EXTERNAL PANEL REVIEW of

THE MASTER IN PUBLIC POLICY GRADUATE PROGRAM
OREGON STATE UNIVERSITY

School of Public Policy
Economics Program
Political Science Program
Sociology Program

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OVERALL RECOMMENDATION
Maintain and Perfect.

SUMMARY OF FINDINGS AND RECOMMENDATIONS
While less than a decade old, the School of Public Policy and its Master in Public Policy (MPP) graduate program has recruited diverse and high quality students into a rigorous interdisciplinary program with strengths in research methods, public policy analysis and theory, statistical analysis, and economics. Graduates of the program have secured jobs in the top public and private agencies in Oregon and the United States.

Any observable challenges or issues of the program were of secondary nature and mostly related to the implementation of the growing program and not to the core structure of the program. These challenges and issues include fine-tuning the delivery of the curriculum; uneven distribution of service and leadership that is heavily concentrated upon the School Director and Graduate Program Director; maintaining the quality of the program with its recent and future growth; incorporating learning outcomes of ethics and diversity more firmly into the current curriculum; and improving assessment measures to capture the rigor of the program.

The external review committee organized its assessment of the program and its recommendations by thirteen evaluation criteria suggested by the Guidelines for the Review of Graduate Programs offered by the Graduate Council of Oregon State University. These evaluation criteria are summarized in Table 1 as well as the recommendations to consider for improvements. As stated, the recommendations are for consideration and do not represent absolute procedures for implementation and required action by the School of Public Policy. We note the limitations of our observations and interviews and offer the recommendations with all the humility of three observers who assessed the program in less than 24 hours on May 18, 2012.

Interviews with the Dean of the College of Liberal Arts, faculty in the School of Public Policy, and current students demonstrated uniform enthusiasm and support for the MPP program and School of Public Policy. The external review committee shares the enthusiasm and support as expressed by those interviewed on the site visit at Oregon State University. The recommendation, therefore, is for the program to maintain its current trajectory and to perfect its delivery of the program.

TABLE 1. Summary of Evaluation Criteria and Recommendations to Consider for Improvement
<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Evaluation Criteria</th>
<th>Recommendation to Consider for Improvement</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>The fit of the mission of the program and its relationship to the mission of the academic college(s), and University mission.</strong></td>
<td>(1) Develop a long-term strategy for incorporating other disciplines and fields at Oregon State University into the MPP program to strengthen the ways in which School of Public Policy addresses the interdisciplinary nature of societal problems and serves as a valuable contributor to the University’s commitment to societal outreach and engagement.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Quality of Students</strong></td>
<td>(1) Maintain admissions expectations of incoming students; (2) Seek national data for comparisons of incoming MPP program students to similar university programs to better document student quality.</td>
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<td><strong>Admission Selectivity</strong></td>
<td>(1) Formalize the pre-screening and recruitment efforts by the Graduate Program Director into written procedures and establish a faculty recruiting committee; (2) Strengthen and diversify recruitment efforts to maintain and increase applicant numbers.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Level of Financial Support of Students</strong></td>
<td>(1) Maintain funding to students; (2) Develop better approaches to communicate to students about how funding decisions are made; (3) Attempt to make funding decisions prior to the start of each term.</td>
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<tr>
<td><strong>Curriculum Strength</strong></td>
<td>(1) Maintain the rigor in the MPP program especially in the quantitative, economic, and research methods. (2) Improve the delivery of classes through better sequencing of classes. (3) Remove unnecessary overlap between classes. (4) Consider additional emphasis in qualitative analyses. (5) Create assessment tools to document and measure the reported levels of rigor in the MPP program. (6) Develop a strategic plan for incorporating ethics and diversity into the curriculum and the accompanying means for assessment. (7) Develop strategies for overcoming the limitations of “slash courses” for MPP students. (8) Reassess the purpose and benefits of concentrations offered by the MPP. Establish a procedure for reviewing and updating these offerings.</td>
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</table>
**Quality of personnel and adequacy to achieve mission and goals**
1. Develop strategies for formalizing into procedures and distributing the duties performed by the Graduate Program Director;
2. Develop proactive strategies for retaining faculty, particularly new faculty hires;
3. Maintain an incentive structure to motivate faculty to mentor students and seek external funding;
4. Develop a method for monitoring service by faculty for the MPP program.

**Level and quality of infrastructure**
1. Identify strategies for overcoming the negative effects from the physical infrastructure, given financial and spatial constraints.

**Quality of Organizational Support**
1. Develop a plan for forming and using an external advisory committee to support the MPP program.

**Level and quality of student performance**
1. Develop measures of student learning in the MPP program.

**Level and quality of faculty performance**
1. Maintain scholarly trajectory of faculty with an emphasis on developing a culture of writing and securing external funding.

