The MPA Curriculum Development in China: Learning from American Theories and Practices

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Abstract: As China is experiencing its dramatic transition from planned economy to market economy and undergoing its economic and political reform during the last two decades, there are many new phenomena worth studying. The emergence of Master of Public Administration (MPA) education is certainly one of them. Borrowing and learning experiences from advanced countries has been a main theme for the curriculum development for China’s MPA education. Using personal experience as a graduate from a full-time MPA program in the United States and research in this field, the author discusses in this article the issue of how to learn from the American theories and practices and develop an MPA curriculum that fits China’s specific political, economic and social environment. The four main areas of discussion include theory development, quantitative skills, technology training, and case study.

Current MPA Education Development in China

While the Master of Public Administration (MPA) education has more than 50 years of history in advanced western countries like the United States, it is rather new in China. The Academic Degree Evaluation Commission under the State Council of China approved the introduction of MPA degree program in China in May 1999. In 2001, 24 Chinese universities were selected to initiate the MPA degree program. Each university was permitted to have an initial class of 100 students and the nationwide enrollment was 2,400. Surprisingly, the applicants for admission exceeded 12,000 in the following year, which produced a 5:1 admission ratio nationwide. With the high demand for MPA education, the nationwide enrollment was increased by 1,000 in 2002. Most of the current MPA programs are part-time and on-job education. The selection criteria include the applicant’s score on a national examination, completion of a university degree, and a minimum of four years of work experience.

The spring of public administration education in China followed the profound transitions of Chinese society from planning economy to market economy, enclosed system to open system, and unprecedented urbanization and modernization of the public service system. The approval of MPA degree in China is the most recent decision in a 20-year effort to reform and professionalize China’s administrative system. China’s progressing reform and opening-up drive have resulted in an increasing demand for professional public administrators. As the role of government evolves from a control orientation to a service orientation, many of the service functions are also being delegated to non-government sectors. Chinese government realized the importance of recruiting and promoting younger, better-educated professionals to management positions in the public sector. According to the State Council of China, MPA education is designed “to meet the needs of a more modern, scientific and professional management for society, to increase the efficiency and effectiveness of serving a socialist market economy, and to improve the quality of administrative corps in the public sector” (State Council of China, 1999). The present educational composition of China’s public-servant team is not satisfactory. Among China’s 5.41 million public servants, only 10 percent have a college degree while 1 percent have a graduate degree, with very few majoring in administration affairs (Tang, 2001; Tong and Strausman, 2003). Because of the size of the government bureaucracy, plus more than 10 million people working in non-government, social, and service organizations, the potential demand for MPA education is substantial.

Therefore, the more challenging question is not about whether China needs its professional MPA education but about how China can succeed to adopt such a Western-style program to fit its specific political and cultural context. Many scholars have realized that China needs to learn from advanced western countries and adopt their sophisticated techniques in MPA education (Chen, 1999; Cheng, 2000; Xue, 2002; Tong and Strausman, 2003; Xu, 2002). Curriculum development is certainly one of the biggest challenges and top priorities for new MPA education development in China. As a graduate from a full-time MPA program in the United States, the author agrees that there are many theories and practices in the field of public administration education in the United States that can be borrowed to help develop an MPA curriculum that has Chinese characteristics and fits the economic, political and social environment in China. This article addresses some of the main issues of MPA curriculum.
development in China. The issues discussed here may well be applied to other professional public administration degrees such as Master of Public Policy, Master of Public Affairs, or Master of Public Management.

Curriculum Development — Implications of the U.S. System

There are 191 MPA programs across the United States, among which 120 are accredited by the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and 71 are not (National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration, 2003). NASPAA is a nationally recognized professional association in public affairs and administration and responsible for accrediting all the graduate programs in this field. There are about 50 other programs such as Master of Public Policy, Master of Public Affairs, and Master of Public Management across the country.

