is 29%. The overall range is from 17% to 79%¹¹ (Appropriation, 2001). SWT clearly falls in the middle of that range.

¹¹ Making conclusions about a university's prestige by these legislative goals will yield some unexpected results for some of the state's universities.

SWT engages in a wide range of assessment activities. They include university-wide academic assessment, department-level assessment, and program assessment. Assessment techniques are even applied toward various services provided to all students. Within the Department of Political Science, the home of the Public Administration program, undergraduate student surveys, intern surveys, graduating senior surveys, alumni surveys, advisory board reviews, and additional targeted assessment techniques are used (SWT Assessment, 2000).

The SWT MPA Program Mission Statement

The SWT MPA program is driven by its mission statement, 274 words¹² of cross-reference to other authorities, prescription of environment, and prescription of outcomes. In Table 3-1, the mission statement is shown, phrase by phrase, to identify the appropriate assessment category for each substantive mission component in the mission statement, assigning each component as an input, environment, or an outcome. In subsequent chapters, those components identified as outcomes will be used as part of the conceptual framework of the research.

Table 3-1. Southwest Texas State University MPA Program Mission Statement Analysis

Mission Statement Phrase	Assessment Type	Justification for Assessment Type Category
The mission of the MPA program is to prepare students for careers as managers and leaders in public service.	Outcome	The public service “destination” is cited.
The MPA Program is guided by		

¹² By contrast, the mission statement of the University of Texas LBJ School of Public Affairs (<http://www.utexas.edu/lbj/welcome/>) consists of 66 words.

values,	Input	Key phrase is “guided by”
ethics, and	Input	
quality standards	Input	
as expressed through the Southwest Texas State University's Core Value Statement, Standards for Professional Masters Degree Programs, Diversity Guidelines, ICMA/NASPAA Guidelines for Local Government Management Education, and NASPAA/APWA Guidelines for Developing Master's Degree Specialization in Public Works.		
The program primarily serves the diverse community that is Central Texas.	Outcome	Key phrase is “serves”
Such service is provided through		
course work,	Environment	The educational experience is being described.
professional development opportunities,	Environment	
internships and	Environment	
applied research projects.	Environment	
The Program responds to the changing public service environment through:		
an innovative curriculum,	Environment	The educational experience is being described. Note that faculty scholarship is an output or outcome, but it is not a student outcome.
faculty scholarship and service,	Environment	
links to professional organizations,	Environment	
interaction with governmental agencies, and	Environment	
a commitment to state of-the-art technology.	Environment	
The Program is distinguished by		
emphasizing the central role of ethics in public service;	Outcome	The public service “destination” is cited.
reinforcing the use of technology in management;	Outcome	The management “destination” is cited.
providing professional and educational opportunities to a diverse student body;	Environment	In these phrases, the service is targeted to the student while in the educational environment.
delivering classes at varied times and locations;	Environment	
offering a variety of career support areas;	Environment	
enabling rich and frequent contacts between students and faculty;	Environment	
providing students and alumni with professional networking opportunities;	Outcome	Since alumni are included, the assumption is that an

		outcome will survive beyond the educational experience.
focusing on continuing professional development;	Environment	It is unclear here whether the program offers a continuation of professional development to the midcareer student entering the program or whether any student is expected to have an outcome. The former is assumed.
emphasizing management in political institutions and processes;	Outcome	Management skills are part of the workplace (outcome) rather than the student's experience of the education environment.
and integrating theoretical and applied approaches to public management.	Outcome	Key word is "applied." Application will occur externally to the educational environment, i.e. as an outcome.

(SWT-MPA)

Seven components of the mission meet the parameters of this research project, in that they are outcome-oriented and therefore may be apparent to employers. The mission statement language about use of technology, management in political institutions and processes is considered to be covered by the NASPAA core curriculum. The outcome-oriented mission components that are not already prescribed in similar language in

NASPAA guidance include service to Central Texas, emphasis on ethics¹³, networking opportunities, and integration of theoretical and applied approaches to public management (NASPAA, 2001).

This chapter has described the particulars of SWT, its region, its assessment tools, and its MPA program, the object of the research project. In subsequent chapters, the outcome-oriented elements of the mission statement shown in this chapter are used with other elements identified in the literature review to further develop the research.

¹³ NASPAA guidance does mention ethics, but not as part of its “bulleted” core curriculum list.

Chapter 4

Conceptual Framework and Methodology

Following from the general knowledge discovered in the literature and the particular information about the SWT MPA program, this chapter develops the conceptual framework of the research project and demonstrates how the five working hypotheses link to an operationalization and interview method for gathering data.

Exploratory Research

Formulating and investigating a conceptual framework based on working hypotheses best addresses the research questions of this project. Working hypotheses are a good fit for exploratory research. The research is described as exploratory because the literature review does not reveal similar exploration of employer attitudes toward the curriculum components in an MPA program. Nor does there appear to be prior research on government employer attitudes toward the SWT MPA program.

Working Hypotheses

Working hypotheses are particularly appropriate for use in exploratory research. Shields posits that “Working hypotheses enable and focus evidence collection” (Shields, 1998, p. 206). An explanation of each of the five working hypotheses follows.

