

# Competency Model Design and Assessment: Findings and Future Directions

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## **ABSTRACT**

Competency models offer potential for defining effective and/or superior performance and then aligning curriculum and other learning opportunities with individual development goals. However, barriers exist that prevent optimal use of competency models, including difficulty identifying competencies and assessing development appropriately. This paper presents insights based on the design and implementation of a competency model for MPA students at the University of Kansas. Goals of this multiyear effort include (a) helping students assess their development as they progress through the MPA program, (b) linking competencies to curriculum and experiential learning opportunities, and (c) assessing progress using multiple evaluations over time. This paper considers associated challenges, including competency identification, assessment, and the need to capture emerging competencies.

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Today's MPA students will face a host of challenges when practicing public management after graduation. To prepare them for that reality, NASPAA-accredited programs seek to "develop the skills and techniques used by leaders and managers to implement policies, projects, and programs that resolve important societal problems while addressing organizational, human resource, and budgetary challenges" (NASPAA, 2012). Of course, programs accomplish these tasks in various ways. Regardless of the approach taken, it is incumbent upon the faculty to assess how well students develop the skills, aptitudes, and perspectives they will need to operate successfully in their chosen profession and to develop habits of reflective self-assessment. One way to address this challenge is to use competency models that define the characteristics that result in effective and/or superior performance on the job (Boyatzis, 1982) and then align those competencies with curriculum and other learning opportunities.

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*Keywords:* competency models, student self-assessment, outcomes evaluation

Competency modeling offers a number of benefits, including a focus on both current and future individual development (Sanchez & Levine, 2009), but many barriers prevent its optimal use, including difficulty identifying competencies and assessing development appropriately (Op de Beeck & Hondeghem, 2010). Further, in teaching MPA students, we face the challenge of developing a competency-based assessment that acknowledges the differences in experiences and accomplishments of mid-career and pre-service students. This paper provides insights on these challenges based on the design and implementation of a competency model for MPA students at the University of Kansas. The goals of this multiyear effort include (a) helping students track their competency development as they progress through the MPA program, (b) linking competencies to curriculum and experiential learning opportunities, and (c) assessing progress using multiyear data collection.

Scholarly literature indicates varied applications for competency models in the context of graduate education. Competency models can be used to respond to changing needs of the profession (Batalden, Leach, Swing, H. Dreyfus, & S. Dreyfus, 2002), help students prepare for leadership roles (Kleinman, 2003), and help faculty members and administrators respond to curriculum gaps (Johnson & Rivera, 2007; Rice, 2007). Further, such models can be used to design holistic educational approaches (Robotham & Jubb, 1996; Talbot, 2004; Tomkins, Laslovich, & Greene, 1996) and contribute to lifelong professional development and learning (Rodolfa et al., 2005). Finally, we believe that engaging students with a competencies model can promote the kind of self-reflection that adds value to the goal of lifelong learning. The challenge, of course, is identifying, defining, and assessing the competencies of interest for successful performance and aligning such competencies with educational components (McEvoy et al., 2005).

In this article, we examine the experience of the University of Kansas in applying its MPA competency model to pre-service students. Topics presented include (a) an overview of competency modeling and applications to an MPA curriculum; (b) the history, development, and purpose of the MPA competency model used by the University of Kansas; (c) a multiyear competency assessment data; and (d) considerations for future directions and broader applications.

## **COMPETENCY MODELING AND APPLICATIONS TO MPA CURRICULUM**

Describing the concept of “competencies” is the starting point. Competencies are those underlying characteristics, says Boyatzis (1982), that are “causally related to effective or superior performance in a job” (p. 21). Competencies move beyond traditional knowledge, skills, and abilities (KSAs) to capture job-related motives, traits, and self-concepts (Daley, 2002). Further, competencies are distinguishable from KSAs in that they focus on future development and potential for performance. To this end, competencies can help answer the question, “How do we know good performance when we see it?” Ideally, competencies can guide a number of critical

workforce functions, including hiring, development, and even evaluation. In the context of MPA education, competency models can help connect curriculum to desired outcomes and guide students in their professional development efforts.

Identifying and validating core competencies for MPA education rests on a process that includes competency identification and modeling, validation, and assessment. Beginning with identification and modeling, varied methods are available. Programs may adopt an existing model or may choose to develop an original model that draws on first-person accounts or expert panel data (L. Spencer & S. Spencer, 1993) to determine those characteristics related to effective or superior performance in the selected context. Next steps, regardless of the selection process, involve applying the model and determining the validity of the selected competencies. A final and often forgotten step is continuous evaluation of the competency model. Just as workforce demands change with time, so too should competency models keep pace with emerging developmental needs (Getha-Taylor, 2008).

The contemporary emphasis on competencies reflects rapidly changing environments that require skills extending beyond the boundaries of any one job and that indicate an individual's ability to adapt and learn (Rodriguez, Patel, Bright, Gregory, & Growing, 2002). Further, a focus on technical, ethical, and leadership competencies helps ensure that public servants do things right and also do the right things (Bowman, West, Berman, & Van Wart, 2004). The rate of rapid change that affects public service also affects the continued validity of public service competency models. Ideally, such models should reflect current demands and help emerging public service professionals meet the challenges of the future.

Despite the promise of competency management, a number of difficulties for utilizing competency models in MPA programs are notable. First, real or perceived resource constraints (including financial resources, time, and in-house expertise) can stall competency efforts. Second, determining how best to select and/or develop original competency models for use in MPA programs presents a challenge. In addition, the utilization of these models and the reassessment to reflect contemporary development needs requires long-term commitment and continued attention. However, it is not the aim of this paper to focus exclusively on the challenges. Rather, our goal is to highlight both the need and opportunity for such initiatives.

Competency models speak to the related and critical instructional concepts of *mastery* and *transference*. To develop mastery, Ambrose and colleagues (2010) note that "students must acquire component skills, practice integrating them, and know when to apply what they have learned" (p. 95). Competency models can help students identify what they've learned and reflect on applications. Mastery, though, is a multiphase developmental process that includes two key dimensions: *competence* and *consciousness* (Sprague & Stuart, 2000). This process and its applications to MPA competency models are presented in Table 1.

Table 1.  
*Developmental Stages and MPA Competency Applications*

Level	Stage	Description	MPA Competency Application
1	Unconscious incompetence	Students do not know what they don't know	Consider initial assessment inflation
2	Conscious incompetence	Students are aware of what they need to learn	Interpretation of subsequent assessments
3	Conscious competence	Students have competence but must act deliberately	Consider development timeline
4	Unconscious competence	Students exercise skills automatically or instinctively	Integrate focus on long-term development

Source. Adapted from Ambrose et al. (2010) and Sprague and Stuart (2000).

It should be stressed that the mastery developmental process begins in a state where students not only lack competence but also are generally unaware of what they do not know. This situation may result in inflated initial self-assessments. As students progress in their education, it is expected that both their consciousness and competence will develop to help them identify what they are learning and what they still have to learn. True mastery occurs only when the initial stage of *unconscious incompetence* progresses to the final stage of *unconscious competence*. We want our students to have competence that can be used automatically and instinctively.

To this end, MPA programs aim to provide students with foundational learning opportunities and resources that they can apply to the practical challenges of governance. Key to effectiveness in this regard is the ability of students to transfer what they are learning to practical contexts. This goal, educational transference, rests on similar learning and application contexts and the ability of students to know how to apply what they are learning in the classroom to practical challenges (Ambrose et al., 2010). One way to improve transference is to give pre-service students opportunities to apply skills or knowledge, through such activities as service learning and/or internship experiences. The University of Kansas MPA program incorporates these components and also provides opportunities for student growth and reflection on the development process.