While widespread agreement exists among scholars of public administration that public managers should not study for the same degree or take the same courses, many believe that the master’s degree is the central element of academic public administration’s efforts to help educate public managers. The answer to the general question about for what students are being educated has been consistently stated as for professionally expert work in public bureaucracies devoted to public service (Ventriss, 1991). Needed are administrators with competence in the techniques and methods of organization and management and who understand the political, social, and economic environments in which they operate (Cleary, 1990). Therefore, the MPA curriculum has traditionally been characterized as an applied field oriented to the development of theory for practice. This requires the field to focus its research efforts on what practicing public administrators actually do. Waldo characterizes public administration as a necessarily multi-disciplinary field, given the variety and complexity of the public’s business (Waldo, 1975). MPA education must introduce into its curriculum the substance of individual public service areas such as criminal justice, public health, environmental policy, education administration, and so on, in order to reflect the activities in which public administrators are actually engaged. The broad coverage of public administration determines that every program has its own curriculum emphasis on its specific area such as personnel, budgeting, financial management, organizational theory, and so on. However, there are some common parts applicable to most of programs. From the author’s personal experiences and research, there are at least four important areas that need to be discussed for the MPA curriculum development in China. The following section will discuss the four areas of theory development, quantitative skills, technology training, and case study. For each area, the theories and practices in the United States will be discussed followed by their implications in China’s situation with current challenges and opportunities.

Theory Development

The question of theory versus practice has long been discussed in public administration education (Cunningham and Weschler, 2002; Denhardt, 2001; Denhardt, Lewis, Raffel, and Rich, 1997; Sellers, 1998; Ventriss, 1991; Weschler, 1997). Some point out that theories of public organization provide a basis for understanding practices. Others suggest that theories typically stand at some distance from practices, so understanding theory may not aid practice and practice is what makes the difference. Denhardt (2001) argues that students require different kinds of knowledge and skills at different points in their careers. Pre-service students need analytic skills in the next several years, while in-service students are likely to need management skills right away.

Even in such a western country as the United States, the requirement for courses on theories about political institutions and processes is highly emphasized for graduate public administration program (Cleary, 1990). Educating MPA students to competency in theory adds at least three potential aspects to their capacity for effective administrative action: richness of perspective, flexibility of attention, and modesty (McSwite, 2001). Due to the interdisciplinarity of MPA education, theories tend to cover a variety of fields including public policy, organizational behavior, sociology, and political science. For example, the program the author graduated from requires Organizational Behavior, Public Policy, Human Resources theory courses as core courses for first-year students. All these theoretical core courses particularly focus on the concept of the topics and provide an overview of classic theories. The program continues to help students develop strong theoretical foundations in their second year’s study. After students declare their areas of specialization, more advanced theory courses are offered accordingly. As in the public policy and administration specialization, advanced theoretical courses include Strategic Management, Advanced Organizational Behavior, and Urban Development Theory. It is believed that a solid theoretical foundation helps students understand and practice their professions, and the theory development needs to be addressed throughout the study.

However, the theory development for MPA students is more issue-related and practice-oriented than theory educations in pure art and science disciplines or doctoral level studies. Due to the practitioner profiles of students, the main objective of theory development is not to bury students in theories but to provide them with effective theoretical instruments to improve their practical skills. Since MPA students come from different professional backgrounds, they bring into the classroom lots of experiences and questions. Theory education can be more inquiry-based, can help students
develop incisive understanding of issues, and can provide a strong theoretical foundation for their problem-solving skills. One innovative way to approach the theory/practice issue is to create diverse opportunities for students to meet their particular needs and interests. For example, we might try to more carefully identify the stages, both in the students’ career development and in their psychological development, where greater attention to theory makes more sense, and to emphasize theory in educating students who find themselves at those stages (Denhardt, 2001). MPA students not only need the knowledge about the field but also need to act effectively and consistently to make things happen.

As China is facing its dramatic economic, political, and social transition, an emphasis on theory education is very important for its fledging MPA education. The current core courses required by the State Education Commission have shown an important focus on theory-based courses. Of the 10 core courses, the State Education Commission has mandated nine and each university can decide the 10th core course on their own. Three of the nine mandated core courses are theory-based, including Construction of Socialism, Public Administration, and Political Theory. A solid theoretical foundation for the education for future public servants will guarantee the leadership of the Communist Party, point the right direction for China’s political reform, and strengthen the fundamental political principles such as Marxist Theory, Deng’s Socialist Theory, Four Fundamental Principles, and Three Represents.