Working Hypothesis 1

Working hypothesis WH1 is that government executives are unaware of the existence or content of the MPA degree. WH1 is based on a lack of literature about broad regard of the MPA.

Working Hypothesis 2

Working hypothesis WH2 is that government executives place high value on each of the areas of knowledge in the NASPAA core curriculum. In addition to NASPAA’s own guidance, several researchers have used the NASPAA core requirements as the conceptual framework for their research.

Working Hypothesis 3

Working hypothesis WH3 is that government executives place high value on areas of knowledge and skill outcomes espoused by the SWT MPA program mission statement. This working hypothesis is based on the SWT MPA mission statement. Four outcomes in the SWT MPA program mission statement are not already covered in the NASPAA core curriculum.

Working Hypothesis 4

Working hypothesis WH4 is that government executives place high value on additional areas of knowledge and skills. This working hypothesis is based on research by several scholars¹⁴ whose work is not specific to government or the MPA setting.

Working Hypothesis 5

Working hypothesis WH5 is that government executives whose organizations have SWT MPA graduates within them believe that the MPA graduates have the knowledge and skills needed by government careerists. This working hypothesis is based in part on the assumptions in the SWT MPA mission statement and on research about the MPA degree that is not specific to any particular university¹⁵.

Conceptual Framework

The conceptual framework of the research is based on the five working hypotheses. The Conceptual Framework is recapitulated in Table 4-1, along with citations of supporting literature and modes of observation.

Table 4-1. Conceptual Framework		
Supporting Literature	Working Hypothesis	Mode of Observation
(This working hypothesis is based on the scarcity of literature regarding opinion toward the	WH1: Government executives are unaware of the existence or content of the MPA degree.	Answer to question: “What level of awareness do you believe there is among high-level government executives of the Master of Public Administration, or MPA, degree?”

¹⁴ Banta, 1993; Hoey, 1999; Knoblaugh, 1989; Kretovics, 1998; and Tanyel, 1999.

¹⁵ Blunt and Spring, 1991; Cleary, 1993; Lewis, 1987; Roberts, 2001.

MPA degree.)		
<p>Blunt and Spring (1991), Cleary (1993), Lewis (1987), Roberts (2001), “What is the Master of Public Administration Degree,” NASPAA (2001), SWT MPA mission statement</p>	<p>WH2: Government executives place high value on each of the areas of knowledge in the NASPAA core curriculum.</p>	<p>Answer to question for each knowledge area in NASPAA core curriculum requirements: “How high is the value you place on knowledge of *** for a successful career in government?”</p> <p>*** is human resources; budgeting and financial processes; computer literacy; policy formulation; program implementation and evaluation; decision-making and problem solving; political institutions and processes; legal institutions and processes; economic institutions and processes; social institutions and processes; organization and management concepts and behavior.</p> <p>Respondents are encouraged to rate each item on a scale of one to five, where three is neutral and five is highly important, and/or to comment on each.</p> <p>Each respondent is asked to review the core curriculum list and mention any items they view as especially important. Then the respondent is asked to mention any items they view as far less important.</p>
<p>SWT MPA mission statement</p>	<p>WH3: Government executives place high value on areas of knowledge and skill outcomes espoused by the SWT MPA program mission statement.</p>	<p>Answer to question for each outcome goal in the SWT MPA mission statement: “How important is it to a career in government to ***?”</p> <p>*** is have high ethics in public services; be a part of a network of professionals; and integrate theoretical and applied approaches to public management.</p> <p>Respondents are encouraged to rate each item on a scale of one to five, where three is neutral and five is highly important, and/or to comment on each.</p>

<p>Banta (1993), Hoey (1999), Knoblauch (1989) Kretovics (1998), Tanyel (1999)</p>	<p>WH4: Government executives place high value on additional areas of knowledge and skills.</p>	<p>Answer to question for each additional hypothetical knowledge area of skill: “How important is it for managers and leaders in your organization to ***?”</p> <p>*** is ‘be socially effective—as leaders, team members, organizers, and problem solvers’; “have good presentation and speaking skills”; “have good writing skills”; “have effective listening skills”; and “have good time management skills”.</p> <p>Respondents are encouraged to rate each item on a scale of one to five, where three is neutral and five is highly important, and/or to comment on each.</p>
	<p>(Clarifying Step for WH3 & WH4)</p>	<p>Each respondent is asked to review a consolidated list of the knowledge and skill areas from the SWT MPA mission statement and the additional hypothetical knowledge areas and mention any items they view as especially important. Then the respondent is asked to mention any items they view as far less important.</p>
<p>Blunt and Spring (1991), Cleary (1993), Lewis (1987), Roberts (2001), SWT MPA mission statement “What is the Master of Public Administration Degree,” NASPAA (2001)</p>	<p>WH5: Government executives whose organizations have SWT MPA graduates within them believe that the MPA graduates have the knowledge and skills needed by government careerists.</p>	<p>Answer to questions: (Show list from SWT MPA web site of MPA grads of last ten years.) “Are you able to think of someone in your organization who holds an MPA degree from SWT?” “How do you believe that graduates from the SWT MPA program differ from other persons in similar positions?” “Would you say there are any areas of knowledge that we’ve discussed in this interview where the SWT MPA graduates are especially strong?” “Would you say there are any areas of knowledge that we’ve discussed in this interview where the SWT MPA graduates should grow more?” “How good a job would you say that the SWT MPA program does of preparing</p>