In addition to academic coursework and the internship experience, pre-service students participate in a series of professional development seminars with faculty members during their second year—their full-time internship year—that allow for group discussion, individual processing, and debriefing experiences. These reflective activities help illustrate how students apply what they have learned in the classroom to practical challenges. This approach is aligned with Schon's (1983) "reflection-in-action" perspective, which emphasizes managing through turbu-

lence and uncertainty using observation and reflective conversation as a supplement to technical knowledge. Together, it is expected that academic coursework, the yearlong internship experience, and the series of professional development seminars provide a total student experience that addresses the connected needs of mastery, reflection, and application.

### **LEARNING FROM PROJECT HISTORY**

This section reports the approach and lessons learned from the University of Kansas (KU) portfolio and competencies project.<sup>1</sup> The competencies project, the results of which are reported in this paper, grew out of a larger focus on portfolio development following a National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) accreditation visit in the early 2000s. Portfolio development was discussed with the site visit team and then pursued in conversations at KU with a faculty member invited from West Virginia University, where a portfolio requirement had been implemented. Seeking more information, the department chair and another faculty member at KU visited the Dean of the KU School of Architecture, where portfolios are commonplace. Of singular importance to our project was the dean's observation that although a portfolio contains evidence of an architect's work, most important for readers and viewers are reflective statements conveying why a particular artifact is in the portfolio and what movement from one project or style of architecture to another means to the architect.

From those beginnings, the project took off with a gathering of first-year pre-service MPA students and local government practitioners in the summer of 2001 to discuss what elements should be included in student portfolios. The first group of portfolios consisted of paper documents in three-ring binders, loosely organized around the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) competencies. The portfolio project progressed very slowly, in part because the university lacked enabling software and also because the department was working its way through portfolio purpose and design issues, including faculty roles. A key point occurred with a decision to link the portfolio assignment to development of a competencies matrix. The thinking was that student focus on competencies could provide an anchor for portfolios and help standardize their presentation.

Work on a competencies rubric began as an assignment in an MPA class in Human Resources Management. In that initial class, students were asked to search for lists of managerial/leadership competencies in public sector organizations and associations. They were encouraged to engage in a worldwide electronic search so they could understand that the movement toward competencies-based human resources management was not isolated to the United States.

Following that assignment, in spring 2005, the department convened a meeting in Lawrence of representatives from regional NASPAA schools to talk about outcome-based education. Also, at a NASPAA conference in fall 2006, KU faculty presented a paper documenting our interest in outcome-based education and our progress toward developing a list of competencies.

A significant point in the development of a rubric occurred when the Canadian Public Service (CPS) competencies project was discovered in preparation for the NASPAA panel. On its face, the CPS definition of public service and its broad categorization of competencies into four sections made so much sense that the department simply adopted it as written. The CPS conceptualization has given the KU rubric intellectual coherence, providing an intellectual guide for future discussions of curriculum. It should be restated that at the time the Canadian Public Service Model was discovered, the rubric was still in the class project stage. In other words, no formal faculty adoption of a rubric or its content was required. This situation greatly simplified development of the rubric and its intellectual underpinnings.

In a subsequent class with the same instructor, a small group of students accepted an assignment to review the lists the previous class had gathered and develop a matrix consisting of common competencies. The resulting rubric was presented to faculty, and two faculty members not originally involved in the project volunteered to review the rubric the students developed with an eye toward creating symmetry. Symmetry was needed regarding degree of specificity of the competencies (rows on the rubric) and also consistency in levels of achievement (columns on the rubric). Also, the two faculty members looked for obvious areas of content omission given our curriculum and MPA program focus.

Faculty acceptance, with minor changes, of the rubric attests to its face validity. That validity is drawn from the sources of the lists the students drew from to identify common competencies. The list included competencies identified and used by a local government, a state government, the ICMA, and the International Public Management Association–Human Resources (IPMA–HR), suggesting a sound professional public administration grounding in practice. Faculty confidence in the rubric was further enhanced when we saw how easily the competencies fit into the Canadian Public Service template, since the CPS model captured the KU public administration curriculum so nicely.

Even though faculty were not involved in the original development of the competencies rubric, as key stakeholders, they had endorsed the idea of student portfolios, which pre-career students were then required to prepare and then present to a faculty advisor during an internship seminar—where they were discussed—immediately before their graduation. Because the project developed the way it did, other than for the internship faculty member, its purposes did not intrude on faculty prerogatives and time.

As described later, our initial goal was student self-assessment, and because of the way the rubric was developed—drawing from professional practices—it was a rubric of career-long learning rather than learning isolated to an MPA curriculum alone. Eventually, we hoped to extend our goal from student self-assessment to curriculum reform. But the self-assessment purpose, the career-long focus of the rubric, and questions that might be raised about validity of the rubric—developed from preexisting lists—postponed that discussion to the present. In addition, the

student cohort we required to use the rubric was focused and had a faculty advisor. This approach meant that general faculty involvement in reviewing student progress could be minimized until the department was confident it was on a solid path.

Over time, our goals for the competencies project became clear:

- Help students track development as they progress through the MPA program both in the classroom and their internships.
- Link competencies to curriculum and experiential learning opportunities.
- Assess progress using both quantitative and qualitative evaluation.

Regarding the first goal, two aspects of the project argued for student self-assessment rather than third-party (faculty) assessment. First, the project did not begin with an explicit connection to the MPA curriculum. The rubric was drawn from other sources, and it represented career-long learning by professional public administrators rather than from a curriculum itself. Thus, objective third-party assessment by faculty of student progress in their MPA program seemed inappropriate. Second, and more important, in the HR class where the competencies project originated, the idea that students and/or professionals are responsible for their own professional development was emphasized. Although feedback on progress is important to inform reflection, faculty assessment of student progress reinforces hierarchical accountability—a concept deemed inappropriate to career-long professional development.

To achieve the first goal, students are required periodically to report on their movement along the matrix. They are asked to pick any three of the competencies where they can report movement, to produce the evidence they have of movement, and then to reflect in writing about their movement—why it is important to them. We have produced a guide with examples of “evidence” artifacts and reflective statements. Faculty involvement to this point has been isolated to individual advisors, the faculty member who was involved with the project from the beginning, and to the school’s academic advisor. Responses to the student’s work are purposefully nonevaluative but are intended to provoke honesty, accuracy, and reflection. Faculty comments are often phrased as questions: “You have produced evidence of progress based on your work in a jurisdiction of 30,000; are you confident you could do the same in a jurisdiction of 500,000?” What we have learned from reviewing student statements of progress is that often students think they have accomplished more than an experienced observer might agree with. We also saw that while working in their full-time internships, students occasionally saw themselves as knowing less than originally thought.

We have addressed this issue by re-conceptualizing the rubric from a flat screen to a cube. In other words, each box in the rubric contains depth, and progress may be seen in terms of building depth rather than moving horizontally. This method has relieved some student self-imposed incentive to show “progress” as horizontal movement toward mastery, and we think it has enabled students to be more honest with themselves.