Besides those fundamental political theories, China needs to develop its own public administration theories. Nowadays, Chinese universities usually rely on the western theories or directly translate textbooks from countries like the United States in their MPA education. There has yet been a systematic framework for the theory of public administration or public service that is built upon a thorough understanding of China’s specific political, economic, and social environment. However, this process won’t be completed within several years. In the United States, the nature of education for public administration has been studied for 100 years. In order to establish its own theoretical system, China needs to have its own scholars in the field of public administration who not only grasp the fundamental ideas of public administration but also have the ability to apply the established western theories to China’s situation. Before this mission can be accomplished, the MPA education in China might still need to focus on teaching existing western public management theories and exploring a unique way to establish Chinese public administration theories through ongoing practices.

The need for greater quantitative skills in MPA education has long been realized. It is expected that MPA programs provide students with requisite skills in quantitative analysis to be successful and effective public administrators (Waugh, Hy, and Brudney, 1994). According to the curricular standards published and promoted by the NASPAA, MPA degree programs are encouraged to “enhance the student’s values, knowledge, and skills to act ethically and effectively” in the application of quantitative and qualitative techniques of analysis in (1) policy and program formulation, implementation and evaluation; (2) decision-making and problem-solving (NASPAA, 1988).

For most MPA programs in the United States, quantitative training is a very important part of the core curriculum. It generally means research methods, statistical analysis, and/or management science or problem-solving skills. For example, the program the author graduated from requires several core quantitative training courses. The fundamental quantitative core course is Statistics for Public Affairs, which covers descriptive statistics, probability, sampling, tests of significance, correlation, regression analysis, and the use of statistical software packages. The other two core courses, Applied Research Method and Public Budgeting and Finance, also require a lot quantitative skills. These quantitative courses follow traditional homework-quiz-exam teaching models, which are not very commonly used in other qualitative courses. Exercises are assigned after every class and students are required to complete about 10-12 quantitative questions using the formula they learn from class. This course is very demanding and needs students to commit approximately one-two hours for homework after every class. The extensive exercises reinforce students’ understanding of basic concept and methodology and help them develop solid quantitative skills. The department encourages students who need to pursue advanced quantitative skills to take elective courses from other departments such as sociology, psychology, and mathematics where more quantitative courses are offered.

In China, many MPA students are from the backgrounds of arts, social science, and political science, and they lack of strong quantitative training. Even if they had some college mathematics or statistics courses, since they have been out in the workforce for several years before they come back for MPA study, they still need fundamental quantitative training in basic mathematics and statistics. It is crucial for them to gain some quantitative training at the very beginning of their study in order to conduct further research. The State Education Commission has mandated Quantitative Research Methods as one of the core courses. Public Economics and Public Policy Analysis are the other two required quantitative-based core courses. But the intensity of quantitative training varies in different programs due to the profiles of the universities they are affiliated with. More particular quantitative-based courses such as Introduction to Statistics and Probability

Quantitative Skills
or Applied Research Method need to be offered to first-year students at the very beginning of their study. These courses can help students understand the basic concepts and knowledge and develop solid quantitative foundations. Once students develop basic quantitative knowledge and skills, a more important goal is to organize their quantitative skills and make them applicable to professional public administration tasks such as budgeting, financial management, economic forecast, and statistical analysis. Public Budgeting and Finance is one of the core courses required in the program the author graduated from. Although the course examines public budgeting and finance from economics, political, and institutional perspectives, great emphasize is put on the quantitative training part. Weekly homework assignments are picked from some real-world budgeting cases for students to exercise and execute. Almost all the assignments require proficiency in Microsoft Excel spreadsheets, since students are required to present their calculations in charts and tables and make recommendations about the budgeting and finance issues. Another good course that can be designed is Applied Research Methods, which covers a broad range of research methods that apply to data analysis, policy evaluation, and economic forecasting in daily public administration. The course teaches students how to collect data from different sources (government agencies, publications, or online sources), integrate data into computerized models, conduct analysis, and help daily decision-making. Some widely introduced economic analysis techniques include location-quotient analysis, shift-share analysis, and cost-benefit analysis. In many occasions, quantitative class projects will take the local community as a case study and students are asked to apply various techniques to issues including demographic analysis, program evaluation, and economic development. Practical applications of quantitative skills to real-world projects help students understand how the skills they learn in class can be applied to their daily administration tasks and develop critical and analytical thinking at work.