		<p>graduates for careers in public service?”</p> <p>“How well would you say Central Texas is served by the SWT MPA program through its graduates?”</p> <p>“Is there anything more that you would like the SWT MPA program to take into account in refining its course of study?”</p>
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Structured Interview Methodology

Under most similar circumstances, surveys would be the method of choice for gathering data for such working hypotheses. But the literature soundly discredits surveys for these research questions, because of strong and consistent bias. Trudy W. Banta, whose prolific research on university assessment has included employer surveys, now recommends use of more personal ways to gather employer input, such as focus groups or personal e-mails, in order to overcome the bias inherent in employer surveys (Banta, 2001). Consequently, this research relies on data gathered through individual structured interviews with government executives.

The interview questions are tightly linked with the working hypotheses. In fact, the sequence of the questions in the interview followed the sequence of the working hypotheses. The structured interview questions are shown in the “Mode of Observation” column in Table 4-1. Most of the questions and their specifications that explored Working Hypotheses WH2 (NASPAA core curriculum), WH3 (SWT MPA mission items), and WH4 (other knowledge areas) were structured to obtain a verbal answer that is akin to a Likert scale. However, to avoid a lack of variation to answers for certain questions about curriculum content areas, the interviewer followed specific value

questions with questions that allowed the respondent to elevate or lower the value of certain knowledge areas within the group of questions.

For working hypotheses WH2 and WH3, based on the NASPAA core curriculum and the SWT MPA mission statement respectively, a series of questions explores each of the “prescriptions” in the basis document. In some cases, for example, where the NASPAA core curriculum calls for coverage of “political and legal institutions,” two questions were formed—one about political institutions and one about legal institutions-- in order to avoid formulation of a “double-barreled” question. In other cases, the “double-barreled” core curriculum requirement was paraphrased into a singular item. And in still others, the multiple related items stand together, unseparated, in order to make the interview less lengthy and tedious to the respondent. Working Hypotheses WH3 (SWT MPA mission items), WH4 (other knowledge areas), and WH5 (SWT MPA graduates) lend themselves toward a closing with questions that are open-ended requests for comment.

The interview steps that called for ranking of the value of knowledge and skills was designed to assure differentiation in values in the event that respondents ranked every knowledge and skill area highly. This had the potential to supercede the importance of the initial questions.

Sample Identification Process

The data-gathering consisted of individual interviews with eight government managers and executives. Five of the respondents were identified through an e-mail solicitation sent by the MPA program director, Patricia Shields, to an e-mail address list

of alumni maintained by the SWT MPA program office. The researcher asked recipients to identify Central Texas government executives who have knowledge of the SWT MPA program or work with its graduates and who may be willing to participate in an interview. In order to reduce bias, the researcher only accepted respondents if they were not themselves alumni of the SWT MPA program. Three interviewees were professional contacts of the researcher.

When first beginning to identify a sample, the researcher found that some respondents were hesitant to commit themselves or their executive contacts to the full hour for an interview as the researcher was requesting. After reevaluating, the researcher resounded the call, this time with a request for only a half hour. Considerable negotiation was necessary to schedule some of the interviews. Ultimately, some interviewees were willing to speak for over an hour. One was available only by telephone.

To preserve anonymity of the respondents, yet to describe them, their general position type is given in the lists below, as well as a description of their organizations, but the two data types are given unlinked from one another.

Types of Position of the Interview Respondents

- two executive level operations managers,
- a mid-level operations manager,
- a human resources manager,
- a state agency director,
- a public information director,
- an upper-level city executive,
- a local outreach director.

Organizations for which the Interview Respondents Work

- two large Texas state health/human services agencies,

- a smallish Texas regulatory agency,
- a large community college,
- a university system office,
- a large city government,
- a small city government,
- a quasi-governmental river basin management agency.

At least one of the interviewees had close exposure to the SWT MPA program because of working in local government in the same town as the university, therefore having close contacts with professors, students, and graduates. Since no graduate of the program was accepted as an interviewee, such arm's-length closeness makes for especially valid responses. Another interviewee had a great deal of contact with SWT MPA graduates through participation in the local chapter of the American Society for Public Administration. And two respondents mentioned their own graduation from the LBJ School of Public Affairs, which provided them with an external standard to compare to what they knew about the SWT MPA program.

Fine Tuning the Interviews

Though the core questions remained consistent through all the interviews, some fine-tuning to the questions occurred during the first three interviews. The revisions consisted of the addition of two questions to more fully explore the value of the outcomes defined in the SWT MPA program mission statement and the additional knowledge areas identified in the literature review, and to better explore the strengths of the SWT MPA graduates.

The first added question was intended to help better explore the relative values of knowledge and skill areas in WH3 (SWT MPA mission items) and WH4 (other knowledge areas). This more fully fleshed out the “clarifying step” by asking the respondent to rank any knowledge and skill areas as far less important than others. The second added question was intended to better balance the information being collected about SWT MPA graduates. This question asked the respondent to mention any areas where the SWT MPA graduates are especially strong. This additional question was intended to explore WH5 (SWT MPA graduates), and it succeeded at generating useful discussion.