**Professional visibility of graduates**
1. Maintain monitoring of jobs and policy impacts of recent graduates.

**Satisfaction of students and graduates**
1. Maintain and perfect delivery of the program and efforts to meet the expectations of students.

**Rankings/Ratings**
1. Discuss a need and strategies for developing and maintaining a national reputation as one of the best schools in public policy in the United States.

**DETAILED FINDINGS**

*The fit of the mission of the program and its relationship to the mission of the academic college(s), and University mission.*

From climate change to rural poverty, the problems facing society as well as finding any plausible solutions intersect the traditional disciplines found in academia. As a result, universities that are traditionally structured by disciplines can scarcely contribute to solving many of society’s most pressing problems. Needed are new interdisciplinary structures. The School of Public Policy and its Master in Public Policy (MPP) program is one interdisciplinary structure at Oregon State University that spans sociology, political science, and economics in educating students through rigorous course work, in
guiding students through on-the-job internships, and in mentoring students towards higher levels of professionalism. The result is high student satisfaction and quality job placements among students in positions where they can make a difference in society.

A university must also approach societal problems from a base of its traditional strengths. The MPP program is built around three traditional disciplines at Oregon State University (sociology, political science, and economics) and also around the study of "outdoor" rural and environmental issues rather than just urban issues, as might be found in many other programs in public affairs and public policy. One of the underlying premises of the MPP program is to build a quality program rooted in the strength of Oregon State University to serve the needs of Oregon, the nation, and the world.

As the School of Public Policy and its MPP program grows into the future, needed is a strategic plan for building the capacity for responding to interdisciplinary nature of societal problems and for incorporating more of the disciplinary strengths found at Oregon State University. Such a plan is critical not just to manage growth at the School of Public Policy and its MPP program but also for a growing university in changing times. Today more than ever, a university must prove how its services contribute to society; the School of Public Policy could provide another means for other disciplines and fields at Oregon State University to achieve greater outreach and engagement.

**Recommendation:** (1) Develop a long-term strategy for incorporating other disciplines and fields at Oregon State University into the MPP program to strengthen the ways in which School of Public Policy addresses the interdisciplinary nature of societal problems and serves as a valuable contributor to the University’s commitment to societal outreach and engagement.

**Quality of Students**
As indicated in the Self Study for Review of the Master of Public Policy Graduate Program (pages 8-10), the quality of the MPP students is high. The average GPA of incoming students is 3.64 with GRE average scores greater than 600 for quantitative and verbal (800 is the maximum). The average score for GRE-analytical (starting in 2006) is 4.4 (6.0 is the maximum). While national averages for public policy students are unknown to the external review committee, the quality of the MPP students at Oregon State University is high by speculation and by casual observation.

**Recommendations:** (1) Maintain admissions expectations of incoming students; (2) Seek national data for comparisons of incoming MPP program students to similar university programs to better document student quality.

**Admission Selectivity**
Through various strategies, including visual brochures, personalized letters, posters, and well-designed websites, the Graduate Program Director has been able to recruit talented and diverse students (see page 11 of Self Study for details). Additionally, the
Graduate Program Director pre-screens all interested students, thereby inviting some applicants to apply and turning others away.

The Self Study (pages 10 and 11) also indicates an increasing number of applicants that reached the mid 50s between 2009 and 2011. The number fell to 39 in 2012. Many public policy and public affairs programs in the United States recorded a similar spike in applications between 2009 and 2010 that likely reflected the election of President Obama and enthusiasm for public service as well as the economic recession. One implication is that the efforts and strategies by the Graduate Program Director may not have mattered as much as broader societal trends.

**Recommendations:**
1. Formalize the pre-screening and recruitment efforts by the Graduate Program Director into written procedures;  
2. Strengthen and diversity recruitment efforts to maintain and increase applicant numbers.

**Level of Financial Support of Students**
Nearly all MPP students are funded through teaching assistant positions, research assistant positions, or scholarships (see Self Study page 13). Such funding is extremely rare for professional programs across the United States and also a contributor to the quality of graduating students from the MPP program.

From the site visit, students expressed sincere appreciation for the level of financial support. A few expressed concerns about how decisions were made for assigning various assistantships (who gets what position) and when decisions were made (days into the quarter). A need for communicating financial support might be needed more for transfer students or students enrolled in dual programs.

**Recommendations:**
1. Maintain funding to students.  
2. Develop better approaches to communicate to students about how funding decisions are made.  
3. Attempt to make funding decisions prior to the start of the quarter.

**Curriculum Strength**
In nearly all the interviews, one of the reported strengths of MPP program is the analytical rigor in the curriculum, especially in quantitative statistical analysis, economics, and research methods. By casual observation, the level of rigor in the MPP program rivals that of the best in the country.