In general, since Chinese students are used to the traditional homework-quiz-exam teaching, they should feel comfortable about the context of the quantitative courses. More attention needs to be paid to the content of the quantitative training. Courses need to integrate pure quantitative trainings into real-world administration tasks such as budgeting and finance, data collection and analysis, and economic forecasting. The department may not have enough resources to offer all the needed quantitative courses for MPA students. One solution is to invite faculties from other departments such as mathematics, statistics, and sociology to help design courses that apply quantitative techniques to professional public administration tasks. Those faculties can be jointly appointed and co-teach at MPA programs. Their interdisciplinary expertise and experience can help develop strong quantitative-based curriculum and provide a broad academic foundation for new MPA programs.

Technology Training
As we discussed above, MPA students need to know how to operate a computer in order to complete their quantitative training. In professional life, a public administrator needs knowledge and skills to use and manage information technology and “formal professional education is the best vehicle for imparting that knowledge and those skills” (Laverty and Sorg, 1986). Laverty and Sorg (1986) identified three levels of computer-related knowledge and skills including applications, management, and policy. Public administrators must possess basic skills sufficient to allow them to use the computer, manage information technology, and promote technology policies. MPA programs should teach their students how to use the computer by providing instruction in computer applications related to the various managerial tasks of the work place. In-depth instruction in applications associated with management control can be most efficiently and effectively provided by core quantitative methods, budgeting, and personnel courses, while those applications associated with planning/policy making and operational control should be introduced into courses in substantive areas of specialization. Rather than teaching applications in a course separate from the areas in which they will be applied, computer use needs to be integrated into every appropriate core course in the curriculum, such as quantitative methods, financial management and budgeting, policy/program analysis and evaluation, human resources management/personnel courses, and so on. More communication skills, microcomputer and other information technology, and advanced research techniques are on the increase in public administration programs (Hambrick 1990; Manns and Waugh, 1989; Waugh, Hy, and Brudney, 1991, 1994). More and more courses such as statistics, accounting systems, and other computer-based training courses are held in well-equipped auditoriums where students can actually operate a computer while their instructors give lectures using a computer-connected screen and providing hand-on guidance.

In China, only one of the core courses mandated by the State Education Commission, Information Technology and Application requires technology training for MPA students. As mentioned above, among China’s 5.41 million public servants, only 10 percent have a college degree while 1 percent has a graduate degree. Computer skill training is of great importance for professional public servants who can utilize advanced technology in day-to-day problem-solving and decision-making. Probably the most realistic goal for China’s MPA programs is to achieve the first-level Laverty and Sorg (1986) pointed out, which is to help MPA students to learn basic or intermediate computer applications including the Microsoft Office Software package, spreadsheet
application, and statistical analysis software like Software Package for Social Science (SPSS). Those students who need highly specialized knowledge such as finance, accounting, human resources, economic forecasting, and so on can be taught the more advanced techniques and software as they require. One of the emerging techniques in public decision-making is the Geographic Information System (GIS), which is becoming widely used in most large and many small American local governments. GIS uses geographic location to relate otherwise disparate data and provides a systematic way to collect and manage location-based information crucial to local government decision-making in planning, zoning, transportation, and real estate development (O’Looney, 2000). As long as China can develop an integrated GIS database and train well-equipped GIS specialists, tens of thousands of local governments can benefit from the strong power of GIS. To date, about more than 30 universities in China have GIS majors but none of them is affiliated with public administration programs.

A major obstacle to implementing the information technology curriculum is the lack of faculty experience in both public administration and specialized computer applications. Implementation will require an investment in faculty development as well as course development. There have not been many software packages that are designed specifically for public administration. Coordination and cooperation are needed from other departments like computer science, electronic engineering, or geographic science to form a strong faculty team and curriculum design for MPA programs.

Case Study
The use of case study approach has been increasingly emphasized in the MPA education. Cases used in the classroom resemble the approximate situations public managers will encounter in their professional lives. Cases yield generalizations, help students take ownership of knowledge from the process of active participation and self-discovery, and develop further repetition of behavioral characteristics important to students such as empathy and self-confidence (Robyn, 1998). In the United States, many MPA course books are written in the format of case study. Specific cases will follow the theory and principle introductions to give students a real sense of their applications. It has been a widely used technique for MPA faculties to assign class time for students to discuss cases and present their understandings about the cases and how they can be improved.

