

California State University, Northridge: Innovative Curriculum Design for Midcareer Professionals

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INTRODUCTION

Universities that focus on urban research should exploit the advantage of their location by matching their curricular strengths to the needs of their respective communities. This article describes how Public Sector Programs (PSP) at California State University, Northridge (CSUN) developed extensive graduate degree and certificate programs in keeping with the needs of local public agencies by using the cohort model, innovative programming, increased options and flexibility for students, a strong academic presence, and a revenue-enhanced model to serve the community. The unique features of self-support and taking the program off-campus enabled this model to succeed.

ENTREPRENEURIAL PLANNING AND CSUN

According to the National Center for Education Statistics (2011), total enrollment in postsecondary degree-granting institutions increased 43 percent from 1995 to 2009 and is projected to increase 13 percent from 2009 to 2020. At the time, state funding for public higher education institutions will decline as states face potential budget deficits for years to come, according to

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the National Center for Public Policy and Higher Education (2006).

As a consequence of inadequate public funding, many institutions are in search of other funding sources such as grants, contracts, and alumni donations. The success of this strategy depends on the resource and reputation model (Burke & Minassians, 2003) of higher education, which enables those institutions with better name recognition to build large endowments.

The 1960 California Master Plan created a three-tier system that clustered universities and colleges with predetermined responsibilities and authorities. The plan affirmed California's commitment to tuition-free education for its residents (fee-based auxiliary services remained students' responsibility), but during the 1980s and 1990s the vision of free tuition dissolved because budgetary mandates such as Medicaid and K-12 education took priority over higher education. State funding declined by 12.7 percent (SHEEO, 2008), and the only certainty about state support was that it would continue to go down. Although California state universities (CSUs) are established and well-respected public institutions, it is increasingly difficult for teaching institutions to compete for large foundational grants or even contracts. Nevertheless, many of the CSUs, notably California State University, Northridge (CSUN), are considered to be among the largest metropolitan universities serving a community.

In response to the funding crisis, the Chancellor's Office of the CSU issued an executive order in 2003 to move funding for all new graduate programs away from state support and into self-support. CSUN used the Tseng College of Extended Education as its mechanism for delivering these programs, and the Tseng College began shifting its offerings away from noncredit courses toward graduate programs specifically designed for midcareer adults. These programs are currently offered on- and-off campus, online, and in a hybrid format, providing agility and a new scale of operations to the university. More importantly, the model has provided the university with new sources of revenue through predetermined revenue-sharing programs among various units.

PROGRAM DESIGN AND IMPLEMENTATION

The Tseng College offers programs in arts and humanities, business and industry, education, engineering and technical fields, health and human services, and in the public sector. The public sector programs include certificates, a bachelor's degree, and a number of master's programs, including the master's in public administration (MPA). The self-supported MPA pro-

gram, with its direct reliance on student tuition, has become the preferred mode of delivery of programs for mid-career adults, and its recent history explains the reason for its success.

Advisory Board Collaboration

The starting point for the redesign of the MPA program in 2004 was a collaboration between a new program director and an advisory board consisting of multidisciplinary faculty and external practitioners. The County of Los Angeles anticipated a significant number of retirements—10 to 15 percent of managers—and needed to implement succession plans, creating an opportunity for providing relevant education in the form of the MPA to potential managerial candidates. The advisory board, through engagement and multi-level discussions with county supervisors and top administrators, identified the challenges that the county's public sector was encountering and the changes required to reposition CSUN's public-sector programs. As part of the strategic planning initiatives of the County of Los Angeles, the chief administrator officer outlined the existing situation, including the endemic conditions that hindered administrative changes, and explored how the paradigmatic shifts could be implemented.

One of the key findings of the advisory board was the actual nature of challenges that public-sector agencies encounter. CSUN reformatted its MPA by addressing learning objectives specific to the county. For example, as a result of discussions with the county, it became evident that delivering public services relies greatly on public and private contracts and requires public sector managers to think and act in a more interdependent manner. Once this was identified, faculty reworked lectures, assignments, and courses to emphasize concepts and practices around the idea of interdependency. The board also advised adding an urban-planning track to enable students to acquire skills in administering planning departments and to address issues facing urban-planning professionals.

Curriculum Restructure

At a deeper level, the advisory board of faculty and practitioners recommended restructuring the curriculum to provide students with relevant managerial and organizational skills. The board identified core competencies and also four tracks: public-sector management and leadership; nonprofit management; policy analysis and management; and performance management and productivity. The core competencies consist of five core courses and six electives with the option of five areas of specialization.

One of the unique features of the academic programming is stackable curricular design. Students are required to take specific core courses to satisfy requirements, then are permitted to select from an array of tracks of specialization. Some tracks provide students with the option of taking specific elective courses to earn a graduate certificate. Within the MPA program, four out of six tracks are freestanding graduate certificates. Students can take six courses within the track and receive a certificate. Although some students have decided to stop after earning the graduate certificate, most continue on to the master's degree. In the original design, there were four tracks but through needs assessment two more tracks have been added.