Current surveys express satisfaction among students and employees as well as solid employment of student graduates (see Self Study pages 37-45). However, better documentation of learning and of the reported high rigor levels is needed. For example, current surveys ask student to express their agreement about the level of rigor in the program but the conceptual meaning and indicators of what “rigor” means remain unknown. Similar comments can be made about self-reported measures of critical thinking. As Universities come under additional scrutiny to measure learning and
document positive outcomes, effort should be devoted toward better assessment of the reported levels of rigor in the program.

From the site visit, students expressed an appreciation for the rigorous training that they were receiving in the MPP program. Some requested better sequencing of classes, coordination among classes, even more quantitative analysis classes, or offering a qualitative analysis class. Some students appreciated the exposure to different statistical software. Minor concerns included an expressed desire to learn more techniques in policy analysis (e.g., benefit cost analysis) and for better scheduling of classes throughout the academic year (apparently many desired classes were offered in the spring quarter the year of the site visit). The next steps should be to perfect the current offering of classes including better sequencing and removal of unwanted overlap. The incorporation of qualitative analysis should be considered.

Substantively the MPP program provides diverse electives that reflect the strength of Oregon State University, including an emphasis on rural studies and environmental issues. The rural emphasis is particularly rare for any MPP program. Views from students and faculty indicated some concern about the number of concentrations, their overlap, and their need. Such concerns are common for public affairs programs as the concentrations are often in a state of constant adaptation and evolution to societal needs and student and faculty interests. While arguably a low priority, the MPP program and the School of Public Affairs should discuss the purpose of current concentrations and the processes for adaptation and evolution over time.

Among the learning outcomes (Self Study page 6) not represented in the curriculum are ethics and diversity. From the site visit, the study of ethics is marginally in the curriculum in the form of IRB certification and possibly as part of research ethics. Similarly, while the MPP program devotes significant attention to diversity in recruitment, it does not provide equal attention to a commitment to diversity in the curriculum. A need for growth in the program is to incorporate ethics and diversity into the core curriculum without adding classes.

Students and faculty strongly supported the internship experience. Faculty report taking time and effort to help with the internship process with students but also accepted the responsibility as part of the job. Unknown is the magnitude and extent of faculty time in supporting the internship experience, monitoring of this time and effort could be incorporated as a formal item on faculty yearly reviews.

Students expressed concern about the quality “slash courses”; that is, courses that combine both graduate and undergraduate students. Students felt such courses were not of graduate-level quality. Students also expressed appreciation for attempts by faculty to deal with slash courses by including extra time after class for discussion. Some hoped that new slash courses could be created that combine MPP and PhD students.
**Recommendations:** (1) Maintain the rigor in the MPP program especially in the quantitative, economic, and research methods. (2) Improve the delivery of classes through better sequencing of classes. (3) Remove unnecessary overlap between classes. (4) Consider additional emphasis in qualitative analyses. (5) Create assessment tools to document and measure the reported levels of rigor in the MPP program. (6) Develop a strategic plan for incorporating ethics and diversity into the curriculum and the accompanying means for assessment. (7) Develop strategies for overcoming the limitations of “slash courses” for MPP students. (8) Reassess the purpose and benefits of concentrations offered by the MPP.

**Quality of personnel and adequacy to achieve mission and goals**

Uniform was the admiration from both faculty and students for the Graduate Program Director (Dr. Brent Steel) and the Director of the School of Public Policy (Dr. Denise Lach) in leading the MPP program and the School of Public Policy. Nearly all expressed concerns about the work load on the Graduate Program Director. No clear succession plan for the Graduate Program Director is evident. At least one student indicated that she did not approach the Graduate Program Director out of respect for his time, given his workload. Effort should be given toward translating the efforts by the Graduate Program Director into formal procedures.

Similar uniform admiration was directed toward recent faculty hires and adaptation by some of the current faculty to the new School of Public Policy. Every effort should be taken to proactively retain current faculty, especially the new hires. (Note: there is no indication that current faculty were dissatisfied with the program, hence, this is a “proactive” suggestion.)

Some described the MPP program and the School of Public Policy as requiring a lot of volunteer and committee work and a small group of faculty carrying a large service load. While the new political science hire (the Debach Professorship) and the part-time Director of Public Policy Graduate Programs may possibly alleviate the situation, there needs to be better monitoring of hours spent for service in the MPP program by School of Public Policy faculty. Once those numbers are known, action – if any – can be taken.

There are increasing expectations for grant writing by all faculty in the School of Public Policy. However, not all faculty are trained or experienced in grant writing. While faculty reported efforts to train and mentor faculty in grant writing, concerns remain for some members about writing grants. Some faculty are worried about the role of external grants in securing tenure and expressed uncertainty about whether the measurement of success involves merely applying for a grant or whether it requires the award of a grant.