A key moment in the entire portfolio/competencies project occurred during one of the seminars when students were discussing their progress constructing portfolios. The discussion began to focus on what faculty expected when one of the graduating students blurted out poignantly and in frustration, “Screw it: It is not theirs!” This simple expression reinforced the idea that we were not trying to create another grading tool; we were trying to assist our students and graduates to plan and chart their careers. It was their responsibility, and we were providing a tool with the portfolio and the competencies rubric.

Moving to a discussion of the second goal, the most important question we face in linking the competencies to curriculum and experiential learning opportunities is how much overlap we want in the MPA curriculum and competencies. At KU, our pre-career students have a part-time internship in their first year, and their second year consists of a full-time internship with three professional development seminars led by KU faculty. The second goal forces a reexamination of the view that the curriculum is the sole contribution to the student’s education. Linking the competencies rubric to our students’ total educational experience both in the classroom and out—as they define their educational experience—has led us to focus on the concept of the “totality of the student experience” rather than looking solely at the contribution that faculty make in class to a student’s education.

Faculty have been asked to identify in their syllabi the competencies covered in their classes. Interestingly, this request was met with no resistance by faculty. This result suggests that faculty members are quite attuned to the concept of competencies, and including references to the rubric in their syllabi is not an intrusion on their prerogatives or approach to learning.

Our intent is to use the data we now have about student progress to review the curriculum—which at KU includes substantial experiential learning for pre-career students. With the student self-assessment data, we now are able to identify pre-career student progress in their academic year on campus and also in their internship year. Rather than working from a preconceived notion of what competencies are required and shaping the curriculum in a traditional approach, we now have data we can use to determine what students are learning in their on campus year and what they are learning in their internships. These data, coupled with a general survey of intern supervisors at the conclusion of the internships on the preparedness of students, provide additional knowledge about students’ learning.

Our goal is to bring this information to faculty to inform a discussion of curriculum. This effort is significant in terms of the sequence of curriculum development, which often has an unspoken purpose of legitimizing faculty interest areas. Now, we truly will be focused on what students have reported as their learning. We now can ask more comfortably, “Shouldn’t they be learning



about *X* on campus?” In other words, the curriculum discussion will have a base grounded in data rather than one solely based on faculty understanding of the academic discipline, the field of professional practice, and their own intellectual connections to that practice and the discipline.

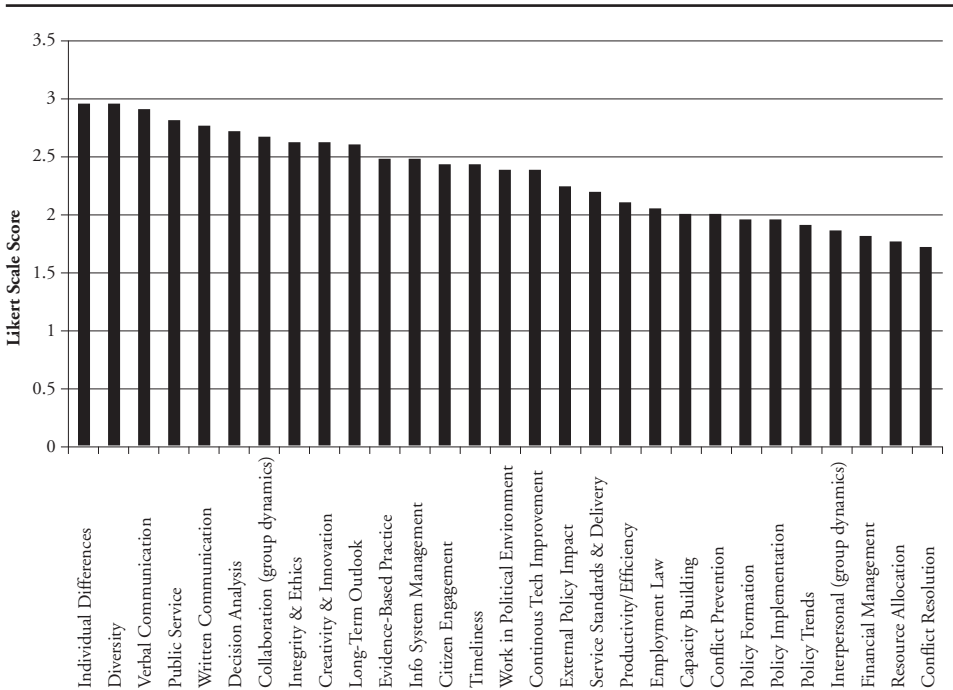
Turning now to the third goal, assessing progress through evaluation, at each stage in development of the competencies matrix and its connection to a portfolio requirement, we asked students for feedback. Their input reinforced the idea of self-assessment, but it also provided ideas on how we could or should use the matrix, involve faculty, and conceive of the project. We are now at a point where we can assess the results from separate cohorts on the competencies rubric. The quantitative results are presented in the next section.

## **DATA FINDINGS**

The effort to gather and analyze quantitative data from student competency self-assessments began with the intern-option KU MPA Class of 2009. At that time, data were collected at two specific points: at the beginning and end of the program. It was later determined that a third data collection point would be necessary to separate the effects of classroom experiences in year one and the internship/professional development seminars in year two. Beginning with the Class of 2010, data were collected at three separate points: (a) at the start of their academic coursework (Time Point 1), (b) at the end of their academic coursework (Time Point 2), and (c) at the end of their internship experience (Time Point 3). At each point, the students were asked to self-evaluate their competency in each of 29 areas of interest using a 5-point Likert Scale, where higher scores indicate greater perceived competencies. Although early versions of the matrix included labels for each Likert Scale point such as novice, apprentice, and so forth, the current version has omitted these in favor of providing only a competency-based description of what is meant by each Likert Scale point (see Appendix B). At the time of this writing, complete data sets exist for two cohorts (Class of 2010 [ $n = 12$ ] and Class of 2011 [ $n = 14$ ]). The resulting data are analyzed and presented here.

Student self-assessments at the start of their program (Time Point 1) indicate that overall, conflict resolution, resource allocation, financial management, group dynamics, and understanding policy trends are the competencies students rate lowest, and thus are most in need of development (Figure 1). Initial assessments also reveal that, overall, student self-assessments identify strengths in individual differences, diversity, verbal communication, public service, and written communication. These data serve as a starting point for the students as they learn and grow over the two years in the program and beyond.

Figure 1.  
Initial Competency Self-Assessment Score

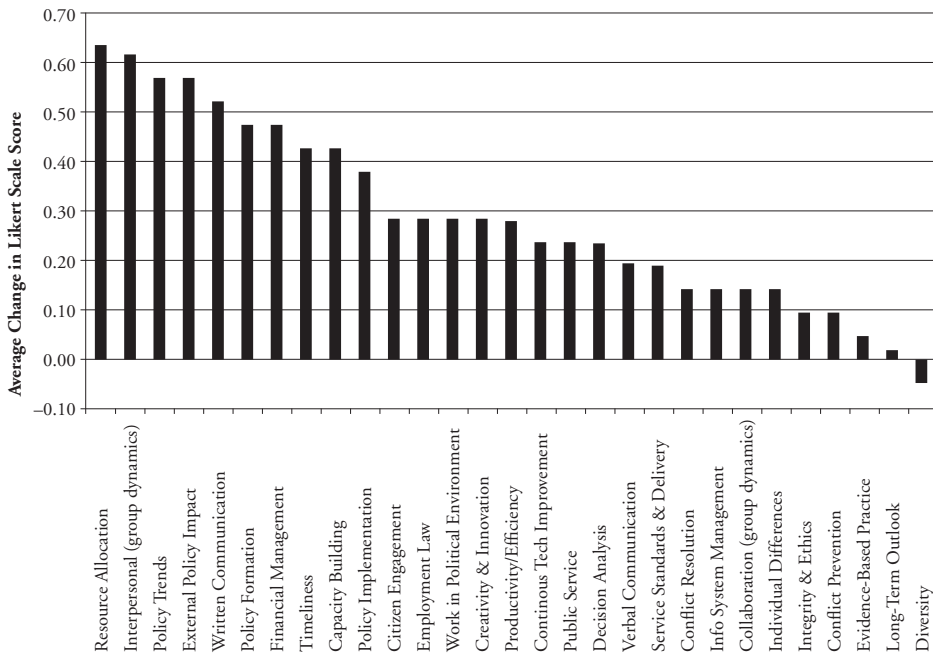


Note. A 5-point Likert Scale was used, where higher scores indicate greater perceived competencies.

