

ASSESSING MPA ETHICS COURSE SYLLABI

HOW DO THEY MEASURE UP TO THE 2013 REVISED ASPA
CODE OF ETHICS?

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PRIMARY FOCUS OF RESEARCH

- The paper:
- 1) reviews literature on conceptual approaches to public administration ethics and ethics education
- 2) assesses whether or how the eight ASPA Code embody fundamental values in public administration;
- 3) conducts conceptual content analysis of MPA ethics course syllabi for NASPAA accredited programs in the United States,
- 4) focus on determining trends in the content of these courses and to assess if the instruction is consistent with the eight principles in the ASPA Code; and
- 5) draws conclusions and implications to inform practice and future research.

METHOD: CONTENT ANALYSIS

- Sample

- Drawn from the list of 179 NASPAA accredited programs published in 2017.
- A final sample of 99 schools were contacted;
 - 41 stand-alone ethics courses
 - 58 elective courses
- 30.3% response rate
 - 30 schools responded and provided copies of most current syllabi.

- Data Analysis Procedure

- The 8 principles of the 2013 revised ASPA Code served as the main categories for coding syllabi.
- A coding rubric was developed to categorize;
 1. Course description & learning objectives
 2. Content (assigned readings, assignments, and topics)
- All data analysis conducted in NVIVO qualitative software

DESCRIPTION OF SAMPLE

Table 1. Characteristics of Surveyed MPA Programs (*n* = 30)

Items	n	%
Geographic regions		
Western (CA, CO, ID, NM, OR, TX, WA)	10	33.3
Midwestern (IL, KS, MI, MO)	6	20.0
Southern (FL, GA, KY, NC, TN, SC, VA)	10	33.3
Eastern (MA, NJ, NY)	4	13.3
Course types		
Explicitly administrative ethics	18	60.0
Administrative ethics related	12	40.0
Status in the curriculum		
Required	20	66.7
Elective	10	33.3

RESULTS

Table 2. Coverage Based on Course Description and Learning Objectives

Category	frequency	Number of Syllabi (%)
Advance the Public Interest	37	17 (56.7)
Uphold the Constitution and the law	13	5 (16.7)
Promote Democratic Participation	13	8 (26.7)
Strengthen Social Equity	9	8 (26.7)
Fully Inform and Advise	7	6 (20.0)
Demonstrate Personal Integrity	52	20 (66.7)
Promote Ethical Organizations	71	23 (76.7)
Advance Professional Excellence	110	29 (96.7)

RESULTS

Table 3. Coverage Based on Content

ASPA Code Category	Textbooks		Journal Articles		Course Topic*	
	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>f</i>	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>f</i>	<i>n</i> (%)	<i>f</i>
Advance the Public Interest	21 (70.0%)	40	6 (20.0%)	19	17 (56.7%)	41
Uphold the Constitution and the law	22 (73.3%)	37	9 (30.0%)	19	19 (63.3%)	43
Promote Democratic Participation	19 (63.3%)	27	7 (23.3%)	16	14 (46.7%)	42
Strengthen Social Equity	15 (50.0%)	22	6 (20.0%)	14	12 (40.0%)	23
Fully Inform and Advise	9 (30.0%)	10	2 (6.7%)	3	6 (20.0%)	6
Demonstrate Personal Integrity	30 (100.0%)	77	9 (30.0%)	37	24 (80.0%)	107
Promote Ethical Organizations	29 (96.7%)	85	11 (36.7%)	72	28 (93.3%)	181
Advance Professional Excellence	24 (80.0%)	55	9 (30.0%)	22	25 (83.3%)	74

Note: *n* = 30; *f* is the frequency to which themes relevant to code categories are referenced across syllabi.

*Includes both course topics and relevant assignments

DISCUSSION & CONCLUSION

- Four frequently mentioned objectives across the MPA ethics curricula with match to the ASPA Code are to produce graduates committed to:
 - a. Professional excellence in public service
 - b. Ethical organizations
 - c. Personal integrity
 - d. Advancement of the public interest
- Course objectives focusing on constitution and law, democratic participation, social equity, and provision of professional policy advice appeared relatively less often both within and across syllabi.
- Predominance of the process orientation to the exclusion of the role of morality in public policy.
- Relative absence of focus on the tripartite foundation of ethics, deontological, teleological and virtue ethics.

CONCLUSION & IMPLICATIONS

- To varying degrees, MPA ethics courses cover a range of public service values consistent with the framework of values in the ASPA Code of Ethics.
- Gap exists between coverage of bureaucratic ethos and democratic ethos.
- Codes of ethics provide an important framework for teaching administrative ethics but should be combined with other ethical frameworks.
- Additional research is needed to understand why instructors emphasize bureaucratic values more than democratic values.