Stackable curriculum also provides individuals who have a master's degree an option to upgrade their education and skills by taking courses toward a certificate rather than a full master's degree. Ultimately, the program will create multiple graduate certificates that students can earn over the period of a few years and through combining two certificates and completing the culminating experience, receive a master's degree.

Cohorts

In addition to curricular changes, the MPA program departed from the traditional model by establishing a cohort model at various off-campus sites with a set start and end date, fixed tuition, and fixed curriculum, thus allowing mid-career adults to join the program without the uncertainties associated with traditional models. This fully structured model, although removing the option of choice, has enabled more midcareer adults to take advantage of the MPA program, ensuring better graduation rates and time-to-degree success. Students joining the cohorts express the ease of following schedule and predictability of offerings thus enabling them to plan their personal and professional life around a fixed schedule. Also, cohort model guarantees access to courses and on-time completion of programmatic requirements.

CHALLENGES

Quality Control

The model's success—during the seven years since its implementation, the new MPA has increased enrollments from 200 to 1,300—has not been without challenges, not the least of which is maintaining academic integrity and quality. Quality is difficult to measure, but because of pressures from the clientele (county and city governments), the marketplace, accrediting agencies such as the Western Association of Schools and Colleges (WASC), and internal administrative units, the public-sector programs use a number

of approaches. The curricular changes permit the assessment of all tracks to be linked with specific culminating outcomes. As a part of the culminating experience, students are examined not only in the field of public administration but also in the chosen area of specialization. This enables the program assessment committee to identify curricular strengths and weaknesses, thus enhancing the review process. Heeding one of the requirements imposed by WASC, the MPA program has continuously used data for programmatic improvements and redesign.

Cost Containment

Expansion of the PSP unit is a direct result of regional contracts with various county and city agencies. One of the critical issues in the growth of the PSP unit has been cost effectiveness. Considering the rising cost of higher education, continual threats to student loans, and the increase in borrowing costs, PSP has worked with the university finance department to keep the cost of attendance within the reach of most individuals.

Although WASC accredits programs administered by PSP, the programs do not possess NASSPA accreditation, a desirable but not essential trait unlike the requirements for engineering programs. This has kept the cost of the MPA lower. Similar to many proprietary models of higher education, a model characterized by access and cost effectiveness is more appealing than the resource and reputation model (Burke & Minassians, 2003) for many potential students who are seeking advancement in their career.

LESSONS LEARNED

By relying on student tuition for sustaining and expanding the public sector programs at CSUN, the university has been able to forego state funding for one of the largest graduate programs in the state of California. Also, reliance on student tuition has allowed certain funds to be shared with departments and colleges through reimbursements to the university departments and services, thereby enabling these units to address reductions in state funding. Each fiscal year through memoranda of understanding, shared governance, and revenue-sharing mechanisms, the Extended Education College remits a percentage of its gross revenue to the CSU and CSUN administrations. The revenue sharing allows more flexibility to delivering programs off-campus.

The experience of CSUN's public-service programs unit demonstrates the importance of clearly defining objectives in consultation with experts on the subject matter from the community of both academics and practicing professionals. It was also important to link programmatic objectives

with the strategic plan of the second largest county in the United States so that the PSP could position itself to meet the demands of both the employing agencies and the students. In fact, driving the curricular design based on the market needs of the public-sector agencies shows the agility and responsiveness of the non-traditional model of higher education designed for midcareer professionals. The mix of strong academic foundations informed by practice makes for an appealing educational offering. We have also found that students appreciate taking theory classes first and applied courses (budgeting, human resources) later.

As with any academic undertaking, assessment should be the cornerstone for maintaining quality and monitoring student learning and programmatic objectives. Outcome-based assessments allow the program to make curricular adjustments, identify effective course sequencing, optimize student learning, and improve teaching strategies. When instructional deficiencies come to light, PSP conducts workshops that bring together faculty and administrators. Data generated by assessment can be analyzed for multiple purposes, providing on-going bases for review and refinement of educational goals.

From the students' point of view, the cohort model has been effective in motivating students through peer pressure and maintaining morale through peer support. Working in groups, students become more productive and understand the material better as they learn not only from faculty but also from each other.

Despite the involvement of faculty on the advisory board, there has always been the issue of balancing the administrative need to create revenue-generating courses and programs and the faculty right of academic governance. Some faculty members are wary of the self-support model for fear that academic governance could be comprised. Many misunderstand the governance structure and assume that they do not have influence or direct oversight. The reality is that even under a self-support model, faculty and departments maintain their control over academic policies and must work closely with program administrators if programs are to succeed in maintaining academic standards, meeting community needs, and generating revenue.

CONCLUSION

As a part of an urban metropolitan university, the public-sector programs unit will continue to increase access by responding flexibly and quickly

to the needs of non-traditional students. The strength of the PSP model is being tested by the crisis in higher education in California, but for nearly a decade it has shown its effectiveness in integrating the conceptual and practical elements of professional activity through curriculum design and delivery. With the continuous fiscal pressure on public universities and their inability to meet the needs of their communities, this study provides a glimpse of possibilities with self-support programs within public institutions of higher education. CSUN's experience can provide particularly valuable lessons to other continuing education units around the country. 🌐

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