Figure 2 considers the development that takes place over the first year in the MPA program. Student self-assessments from Time Point 1 and Time Point 2 are analyzed to consider the change that occurs as a result of classroom experiences and traditional instructional techniques. During the year of intensive academic coursework, students illustrate greatest developmental change related to resource allocation, group dynamics, policy trends, policy impact, and written communication. These findings are particularly interesting in two ways. First, given the self-assessed initial strength in written communication, it seems that although students perceived strength in this area, graduate coursework developed this competency even further. Second, the classroom experience seems well suited to addressing the competencies that students perceive in need of development, including resource allocation, group dynamics, and policy trends. Perhaps even more intriguing is the finding related to the diversity competency: Students generally reverse their initial strong self-assessment to indicate perhaps an improved understanding of what diversity really means in the context of public management. This finding supports the conclusion that many students enter the program with *unconscious incompetence*: They do not yet know what they do not know.

Figure 2.

## Examining Development in Year 1: Impact of Classroom Experiences

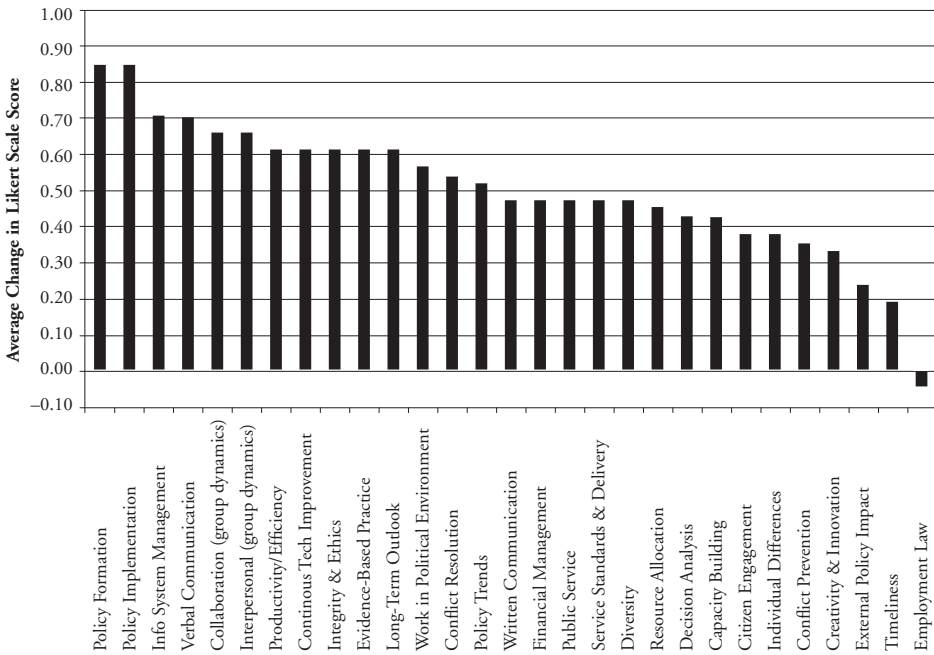


Note. Scores represent the average change in Likert Scale scores between the initial assessment (Time Point 1) and the assessment at the end of the first year in the program (Time Point 2).

Figure 3 considers the developmental change that occurs in year two of the program, which involves a full-time internship and also professional development seminars. Findings indicate significant competency growth on policy formation, policy implementation, information system management, verbal communication, and collaboration. Again, it is notable that one of these (verbal communication) was identified as one of the initial competency strengths. Further, Figure 3 demonstrates the complementary impact the internship experience and professional development seminars have on coursework: It appears that these experiences support growth in needed competency areas, including collaboration and information system management. Finally, this figure indicates the development of mastery as revealed by the employment law competency. The data indicate that students provide a lower self-assessment on this competency after completing their internship and professional development experiences. This result suggests that students are learning to apply what they covered in the classroom to practical situations. Students' reverse movement on this competency suggests two potential explanations. First, the reality of applying employment law to practical management challenges may have revealed the complexity of mastering this competency.

Second, this finding may suggest that the curriculum needs updating to ensure students are receiving adequate training before beginning their internships.

*Figure 3.*  
Examining Development in Year 2: Impact of Internship and Professional Development Experiences



*Note.* Scores represent the average change in Likert Scale scores between the assessment at the end of Year 1 in the program (Time Point 2) and the assessment at the end of Year 2 in the program (Time Point 3).

To present a picture of the overall change in competency ratings over the course of the two-year program, Figure 4 combines the developmental changes that occurred during both the academic coursework (see Figure 2) and the internship/professional development experiences (see Figure 3). Unlike Figure 4, which depicts the change in competency self-assessment, Figure 5 focuses on the average Likert Scale score for each competency. It combines the data taken at each of the three time points to present a cumulative bar chart of the average competency self-assessment. Together, these figures provide an opportunity for discussion related to strengths and strategic adjustments for the future. For instance, they can help faculty members identify competency areas that are developed effectively in the classroom (e.g., group dynamics, resource allocation, policy impact, and written communication) and those that are effectively addressed through internship and other professional development activities (e.g., policy implementation, verbal communication, information system management, evidence-based practice, and long-term impact).