MPA programs in China will need at the very least to develop more extensive teaching notes and encourage accumulation of experiences using various cases in a wide range of settings. The central obstacles to the case study approach are well-entrenched attitudes that have dominated the Chinese education system for thousands of years and hinder open exploration of alternatives. The old system penalized those who challenged the accepted wisdom and students of management believe that there is one best solution or correct answer. In addition, Chinese faculties are used to teaching via lectures only. Case study teaching can break down this orthodoxy, provided the teacher is sensitive to the cognitive dissonance that can arise from centering both the teacher and the text (Eliason, 1995, p.153). Even if the traditional teaching method can be overridden, there are still some technical problems to successfully launch the case study method. As Tong and Straussman (2003) pointed out while the State Education Commission already requires the case study method be used in all MPA programs, there are very few cases available that focus on subject matter pertinent to China.

In order to encourage the case study method, those Chinese universities that have MPA programs need to work together to expedite the dissemination of existing cases. Since most of MPA students enrolled are full-time public sector employees, they are great sources for good cases. Students can be organized to report practical problems and cases they run into in their professional occupations. Case study writing can be considered as a component of student exercises under the instruction of experienced faculties. This can also be an efficient way to keep the cases most up-to-date and pertinent to real-world experiences. Publishing real case studies should be encouraged. Some internally circulated materials will provide great feedback and advice for revision, which makes a case study more implicable and teachable.

Another good source of a case study can be the thesis or internship reports from MPA students. Case studies can be encouraged as a preferred research method for masters theses. Internship are extremely important for MPA candidates, enabling them to apply knowledge and skills they develop through the education to real-world work. This will become more significant after Chinese universities start recruiting full-time pre-service MPA student from new college graduates who will seek employment with their MPA degrees. An internship between the two segments of their education will provide them with a great opportunity for exposure to potential employers and help them launch their professional careers. In the United States, more than 50 percent of recruitment is completed within those candidates that did or are doing internship with the employer. Considering the practical characteristic of MPA education, the practical implication of a thesis or internship report determines its good quality and provides valuable sources for case studies.

A Note on Program Assessment
Besides the curriculum development issues discussed above, the author wants to add a few notes on the program assessment for China’s MPA programs. One of the most sensitive and difficult topics in education is the
measurement of program quality. There are three generic types of evaluation: the quantitative emphasis, reputation studies, and productivity studies (Thayer and Whelan, 1987). In the United States, Lewis (1987) tried to evaluate whether an MPA degree can increase more career success in the federal government than other graduate degrees and found out that MPA graduates were benefiting from their degree in terms of annual average salary, promotion, and career stabilization (Lewis, 1987). Lewis’s evaluation was for the general MPA program. For evaluating and assessing the success of a specific MPA program, accreditation may well be a good tool. A NASPAA survey in 1989 found that its accreditation had a specific and identifiable impact on MPA programs (Cleary, 1990). Cleary (1990) found out those MPA programs that were accredited and passed annual review of NASPAA generally had more solid credit-hour requirement and curriculum. NASPAA’s annual review requires MPA programs to include in their annual report their eligibility for peer review, program mission, program jurisdiction, curriculum, faculty, admission of students, student services, support services and facilities, and off-campus programs and distance education. NASPAA also established a Pi Alpha Alpha Honor Society for excellent MPA graduates provided that they have an overall grade-point average (GPA) of 3.75 out of a 4.0 scale and are recommended by at least two faculty members. The honor society strengthens the network among MPA graduates and helps them with future career development.

There has not been an academic association for public affairs or administration in China. The State Education Commission is currently the administration agency for MPA education and performs some of the functions the NASPAA in the United States. Strict accreditation and annual review are crucial to guarantee the quality of the fledging MPA education and its further healthy development. Specific and detailed requirements need to be established for accreditation and annual review. As the number of Chinese universities that offer MPA programs increases, an independent academic association will be very much needed to better perform the assessment functions.

**Conclusion**

The professionalization of China’s public servants team is one of the missions of current political and economic reform in China. MPA education is very much needed to help the modernization of Chinese society and public service. Curriculum development is one of the most important tasks the new development needs to accomplish. Just as all other new development, China needs to learn from existing theories and practices in advanced countries such as the United States and develop an MPA curriculum with Chinese characteristics. The four areas of theory development, quantitative skills, technology training, and case study are very important for the MPA curriculum development in China. Challenges and opportunities always co-exist. The future for successful MPA education in China is very promising but the progress will need great coordinated efforts from government, academic institutions, scholars, and students.
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