Another small variation in the interviews was the use of a list of MPA graduates over the last ten years. This was used in six interviews to help the respondents assure themselves that they were acquainted with actual SWT MPA graduates. The technique had not been introduced at the time of the first interview, and not used in another because it was a telephone interview. In both cases, SWT MPA graduates were known to the interviewee anyway.

In the first three interviews, numeric ratings for answers were not vigorously sought for those questions that addressed the value or importance of various knowledge areas. But after the first two interviews, it seemed clear that the subjective commentary would not be a good basis for comparisons, and numeric ratings were sought more vigorously. In the end, though, even numeric ratings seemed suspect because of the differing interpretations to the questions that eventually came out as the interviews went on. Consequently, it seems appropriate to rely more on the later questions that asked the

respondents to differentiate the skills and knowledge areas into higher importance areas, lower importance areas, and the remaining mid-importance areas.

Analysis of the results consists of examination of the notes from the several interviews, looking for similarities and dissimilarities in the responses. The research attempts to find consistent patterns or general attitudes among the respondents and turn these into recommendations for the SWT MPA program. The next chapter discusses the research results.

Chapter 5

Research Results

This chapter discusses the findings from the interviews, as embodied in value rankings and the qualitative assessment of the interview responses by the researcher, accompanied by quotes from the interviewees. The sequence of this chapter follows the five working hypotheses of the conceptual framework and the questions in the structured interview. The results are summarized in juxtaposition to the working hypotheses in Table 5-1.

In answering the questions, several of the interviewees struggled with whether to answer for what is or what should be. Similarly, some struggled to separate their own opinions from a different view of themselves as spokespersons for the government executive community at large. The researcher acknowledged these dilemmas in the interviews and committed to try to capture their predicament.

Awareness of the MPA Degree (WH1)

One question addressed Working Hypothesis 1: “Government executives are unaware of the existence or content of the MPA degree.” The research indicates that there is good general awareness of the existence of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree. All interviewees indicated that there was some awareness among government executives of the MPA degree. However, almost all of them indicated that there was little awareness of the curriculum content covered in MPA programs. One respondent mentioned that she felt that there was awareness of the difference between the Master of Business Administration degree and the Master of Public Administration

degree. Interviewees from city government indicated that there was high awareness of the MPA degree among city executives, and one interviewee offered evidence that a large percentage of city managers hold the degree.

Value of NASPAA Core Curriculum (WH2)

A group of questions considered the value of the NASPAA core curriculum in order to explore Working Hypothesis 2: “Government executives place high value on each of the areas of knowledge in the NASPAA core curriculum.” The interviewees considered each core curriculum component to be of some value. The most revealing way to analyze the interview responses, though, is on the ranking of these knowledge and skill areas into most important, least important, and the residual middle ground. By this measure, the interviewees as a group valued the core curriculum areas in this order¹⁶:

1. Decision making and problem solving
2. Human resources
3. Program implementation and evaluation
4. Organization and management concepts
5. Budgeting and financial processes
6. Policy formulation
7. Political institutions and processes
8. Social institutions and processes
9. Computer literacy
10. Economic institutions and processes
11. Legal institutions and processes

Most of the respondents spoke emphatically about the importance of knowledge of decision making and human resources. It was clear from the remarks that the

¹⁶ To create this ranking, I assigned a score of 1, 2, or 3 for each of the core curriculum areas depending on the respondent’s ranking of them as being in the “most important,” group (1), least important group (3), or

interviewees' valuing decision making so highly was based on their interpretation of decision making as an inclusive, democratic process, or at least one which generates defensible explanations for oversight boards, commissions, and legislature. One respondent remarked, "If someone in public service doesn't have the answers, if they can create a framework where they get the answers, they can be successful. I don't think an MPA has a program to teach someone all the answers. I think what it has to do is teach someone to create a framework where they get the answers." Another respondent said, "You're dealing with council members, department directors, staff, constituencies, the community, the general public. You have got to be able to bring those factions together and work it through, so I think that [decision making] is a very important skill."

The other area that gathered the most emphatic remarks was human resources. One respondent called knowledge of human resources "the most undervalued knowledge in the professional community." Another referred to knowledge of the organization's human resources as irreplaceable.

Program implementation and evaluation was ranked on a par with human resources in importance. However, this topic did not garner comments as strong as those about human resources. Two respondents recognized the "double-barreled" nature¹⁷ of the question and directed their high rating toward evaluation rather than toward implementation. On the other hand, another said, "It's great to plan, but you have to be able to implement." One, from a quasi-governmental organization, noted that program

the residual middle ground (2). The scores for each item from all the interviews were averaged and sorted to get this ranking order.

¹⁷ As noted in Chapter 4, some "double-barreledness" was intentionally retained in the question design, partly because of the nature of the NASPAA core curriculum guidance, and partly to make an appropriately brief interview.

implementation and evaluation “doesn’t seem to be as important in government as in the private sector.”

Some of the respondents seemed to resonate to the value of knowledge of political institutions and processes. These seemed to be those executives whose positions put them most in contact with elected bodies, such as legislatures, city councils, or other boards. Two of them humorously focused on the key word “successful” to rhetorically emphasize the question: “How high is the value you place on knowledge of political institutions and processes for a successful career in government?” The implication seemed to be that one would be a failure without such sensitivity.