Figure 4.  
Overall Program Impact on Competencies

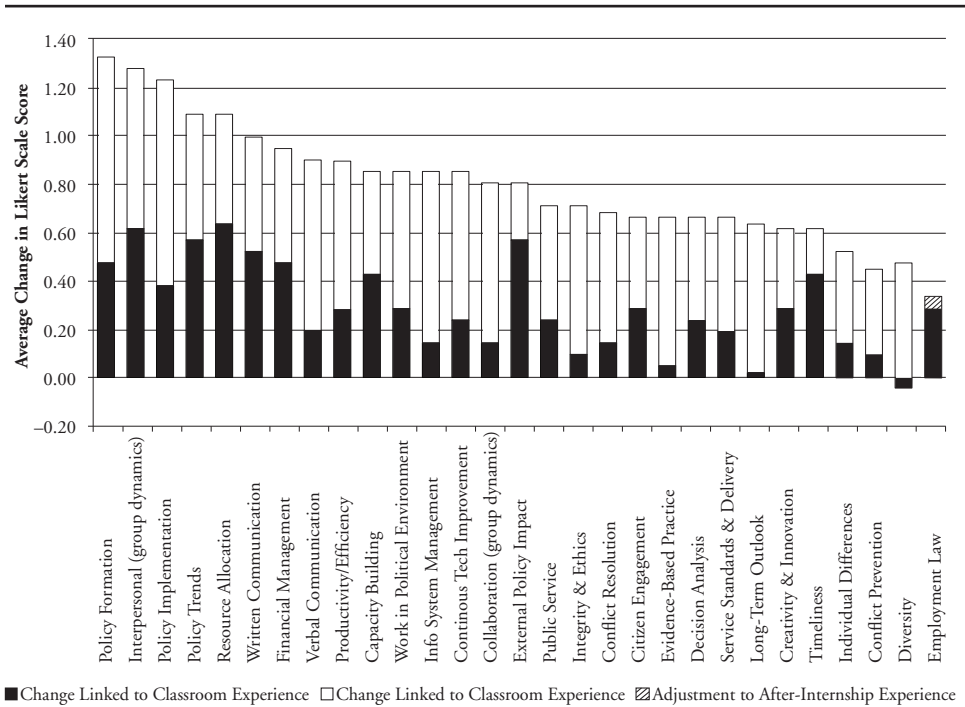
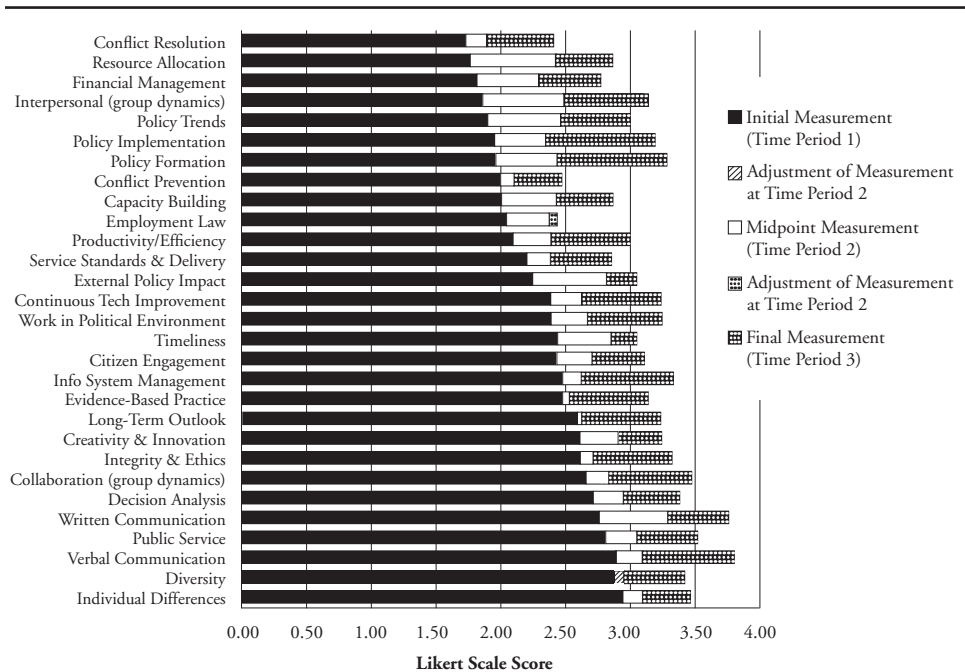


Figure 5.  
Student Competency Self-Assessments Over Time



These figures also illustrate the impact of time and application for key concepts covered in the classroom. Notably, competency areas like integrity/ethics, collaboration, and diversity, which are addressed in curriculum, may not be fully understood until students have opportunities to apply these concepts in practice. This speaks to the developmental principle of *conscious competence*, which emerges only over time. In addition, these figures reveal areas of opportunity for the future curriculum changes such as conflict resolution, conflict prevention, decision analysis, and service standards and delivery. Students did not feel that their competence in these areas grew as much relative to their reported growth in other areas. Overall, these figures illustrate the totality of the student experience, including both classroom and applied experiences, and the complementary impact these activities have on competency development overall.

## DISCUSSION

The findings present an opportunity to extend this discussion beyond the university context in which these data were collected to consider three broad themes: (a) the totality of the MPA student experience, (b) the developmental stages of mastery, and (c) implications for program decisions, including curriculum choices.

Regarding the first broad theme, the data illustrate the distinctions between first- and second-year assessments. This finding speaks to the totality of the student experience, including both the classroom learning experiences and the second-year full-time internship experience facilitated by professional development seminars. These intern-option students illustrate different developmental gains through participating in these separate but related activities. This result speaks to the key educational goal of transference. Although the data illustrate distinct developmental differences, it is notable that the classroom experiences are supplemented with opportunities to apply foundational lessons to practice. It is important to note that career-option students—who are not part of our project to date—may illustrate different developmental patterns, given their work experiences.

In addition, the data reveal changes that suggest reflection and reassessment. Interpreted on the average, some competency components reveal lower self-assessment following the completion of program components. This finding supports the work of Sprague and Stuart (2000) that describes mastery as a developmental process that involves the gradual recognition of competence (or incompetence). Initial assessments on some competency dimensions are inflated because students do not yet know what they do not know. As they gain classroom and internship experience, they become more conscious of their developmental needs as academic themes are highlighted in practice.

The data speak to the final theme in several ways. First, competency assessments can help faculty members make data-based curriculum decisions by identifying curricular strengths and needs. Second, the data can highlight the program components that are best developed through classroom instruction or internships. Third, competency assessments can become an important segment

of a “balanced scorecard” approach to MPA program evaluation when combined with student reviews upon graduation and assessments of students by intern supervisors. This approach helps determine the continued relevance of the model and its components.

Finally, competency models can help programs align their efforts with broad priorities that are shared by other public administration programs across the nation and even around the world. Especially when programs choose to adopt and apply existing models, these goals can be met more easily. Crafting an original competency model may prove a useful exercise for legitimizing the program and its curriculum, but it is not the position of this paper to advocate for either approach. Rather, its aim is to encourage programs to determine the approach best suited for their needs.

## **CONCLUSION**

Although this paper presents the University of Kansas MPA competency model and assessment experience, we expect that the findings and discussion may help other programs evaluate their current development and evaluation methods to balance continued focus areas and emerging needs. All NASPAA-accredited programs are expected to develop competencies in five domains: (a) leading and managing in public governance; (b) participating in and contributing to the policy process; (c) analyzing, synthesizing, thinking critically, solving problems, and making decisions; (d) articulating and applying a public service perspective; and (e) communicating and interacting productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry. The KU MPA program competency model captures these domains. Moving forward, it is expected that this program and others will further develop and refine competency models to meet these expectations and reflect program-specific content and concentrations (Powell, Piskulich, & Saint-Germain, 2011).

Based on our experience with the KU competency model, a number of issues should be considered when designing, implementing, and evaluating a competency model.

1. The competency model should attempt to align the broader priorities of the academic and practitioner communities. Although both groups have a similar goal in that they have a vested interest in the development of future public servants, faculty and practitioners can sometimes have different views on how that development should occur and what types of conceptual understandings and skills should be developed. Though different, these two perspectives are important and the voices representing both perspectives should be heard. This takes time and effort, but it is one way to help make sure that the model remains relevant. When engaging the practitioner community, it is important to seek out those who value the competency initiative and who can be expected to participate thoughtfully in the conversation.

2. Another voice that should be heard is that of the students. As such, students and faculty should share the responsibility of developing, implementing, and revisiting the competency model. Because both groups will be closely working with the model, their individual and collective buy-in is paramount. In addition, if student self-assessment is to become part of the competency initiative, attention should be paid to rewards and/or punishments that will foster honesty.
3. The competency model should capture the totality of the student experience. It should be realized that student learning is not restricted to the classroom. Although the internship aspect of the KU MPA program is unique, the vast majority of MPA programs incorporate at least a summer internship experience. In addition, many MPA programs provide, support, and encourage service learning, volunteerism, and the like. The learning that occurs during these other types of experiential learning should be reflected in the model because it will affect student competency.
4. A significant output of the competency model project can be the collection of data. As mentioned earlier, the model should contain learning objectives and areas of competency that are seen as important by the faculty in consultation with a thoughtful practitioner community. The data can and should be used to help the faculty understand how they and the program are helping to meet the learning goals established in the model. Faculty can see areas in which the program is succeeding and those in which it is not. The faculty can then engage in a data-based curriculum discussion to improve the program where needed.
5. Competency models also provide an opportunity to illustrate developmental gains over time. This is particularly the case with models that employ a self-assessment aspect, because they enable students to compare where they were in regards to a competency to where they are now. This knowledge can build awareness, confidence, and an appreciation of the value added by the program, and it can reinforce a commitment to continuing professional development after graduation as a responsibility of the student.
6. Developmental gains should not be seen solely as an increase in a competency. As was seen in the data presented earlier, the perceived competency of our students in a few cases actually decreased. This could be because the students inflated their previous competency and realized that on a subsequent self-assessment. However, this insight can be a good thing and demonstrate an increased awareness of the competency itself. It could occur as the students come to appreciate



the complexity of an area of public administration and realize that they are not as advanced in an area as they originally thought.

7. There is value in supplementing the competency assessment with reflective statements from the students. It is one thing for students to give themselves competency scores; it is another for students to reflect upon what that score means to them. Again, this is another method of building personal responsibility for future professional development and continuous professional learning.
8. Although competency models should be continuously revisited to ensure that the content is appropriate, too many changes can pose significant problems. Multiple competency model versions may introduce additional complexity in administration. If development of competencies is the goal, the model must remain constant so that repeat measures of the same competency can be taken. Therefore, it is recommended that models remain the same for a cohort during the entire course of their program.
9. Finally, links between the competency model and program components should be identified and evaluated. If the competency model is a true reflection of what the faculty sees as valuable, the courses offered should be explicitly tied to one or more expected competencies. The reverse should also be true. The faculty should ensure that the competencies are all linked to at least one program component.

Additional questions remain to be considered. First, this effort illustrates the importance of phased data collection but focuses primarily on self-assessment: How should faculty members balance student self-assessment data with external evaluations from instructors and/or internship supervisors? Connected to this issue, what are the implementation costs associated with analyzing multiple forms of assessment? Further, how should we interpret these forms of assessment and connect them to program outcomes? Consideration of these questions leads to an understanding of the integral relationship between classroom feedback and grades from faculty and the student self-assessment process. Without a foundation of faculty evaluation, an academic program would lack credibility. But a self-assessment element introduces a critical element of self-responsibility, and sharing those self-assessments in a seminar setting introduces the idea of mutual accountability as well.

Another question centers on whether competency models should differ for varied student groups: Should we develop customized competency models for part-time, pre-service, and in-career students? Or, should we reconsider the evaluation schedule for these groups? It is expected that the competency model can serve to focus the MPA student experience, but important questions remain on how best to design and evaluate progress on the model. In addition, programs

should consider the issue of faculty buy-in. Effective integration of competency models depends on faculty investment, and it will be important to use the model as a way to enhance communication and address any concerns related to instructional autonomy. Finally, continually validating over time presents a challenge: How should we integrate competency feedback from alumni, internship supervisors, and/or other stakeholders in the future?

Competency management for MPA educational purposes will require a long-term investment and continual reevaluation. Bowman and colleagues (2010) note that “public service has been greatly affected by the rapidly changing context within which it is organized”; there has been and will continue to be changes in the “(1) technical, (2) internal, (3) external, and (4) managerial environments that encompass the organization and delivery of public services” (p. 7). Competency assessment is an iterative process that involves faculty members as learners. To this end, faculty members must be sufficiently invested in the process to ensure that both methods and applications are revisited on an ongoing basis. In the case of the KU MPA program, efforts are under way to revisit the competency model to ensure its continued applicability. It is expected that faculty, students, alumni, and program stakeholders will be involved in these discussions.

The ever-changing context of public sector work requires that existing competency models be revisited to identify congruence (or lack thereof) between competency models and changing leadership needs. Although these investments may seem substantial, we hold that the collective investment in competency management can be regarded as an investment in public leadership development and one that contributes to the shared goal of preparing students to manage in a changing public sector landscape (Berry, 2010).

## FOOTNOTE

1 A chronology of the project appears as Appendix A to this paper.

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## **APPENDIX A**

### **Chronology of Portfolio and Competencies Project**

Chronological History  
Competency/Portfolio Project  
University of Kansas

Prepared by Raymond Hummert, Academic Advisor, School of Public Affairs and Administration

**March 7, 2001:** Faculty, Practitioner, and Student representatives met with Dr. David G. Williams, West Virginia University, to discuss professional portfolios and the West Virginia assessment model. Discussion on the use of portfolios included

- Faculty evaluation of student performance
- Personal self-evaluation
- Career planning
- Job search tool

**March 30, 2001:** Chuck Epp and John Nalbandian met with John Gaunt, dean of School of Architecture and Urban Design, to discuss use of portfolio by architects. In the field, portfolios were used for a long time that were generally graphic narratives that showed past professional development as well as well as had a limited use for future development. Portfolio concept solidified.

**April–May 2001:** Faculty begins discussing portfolio concepts.

**August 2001:** Faculty approves Student Portfolio Policy.

**Summer 2001:** Faculty, practitioners, and Intern Option students meet for the first time to discuss the portfolio project. The discussion centered on ICMA competencies. Importance of faculty review was emphasized.

**Summer 2002:** Faculty meets with second class of Intern Option students. Bill Carswell, School of Architecture and Urban Design, to discuss use of portfolios by architects made presentation. List of competencies were expanded beyond ICMA. Creativity and flexibility were encouraged as a professional development tool. Review by supervisors, faculty, and others encouraged.

**April 2003:** Portfolios were discussed and reviewed by outside consultant (Bill Hansell). Emphasis was on professional development. Portfolio Project was evaluated by first class. Results were mixed, but generally favorable with encouragement to proceed with the recommendations:

- Portfolios took two forms: (a) Compilation of materials and reflection and (b) Expanded resume.
- Use a faculty mentor.
- Share with mentors other than faculty.

**Summer 2003:** Faculty meets with third class of Intern Option students to discuss portfolios. Portfolios in the academic setting were discussed with representatives from the Writing Center, English Department, California State University, Long Beach, and the University of Kansas Portfolio project. Emphasis was given to process, importance of writing, and reflective nature of portfolio.

**October 2003:** Portfolio discussion was made part of Professional Development Seminar.

**April 2004:** Personal development was emphasized along with professional development in professional Development Center. Consultant reviewed/discussed portfolios (Jim Keene). Evaluation of second class of Intern Option students. Response was good to concept. Recommendations included

- Use as a self-development tool.
- Use as a tool to connect with students.
- Connect students with faculty in the second year of MPA program.

**Summer 2004:** Faculty meets with Intern and Career option students. Discussion centered on use of portfolio as professional and personal development. Process was better defined with emphasis on reflection, writing, evaluation, and lifelong learning process.