Computer literacy was not recognized as highly important. Some respondents indicated that specialists should be available to assist the executive with this area of knowledge. Similar answers were given, though, on a number of other skill areas, most notably on budgeting and legal institutions and processes. Several respondents did indicate that the importance of computer literacy is growing.

One pragmatic respondent indicated that an executive could survive being weak in one or several of the knowledge areas if he were closely connected with someone who could assist with the weak areas. The same respondent indicated that one could not survive being weak in all or most of the areas.

Beyond the NASPAA Core Curriculum

Going further afield from the NASPAA core curriculum several question groups explored outcomes in the SWT MPA program mission statement, additional areas of

knowledge discovered in the literature review, and the respondents' own ideas of valued areas of knowledge and skill.

Outcomes from the SWT MPA Mission Statement (WH3)

Working Hypothesis 3, “Government executives place high value on areas of knowledge and skill outcomes espoused by the SWT MPA program mission statement,” was explored through a set of questions about three areas in the mission statement not covered in the NASPAA core curriculum. As noted in an earlier chapter, ethics is mentioned in NASPAA’s guidance, but not in its bullet-point list of core curriculum areas. The SWT MPA program, though, does list ethics in its mission statement. The government executives queried in this research gave this item the most consistently high values of any item in the interview. One careful listener, apparently noticing the phrasing of the question about “ethics in public service” indicated that high ethics must apply to an individual’s whole life, not just public service. Another respondent pointed out that high ethics “are important for internal and external credibility.” She stated that in high level positions one could not be successful without high ethics.

Other questions drawn solely on the SWT MPA program mission earned a mixed response on value. Only one respondent rated networking as one of their highest priorities. That respondent emphasized the value of being connected with a “broader knowledge base as a professional,” and of having “a network of people to bounce ideas off on and even commiserate with at times.” He said, “There is a sameness in local government to the kinds of problems we deal with, and there’s no reason to reinvent the wheel each time.”

The third item drawn solely from the SWT MPA program mission statement earned a low response on its value. Integrating theoretical and practical approaches was given the lowest value in the group of those items not covered by NASPAA's core curriculum requirements. The abstractness of the phrasing seems not to have attracted many adherents from the practitioner community.

Value of Additional Areas of Knowledge and Skill (WH4)

Working Hypothesis 4 is "Government executives place high value on additional areas of knowledge and skills." To explore this working hypothesis, the interviewer asked about several skills identified in the literature review that seem to have broad appeal to employers. These areas of knowledge are not acknowledged in either NASPAA's core curriculum requirements or in the SWT MPA program mission statement. Finally, after asking about a list of knowledge areas, the interviewer invited the respondent to name other important areas of knowledge.

Some of these additional areas of knowledge were given high marks for value by the respondents. These highly valued areas of knowledge and skill are members of a group of communication skills: effective listening skills, presentation and speaking skills, and writing skills. And while these seem not to be skills specific to the Public Administration environment, the respondents prized these skills highly, even in an interview context that included all of the NASPAA core curriculum, ethics, and the outcome-oriented items from the SWT MPA mission statement.

One city executive said that presentation and speaking skills are "absolutely critical," especially for individuals "in the business of trying to convince a council

audience that here's my recommendation and here's why." A state agency chief said that "probably nothing is more critical, [whether for] two people or two thousand. That will take a person a long way." He went on to say, "Some careers stagnate because of that shortcoming."

Writing skills were another prized communication skill. The state agency chief said that writing "is the mark of a person," and "characterizes one as a smart person or a dumb person." A human resources director said that writing determines who gets visible assignments and projects. Yet others indicated that while writing is important, "we also have some good polishers." And a city executive noted that writing "is a skill that is sometimes delegated at top levels... You can't have someone give a presentation for you, but you can have someone draft reports and do the underlying writing."

The final component of the highly valued communications skills group is listening. Finding a synergy with another communications skill, a city executive noted, "good presenters are good listeners." Applying these skills inward in the organization, a human resources director noted that "managers with poor reputations are those who don't listen." Similarly, an agency executive said that "an early sign of employee discontent is when they are not listened to."

Time management, a skill identified solely from the literature, gained strong support from only one of the interviewees. It was the second-lowest valued knowledge or skill area in the second group of questions. Social effectiveness ranked third from the bottom in the second group.

Respondents' Suggestions of Other Valuable Knowledge

Some of the respondents were able to suggest other areas of knowledge that they felt managers and leaders in their organizations should have. One respondent valued leadership skills that help differentiate between intuitive methods and other means for getting a job done. Another pointed out that senior managers must be able to assimilate many areas of knowledge, because they must dip in and out of many areas of expertise each day.

Awareness of diversity issues was mentioned. The respondent who mentioned diversity acknowledged that diversity may be considered a human resources issue, but felt that it should be mentioned on its own. Awareness of racial impacts of diversity were mentioned, as well as the various outlooks that may come from persons of different creeds or sex.

The most concrete suggestion of an additional area of knowledge was for emphasis on media relations. In mentioning this, the respondent pointed out that very few people come to the meetings of elected bodies, and that the only way to communicate with the public is through the media. Good presentation skills were linked with this.