**April 2005:** Consultant (Linda Barton) and Practitioner in Residence (Carol Gonzales) discussed portfolios and continual learning. Portfolios have to be individualized to be relevant. Evaluation of third class. Portfolio better used by students. Consultants were impressed by concept. The discussion emphasized the individuality of the process/document. "Screw it! It is not theirs."

**April 2005:** John Nalbandian convenes the Mid America Competency Summit to discuss learning in PA Departments. Representatives from regional NASPAA schools attended an afternoon session at KU to talk about outcomes based education and where their schools were programmatically. MU, UNO, UMKC, and Iowa State University (via phone) were present as well as NASPAA representatives: Steven Maynard-Moody, Laurel McFarland (NASPAA executive director via conference phone)

**Spring 2006:** Hummert surveys graduates on use of portfolios. Graduates responding to the survey recommended

- Provide students a better outline of what needs to be learned, or define competencies more clearly.
- Provide guidelines and a mechanism for both the student and the person evaluating the student.

**Spring 2006:** Nalbandian assigned an optional research paper in PUAD 834 on competencies. It consisted of

- A review of literature
- A collection of lists and identification of competencies that commonly appear in managerial/public service arena

**Fall 2006:** Nalbandian presented a paper at the NASPAA conference in Minneapolis on the project.

**Fall 2006:** Nalbandian made another optional research assignment in PUAD 834 to develop a rubric of competencies. This placed the competencies within the Canadian Public Service framework, which identified components of each competency (vertical element of the rubric) and levels of competence (horizontal elements)

**Spring 2007:** The rubric was given to graduating intern option students, who spent a morning discussing its values and drawbacks.

**Fall 2007:** Students participating in a PUAD 831 project reviewed the content of the rubric with the goal of achieving vertical and horizontal alignment. The rubric will be presented to all incoming students.

The Intern Option students will anchor the boxes in the rubric with case studies provided from interviews with local government professionals who attend the ICMA annual conference. And Career Option students in PUAD 845 will find cases to describe the boxes.

**Fall 2007:** All incoming MPA students were presented the competency rubric and portfolio. They developed three additional documents. They were reflective essay guidelines; artifacts examples; and faculty expectations and student obligations.

**Fall 2007:** Met with second-year Intern Option students and suggested continuum instead of rubric, depth to the rubric, and continue to emphasize flexibility. "No KUCIMAT left behind program." NOT!

**Fall 2007:** University IT agreed to do a feasibility study of an electronic portfolio that would include the competency rubric.

**May 2008:** The first-year students of the 2009 class leaving campus are asked where they are on the competency rubric.

**Fall 2008:** The electronic portfolio is tested by students.

**October 2008:** At the Richmond ICMA Professional Development Seminar, students of the 2009 class are asked where they are on the competency rubric.

**April 2009:** At the last Professional Development meeting for the 2009 class, students are asked where they are on competency rubric.

**May 2009:** As the 2010 class leaves campus, they are asked where they are on the competency rubric.

**June 2009:** Students in the incoming class of 2011 are asked where they are on the competency rubric.

**August 2009:** The electronic competency rubric and portfolio is activated and moved to production server.

**January 2010:** After testing electronic rubric and portfolio with students, it was abandoned as a platform.

**March 2010:** KU Center for Teaching Excellence demonstrates KU Keeps as a platform for portfolios.

**Spring 2010:** Continue to collect data from first- and second-year students on their placement on rubric.

**August 2010:** Getha-Taylor and Silvia join Nalbandian and Hummert in working on competencies and portfolios.

**September 2010:** Developed concept of electronic resume to develop, store, and present portfolio information.

**October 2010:** Explored Digication as a platform for rubric, portfolio, and electronic resume, which seemed promising.

**November 2010:** Presented to faculty two years of student data.

**Spring 2011:** Continue to collect data from first- and second-year students on their placement on rubric, which will be the beginning of four full years of data.

**April 2011:** Students experiment using web-based sites for portfolios.

## THE FUTURE

### Phase I:

- Refine competency rubric using information from faculty.
- Connect the competency rubric to the curriculum and require a higher level of confidence in the rubric. Students would be asked at the end of the semester to indicate which competencies were covered in a particular course.
- Use web-based sites for portfolios.

**Phase II:** Use the rubric to objectively evaluate student progress. This phase requires the highest level of confidence in the validity of the rubric.



APPENDIX B

University of Kansas Competencies Matrix

I. Values & Ethics (serving with integrity and respect)					
	1	2	3	4	5
<b>Diversity Management</b>					
Individual Differences	Little experience in working with people from a different background.	Aware of the importance of individual differences.	Demonstrates respect for difference in people in own personal and professional actions.	Encourages others to respect and provide fair and equitable treatment for all people. Articulates benefits of individual difference to others.	Inculcates organization-wide recognition of the benefits differences bring to the organization and the community.
Diversity	Unaware of differences between cultures, ethnicities, and groups.	Aware of the importance of diversity.	Demonstrates sensitivity toward and appreciation of diversity in own personal and professional actions.	Encourages others to value diversity in the workplace.	Strengthens organization by integrating diversity into operating culture.
Employment Law	Little knowledge of employment law.	Understanding the basics of employment law.	Applies principles employment law in personal and professional actions.	Encourages others to understand and fairly apply provision of employment law.	Promotes organizational culture that adheres to the letter of the law, and also values the spirit of the law.
<b>2 Professionalism</b>					
Public Service	Does not distinguish between commitment to public service and working in the public sector.	Grasps the meaning of commitment to public service.	Demonstrates commitment to public service in personal and professional actions.	Instills in others a commitment to public service.	Inspires an organizational commitment to public service.
Integrity & Ethics	Minimal understanding of the role that ethics and integrity play in effective public service.	Respects importance of integrity and ethical reasoning in public service and is in formed of related laws, rules, and regulations.	Demonstrates integrity and ethical reasoning in personal and professional actions and complies with related requirements.	Encourages others to act with integrity, to employ ethical reasoning, and to respect related rules, regulations, and laws.	Elevates integrity and ethical reasoning as defining organizational characteristics.

II. Strategic Thinking (innovating through analysis and ideas)						
1	Administrative Policy Making	1	2	3	4	5
	Policy Formulation	Has a limited knowledge of policy formulation processes.	Aware of how policy processes work.	Participates effectively in policy-making initiatives.	Has led an effective policy-making team or effort.	Set overall organizational policy direction and serves as overarching policy entrepreneur.
	Policy Implementation	Simplistic understanding of how policy gets implemented.	Basic and sound understanding of the importance of policy implementation strategy.	Plays a role in the implementation of adopted policy.	Leads policy implementation effort or team.	Responsible for realization of organization's policy goals.
	Policy Trends	Unaware of policy trends that may impact organization.	Aware of policy trends that may impact the organization.	Is mindful of the impact of policy trends in personal and professional actions.	Encourages work group to consider broader policy trends.	Integrates trends into organization's policy making and strategic planning.
2	Innovation	1	2	3	4	5
	Creativity & Innovation	Unaware of the need creativity or innovation.	Appreciates value of creativity in the workplace.	Demonstrates creativity in personal and professional actions.	Encourages creativity among coworkers and staff.	Develops a work environment that encourages creative solutions that lead to organizational improvements.
3	Strategic Management	1	2	3	4	5
	Long-Term Outlook	Limited awareness of long-term issues or needs.	Develops long-term perspective on organizational issues and needs.	Factors long-term consequences and objectives into personal and professional actions.	Responsible for a conducting strategic planning team or activities.	Articulates an organizational vision that frames strategic plans.
	Capacity Building	Unaware of organizational capacities.	Aware of organizational capacities.	Participates in efforts to define and expand needed organizational capacities.	Leads a team effort to define and expand needed organizational capacities.	Aligns vision, strategic planning, and capacity development. Sufficient capacity is realized to achieve organizational vision and plans.