Finally, two of the respondents pointed out that the manager or leader must be knowledgeable about the particular program area for which she is responsible. One said “good managers and leaders are known to have a thorough understanding of the content they manage. On a daily basis they are probably not doing that at their level, but I think it’s important in building respect and credibility, that they be known as people who do have a mastery of the underlying content.”

Responses about the SWT MPA Program and Graduates (WH5)

Working Hypothesis 5 is “Government executives whose organizations have SWT MPA graduates within them believe that the MPA graduates have the knowledge and skills needed by government careerists.” The first question in exploring this working hypothesis helped assure that the respondent had one or more SWT MPA graduates in mind. Then questions were asked about the strengths and weaknesses of the graduates and the effectiveness of the program.

In most of the interviews, the researcher offered each respondent a list of SWT MPA graduates from the last ten years, taken from the web site of the MPA program. This allowed the respondent to fix in his or her mind one or several graduates of the SWT MPA program and respond to a final group of questions with those graduates in mind. In later interviews, the researcher asked each respondent how many of the graduates’ names were known to the respondent. All the interviewees knew at least one of the graduates. Most knew several, and one recognized approximately fifteen of the names. All of these responses assured that the responses were meaningful and valid.

The interviewees were asked twice during the interview if they thought SWT MPA grads differ from other employees in similar positions. The placement among the other questions in the interview provided very different contexts for the two instances of the question. The results varied, but not necessarily by the context of the question. Clearly some interviewees were persons who answered with narrow objective truth. Some others seemed inclined toward making favorable remarks—seeing a glass as half full and ready to share positive observations.

Three of the respondents indicated that the SWT MPA graduates are more well rounded and more practical than either employees without such education or graduates of similar institutions. One said that the SWT MPA graduates had a “more global understanding of the challenges of state government,” and that there was more practicality at SWT than at the LBJ School. Similarly, other non-SWT graduate employees were described by one interviewee as “more narrowly focused, analytical, and without a broad focus,” and by another as having “a lot of pie in the sky ideas.”¹⁸

About half the interviewees said they were not aware of differences between the SWT MPA graduates and others. A similar number made positive remarks. None made negative remarks. Among the positives mentioned were:

1. SWT MPA graduates have a more diverse understanding.
2. SWT MPA graduates “compare favorably,” including some that “I have the highest respect for.”
3. “More well rounded and versed in a number of areas. More practical.”
4. Good analytical skills.
5. Good political awareness.
6. “The graduates that I know from the program or even those who are going through the program have been exceptional...work very hard.”
7. “...is an excellent, excellent administrator.”

One question sought to discover any negatives about the SWT MPA graduates. None of the interviewees could mention any areas where SWT MPA graduates should grow more.

On the question on how well the SWT MPA program does at preparing graduates for careers in public service, again the answers were all favorable. One said that the SWT MPA graduates are “as good as any there are.” Another said that the SWT MPA

¹⁸ Although the researcher did not solicit comparisons of the SWT MPA program to the Master of Public Affairs program at the University of Texas Lyndon B. Johnson School of Public Affairs, one interviewee

graduates were broader in thought and approach...well rounded, ...flexible.” Another said, “The opportunity is there for people to leave that program with a more thorough understanding of how to be successful in public service than they came in with.”

The SWT MPA mission statement asserts that “The program primarily serves the diverse community that is Central Texas.” The interviewees broadly agree with this assertion. Those interviewees in city government had a more local viewpoint than those in state government, and felt that SWT MPA graduates were well represented in local governments in Central Texas. One executive said that the program is a valuable resource. While responding to this question he indicated that the list of SWT MPA graduates was “an impressive list of individuals.” An agency executive pointed out that being located near the hub of Texas government, Central Texas is a direct beneficiary of the program.

One respondent took the meaning of the question as asking how well the university does at offering opportunities to earn an MPA degree, and to this interpretation, the answer was again favorable, indicating that the class schedules are particularly accommodating to mid-career students.

The final question offered the interviewees the opportunity to make recommendations to the program to refine its course of study. About half indicated insufficient knowledge about the curriculum to make recommendations or gave generalized ideas about what would be good in such a curriculum. Three seemed to speak with great enough familiarity about the program to give specific ideas that would reflect change in the program.

made an explicit comparison, and another made what I considered an implicit comparison to the LBJ School.

First, one respondent ardently promoted inclusion in the curriculum of material about dealing with the media. The researcher interprets the contention as being that media relations are an important aspect of open government and democracy, given the reality that few people can participate directly in meetings of their elected officials. A second respondent suggested that the program could teach toward not only the public sector, but also toward the needs of the nonprofit sector and the education sector. Another respondent held that the program has a great but unrealized opportunity to integrate the real-world experience of high-level practitioners in the instruction. This respondent noted that the LBJ School of Public Affairs does a great deal of this. Another LBJ School graduate touted a class from the LBJ School on innovation in government. In her particular class, there were a number of foreign students who could share radically different techniques in governance from their home countries. Finally, an agency chief suggests that the SWT MPA program teach more about dealing with a state legislature, or appropriate elected policymaking body. The respondent suggested that recent case studies be included, showing the roles of various stakeholders and interest groups.

This chapter has covered the results of the research, primarily through rankings and qualitative discussion of the responses. The next chapter provides interpretation of those results as conclusions and recommendations for the university and for further research.

Chapter 6 Conclusions

This chapter consists of conclusions reached from the research questions, as well as recommendations for the SWT MPA program and for further research. The recommendations for further research will be divided into suggestions on how replicated research might be improved and on new research questions and methodologies.

Awareness of the MPA Degree

Government managers and executives are well aware of the existence of the MPA degree. However, the degree seems seldom to be a job requirement, and public administrators are likely not to be aware of the particulars about the curriculum.

Working Hypothesis WH1, which asserted, “government executives are unaware of the existence or content of the MPA degree” was not supported by the research findings.

Value of the NASPAA Core Curriculum

Working Hypothesis WH2 is that government executives place high value on each of the areas of knowledge in the NASPAA core curriculum. All of the knowledge and skills of the NASPAA core curriculum were valued by the respondents. No respondent felt that any of the core curriculum areas was without value. Each respondent viewed the core curriculum from his or her own job requirements and gave high value ratings to different items accordingly. The least valued areas for the sample of respondents were those concerning computers, economic institutions and processes, and legal institutions and processes. However, even these least valued areas were valued at or above a neutral rating by all participants.

The rankings of value by the respondents could be used as a guide in allocating classroom time to the various topics. By such a scheme, relative amounts of class time would be given in this order:

1. Decision making and problem solving
2. Human resources
3. Program implementation and evaluation
4. Organization
5. Budget
6. Policy
7. Political institutions and processes
8. Social institutions
9. Computer literacy
10. Economic institutions and processes
11. Legal institutions and processes

The conclusion is that Working Hypothesis WH2, that government executives place high value on each of the areas of knowledge in the NASPAA core curriculum, is supported. As would be expected, some minor variation in the level of value for each item exists. To put it simply, this research supports the value of the NASPAA core curriculum.

Value of Additional SWT MPA Mission Outcomes

Working Hypothesis WH3, that “government executives place high value on areas of knowledge and skill outcomes espoused by the SWT MPA program mission statement” was partially supported by the research. One item that is covered by the SWT MPA program mission statement but not covered in NASPAA’s bullet point list of core curriculum is ethics. The single most highly valued knowledge area in the research project appears to be ethics. This rating, though in the context of a separate question group from the NASPAA core curriculum, enjoyed a level of support that would

probably exceed that of all the other core curriculum components if they were directly compared.

The SWT MPA mission to provide networking opportunities received a relatively low level of support from the respondents in general, but one respondent considered it a top-tier item. Other respondents considered it in the neutral middle ranking. The SWT MPA program mission item “integrating theoretical and practical approaches to public management” ranked lowest among the group of knowledge and skills derived from the program mission statement and the additional items uncovered in the literature review. Theory may not hold as high a value to the practitioner employers as it would for academicians.

It should be pointed out that Working Hypothesis WH3 is not concerned with the success of the SWT MPA program in meeting its mission, but instead with the value of certain elements of the mission statement itself. The research findings show that some parts of the mission statement, though outcome-oriented, are of little value to employers.

Value of Additional Areas of Knowledge and Skills

Working Hypothesis WH4, that “government executives place high value on additional areas of knowledge and skills,” was partially supported by the research. The effective listening skill, identified in the literature review as a trait of general value to employers, was given one of the highest value rankings in its grouping. The preponderance of respondents ranking this high in its group is noteworthy. Following with a high ranking are the presentation/speaking skills and writing skills. Of relatively lower importance is the value of time management skills.

Knowledge and Skills of SWT MPA Graduates

Working Hypothesis WH5, that “government executives whose organizations have SWT MPA graduates within them believe that the SWT MPA graduates have the knowledge and skills needed by government careerists,” is supported by the research. While several of the respondents spoke glowingly of the several SWT MPA program graduates known to them, none of the respondents could report deficiencies among the graduates. The most frequently mentioned strengths of the program are the breadth of understanding of public administration the graduates have and the pragmatic orientation of the program and its graduates.

Respondents felt that the program lived up to its mission of serving Central Texas and preparing graduates for careers in public service.

Summary Conclusions about the Working Hypotheses

The research demonstrated a mix of support for the five working hypotheses. Working Hypothesis WH1 (unawareness of the MPA degree) was the only working hypothesis that was not at all supported by the research. The other four working hypotheses were supported to some level by the research, though some were only partially supported. Most clear is that the NASPAA core curriculum requirements are highly valued by government executives and that SWT MPA graduates are highly regarded by government executives who have association with them. The research conclusions are summarized in Table 6-1.