III. Engagement (mobilizing people, organizations, & partners)						
		1	2	3	4	5
1	<b>Communication</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	Verbal	Basic verbal communication skills.	College-level speaking skills.	Effectively communicates regarding own personal and professional actions (e.g., conferring with colleagues and reporting to superiors).	Effectively communicates within department or workgroup (e.g., staff meetings, departmental briefings).	Effective at public communication and clearly and responsibly articulates organization's mission and activities (e.g., gives effective speeches, testimony, is comfortable in public discourse).
	Written	Basic writing skills.	College-level writing ability.	Effectively writes for personal and professional needs (e.g., internal memos, letters, and staff reports).	Ensures effective writing from unit/workgroup (includes ability to edit, e.g., budget narratives, departmental reports, policy statements).	Ensures effective organizational written communication (includes editing, e.g., press releases, annual reports, legislative testimony, strategic plans).
2	<b>Conflict</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	Resolution	Inexperience in conflict resolution.	Aware of different processes for conflict resolution.	Working familiarity with at least one ADR technique.	Involved in the formal resolution of a conflict and skills sought by others.	Creates organizational culture that recognizes and resolves conflicts as they arise.
	Prevention	Unaware of how to prevent conflict in the workplace.	Understands and uses proper protocol to prevent escalation of work-related conflicts.	Anticipates and takes appropriate actions to avoid detrimental conflicts in the workplace.	Provides counsel to individuals in early stages of workplace conflict and encourages individuals to take appropriate preventive action.	Creates organizational culture, where conflict is recognized in earliest stages and has systematic means for early resolution.

III. Engagement (mobilizing people, organizations, & partners) <i>continued</i>						
	1	2	3	4	5	
3	<b>External Awareness</b> Working in a Political Environment	Unaware of inextricable link between policy and politics.	Is mindful of appropriate political considerations in his or her personal and professional policy-making actions.	Helps workgroup appreciate how politics informs policy making, and vice versa	Works to maintain alignment between organization's policy goals and political support.	
	External Policy Impact	Not aware of external stakeholders.	Effectively considers external stakeholders and their interests in personal and professional actions.	Encourages work group to understand and address external stakeholders and their interests.	Ensures that external stakeholders are viewed as legitimate partners and have an appropriate voice in the organization.	
	Citizen Engagement	Does not understand that public service exists to serve the interests and needs of citizens.	Serving needs of citizens is at the heart of personal and professional actions and is skilled planning and conducting citizen engagement.	Helps workgroup understand the public service exists to serve the public's needs and develops in others effectiveness in citizen engagement.	Fosters an organizational culture that is skilled and committed to using citizen engagement as an essential component of policy planning and implementation.	
4	<b>Group Dynamics</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	Interpersonal	Has basic self-awareness and sensitivity to needs of others in group setting.	Has used formal instruments (e.g., Meyers-Briggs, NBTI, SDI, or other) to assess interpersonal skills.	Information from formal assessment informs personal and professional behavior.	Effectively manages group's interpersonal skills and dynamics promoting group effectiveness.	Ensures development of organization's interpersonal skills sufficient to engage the needs of employees, citizens, and stakeholders.
	Collaboration	Inexperienced in collaborative efforts.	Some experience in collaborative efforts and aware of costs and benefits of collaboration and competition.	Required to work in a collaborative fashion in personal and professional activities.	Leads collaborative efforts within workgroup/unit (e.g., policy development team or annual planning retreats).	Ensures effective collaboration both within the organization and among the organization's stakeholders.

IV. Management Excellence (delivering through action management, people management, & financial management)						
1	Decision Making	1	2	3	4	5
	Timeliness	Aware only of personal deadlines.	Understands value of timelines and deadlines associated with the decision-making processes.	Effectively establishes timelines, and works effectively with competing deadlines associated with decision-making processes.	Aligns group activities with timing of decision-making processes and is seen as a resource in time management and decision-making processes.	Recognizes moments of opportunity and acts to advance the organization's goals.
	Evidence-Based Practice	Limited understanding of links between information, analytical tools, and decision making.	Sees the need to link information and analytical thinking and tools to decision making.	Effectively links information, analytical thinking, and tools to decision making in personal and professional actions.	Aware of information and information gaps needed to support the decision-making process within a unit or department and effectively communicates needs and gaps to others. Able to guide others in systematic collectively of information and application of information to decision making.	Develops and implements a strategic plan to gather information needed to support decision making within the organization.
	Decision Analysis	Acts on decisions made elsewhere.	Recognizes that decision making arises from choosing among available options.	Develops, considers, and evaluates different options in personal and professional actions.	Encourages workgroup to generate and consider various options for agency decisions.	Creates an organizational culture where options are cultivated and considered, but holds decision-making responsibility.

IV. Management Excellence (delivering through action management, people management, & financial management) <i>continued</i>						
2	Financial Resource Management	1	2	3	4	5
	Resource Allocation	Little exposure to basic budget processes.	Understanding of basic budget principles, practices, and processes.	Proficiency in basic budget preparation.	Prepares budget and integrates audit and other performance information for an entire unit, workgroup, or department.	Designs and guides budget process to reach desired organizational outcomes.
	Financial Management	Little exposure to core financial documents (balance sheet, cash flow statement, and activity statement).	Reads and interprets basic financial documents.	Effectively uses financial documents to guide resource management decisions in personal and professional actions.	Uses financial documents to guide resource management decisions and operations in unit or department.	Uses financial documents to guide organization's management and operational decisions.
3	<b>Information Management &amp; Technical Understanding</b>	1	2	3	4	5
	Information System Management	Has basic computer skills.	General computer skills in addition to awareness of systems content plus capacity.	Uses system contents and capacities in personal and professional actions.	Understands systems contents, capacities, and deficiencies and enables group to take advantage of available resources.	Develops a strategy to build, maintain, and introduce a system that supports the organization's activities.
	Continuous Technological Improvement	Unaware of basic technology.	Understands state-of-art advancements	Maintains current technological proficiencies in personal and professional actions.	Anticipates and articulates technological needs and adapts to technological changes that affect the workgroup.	Develops a strategy to ensure that the organization stays current in needed technological competencies.

IV. Management Excellence (delivering through action management, people management, & financial management) <i>continued</i>						
	1	2	3	4	5	
4	Service Standards & Delivery	Unaware of organization's basic service standards.	Aware of organization's basic service standards.	Participates in the development and implementation of performance management initiatives.	Leads group effort to continuously improve service standards and service delivery.	Creates organization that is continuously seeking to better understand and meet the public's expectations and needs and to measure results.
	Productivity/ Efficiency	Unaware of either public needs or organizational capacities.	Aware of public needs, organizational capacities, and the relationship between the two.	Considers public needs and organizational capacities in personal and professional actions and is able to communicate the relationship to others.	Works within a team to increase team's capacity to address defined public needs and to articulate the relationship between needs and resources.	Creates organization-wide understanding of elements involved in balancing needs and resources and effectively develops organizational methods that systematically convey the relationship to others.