Table 6-1. Research Conclusions		
Working Hypothesis	Conclusion	Comments
WH1: Government executives are unaware of the existence or content of the MPA degree.	Not supported	Respondents felt that government executives are generally aware of the MPA degree, but probably have little awareness of the curriculum components.
WH2: Government executives place high value on each of the areas of knowledge in the NASPAA core curriculum.	Supported	All the components of the NASPAA core curriculum are valued. Most highly valued areas of knowledge are decision making and human resources.
WH3: Government executives place high value on areas of knowledge and skill outcomes espoused by the SWT MPA program mission statement.	Partially supported	Ethics is extremely highly valued by respondents. At the other extreme, respondents hold almost no regard for “integrating theoretical and practical approaches to public management.”
WH4: Government executives place high value on additional areas of knowledge and skills.	Partially supported	Communication skills, including presentation and speaking skills, writing skills, and listening skills, are highly valued.
WH5: Government executives whose organizations have SWT MPA graduates within them believe that the MPA graduates have the knowledge and skills needed by government careerists.	Supported	All respondents hold SWT MPA graduates and the SWT MPA program in high regard.

Recommendations for the SWT MPA Program Curriculum

The research results indicate that the SWT MPA program is well regarded by the interviewees. Occasionally the respondents explicitly or implicitly made generalized

comparisons of the graduates of the SWT MPA program to the graduates of another master's program oriented toward public service, and the SWT MPA graduates compared very favorably. There is strong indication that much of what the SWT MPA program is doing should be continued. One respondent who was familiar with the prizes won by SWT MPA capstone papers praised the structured guidance given these papers as superior.

There was a noteworthy lack of support for parts of the mission of the SWT MPA program. This research would suggest that the program should reexamine the mission statement, with an eye toward fine tuning the language that espouses integration of theoretical and practical approaches to public management.

The interview respondents rated writing skills highly. And the SWT MPA program places a strong emphasis on writing in its capstone applied research project. The emphasis on writing skills could be strengthened throughout the program by assuring that writing assignments are returned with constructive feedback to students, rather than used solely as a technique for assessing student learning.

The substantive suggestions that would represent change for the program are reiterated in the following list:

- Include coverage of media relations
- Include coverage of nonprofit management
- Use more high-level practitioners in instruction
- Include material on dealing with elected policymaking bodies
- Provide more feedback on student writing.

Recommendations for Further Research

This research project was built keeping in mind the successes and failures of predecessor research into both employer perceptions of college graduates in general and other research on MPA education. The researcher did indeed find that the challenges to earlier research again appeared during the course of this research. For example, SWT MPA graduates offered themselves in response to the e-mail broadcast asking for interviewees. But when it was explained that the researcher needed employer interviewees free from the bias of affiliation, several of these initial replies vanished without a referral. Such obstacles to bias-free sampling were suggested by the literature. The literature assumes that bias appears because alumni are only willing to share supervisors' names when the supervisor is thought likely to say positive things about the graduate employee. In the course of this research, an issue came up about the length of the interview, and a new explanation for alumni reluctance to share supervisor names comes to mind. It could be that graduate employees are reluctant to visibly add to their supervisors' workloads. Either a referral for an interview or the inclusion of the employee's name on a survey instrument would show that the graduate employee was adding additional burdens to the supervisor's busy schedule. Future researchers should consider this change of assumptions in designing bias-free and valid sampling methods.

The literature also suggested that survey respondents are indiscriminately complimentary of a program or named graduate. That was not exactly the case here, but there was low differentiation in the values assigned to the core curriculum requirements of NASPAA. This researcher interprets the generally high set of marks as meaning that NASPAA has appropriately set the core curriculum requirements.

To improve the research, several “dos and don’ts” are offered here. First, government executives and managers are busy people, so it is important that the interview be kept brief. A brief interview will help assure that the interview is minimally intrusive, but the promise beforehand of a brief interview will help the interviewer assure that an interview is even scheduled. Early requests for a one-hour interview met some resistance, but a half hour interview met almost no resistance. In any case, some interviewees had no problem with speaking for nearly an hour. With brevity of interview in mind, the researcher should be willing to tolerate a certain number of “double-barreled” questions¹⁹. Also for the sake of brevity, future researchers should consider either narrowing the research to the employers’ values of curriculum elements or an institution’s success in educating its graduates on already-established valued curriculum elements. A study that is intended to explore both the values of curriculum elements and the quality of graduates might use separate respondents for the two types of data.

Future researchers should be cautioned to word their interview questions extremely carefully. In this research questions on “human resources” might better have been rephrased as being about “human resource management,” to assure that questions were not about knowledge of the people in the organization, but instead about management practices. Standard definitions for each of the topic areas should be ready in case interviewees ask for clarification. A number of interviewees had questions about what was meant by “legal institutions,” or “social institutions” as examples.

¹⁹ Double-barreled questions are acknowledged to be poor methodology in surveys, but surveys can usually be designed with somewhat less concern about the respondents’ time constraints than are interviews. If double-barreled questions are to be tolerated at all, the compound components of the question must be closely related. I think they are here, in part in that they are double-barreled in NASPAA’s core curriculum.

Overall, the research technique used in this paper appears to provide meaningful data, which is admittedly difficult to quantify. One of the most difficult obstacles in employer research is that the employers do not know much about the academic program of their employees, and that consequently, it is difficult for them to know if employee traits were gained through the education program or through some other means. Perhaps future research could be more inclusive of those alumni who have been out of school long enough to temper their perceptions of the education experience with their work experience. The feedback of such alumni could have the benefits of valid knowledge of the education program as well as the realities of the workplace. While feedback gathered in such a way would be worthless for comparing schools, it would have a high value in fine tuning individual education programs.

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