Retirement of previous faculty has not always been replaced with tenure track faculty -- or even with adjunct positions or instructor positions. Faculty spoke of potential issues
among instructors and tenure track faculty. This is not an issue in the present but may become an issue in the future. The distribution of faculty also affects the distribution of an increasing work load as adjunct and instructor positions do not serve on committees or have the same service responsibilities as tenured track faculty.

Producing rigorously trained MPP students requires advising and mentoring of students. While some students mentioned difficulties in finding a mentor, most were pleased with the quality of mentoring from faculty to student. Part of this success comes from the incentive structure that provides a course offload for mentoring a number of students.

**Recommendations:**

1. Develop strategies for formalizing into procedures and distributing the duties performed by the Graduate Program Director;  
2. Develop proactive strategies for retaining faculty, particularly new faculty hires;  
3. Maintain the incentive structure to motivate faculty to mentor students and seek external funding;  
4. Develop a method for monitoring service by faculty for the MPP program.

**Level and quality of infrastructure**

The MPP faculty are physically dispersed across the campus. Faculty and students identified the facilities as a negative for the program. Faculty reported a need for collaboration that often comes from face-to-face daily interactions. Students reported that physical dispersion reduced the availability of some faculty. Faculty also recognized the limitations of space and funding for better facilities from the University.

**Recommendation:**

1. Identify strategies for overcoming the negative effects from the physical infrastructure given financial and spatial constraints.

**Quality of Organizational Support**

The MPP program is strongly supported by the leadership at Oregon State University and by the Graduate Program Director and Director of the School of Public Policy. The MPP program also partners with many external actors (e.g., Pacific Northwest Laboratory) and this should continue.

Needed is a stronger presence of an external advisory committee to help with philanthropy, serve students through better curriculum, internships, and job placements, act as an advocate for the program, and help link the MPP program and the School of Public Policy to the Oregon community and beyond. The external advisory committee should also consider members from disciplines across the Oregon State University campus.

The program is in constant adaptation, in part to meet student needs and in response to recent growth. This has led to some issues with consistent delivery and seamless delivery of the curriculum.
**Recommendation:** (1) Develop a plan for forming and using an external advisory committee to support the MPP program.

**Level and quality of student performance**
Student performance is high (see Self Study pages 30-34). Of the 77 students who have entered the program since its inception, 65 have graduated and only 11 did not complete the degree. Additionally, many MPP students have received university and professional awards. Similar to documenting the rigor in the MPP program, the current measures of student level and quality of performance are limited by what can be easily measured (e.g., graduation rates and student awards). What is needed is original measures that document performance of the students through learning and development of professional skills as taught in the program.

**Recommendation:** (1) Develop measures of student learning in the MPP program.

**Level and quality of faculty performance**
The performance of the faculty in the School of Public Policy is impressive and meets and sometimes exceeds that of peer programs (see Self Study pages 34-36). Some faculty expressed concern about their abilities to write and secure external funding.

**Recommendation:** (1) Maintain scholarly trajectory of faculty with an emphasis on developing a culture of writing and securing external funding.

**Professional visibility of graduates**
The Self Study (pages 37-39) provides a list of job placements for recent graduates. Placements reflect the rigor of the program with jobs as economic analysts, data analysts, policy advisors and analysts, and research analysts with government and non-government organizations. More than 90 percent of students report their initial graduate status/position directly or was somewhat related to their MPP degree.

**Recommendation:** (1) Maintain monitoring of jobs and policy impacts of recent graduates.

**Satisfaction of students and graduates**
The satisfaction of students and graduates is extremely high (see Self Study pages 37-45). Such satisfaction was unanimously repeated by current students on the site visit. Any complaints by current students were on secondary and minor issues and discussed previously in this external report (e.g., course sequencing, incorporation of ethics into the curriculum).

**Recommendation:** (1) Maintain and perfect delivery of the program and efforts to meet the expectations of students.

**Rankings/Ratings**
Currently the MPP program is unranked. Accreditation through the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) will help with national recognition. An issue that should be discussed is the School’s reputation among public affairs programs in the United States, which often builds from work that speaks directly to the fields of public administration, public management, and public policy. It is important to note that a national reputation in public affairs is not a required necessity for a rigorous education in the MPP program. A national reputation will likely have an effect, however, in the ranking of the MPP program by peer institutions, which could affect the recruitment of quality students and quality faculty into the future. Such a discussion should be conducted with caution and respect as current faculty members clearly have their strengths and reputations in their respected fields in economics, political science, and sociology.

**Recommendation:** (1) Discuss a need and strategies for developing and maintaining a national reputation as one of the best schools in public policy in the United States.

**CONCLUSION**
The recommendation is to maintain and perfect the MPP program in the School of Public Policy. The program has grown in an upward trajectory of student applicants and numbers and has provided 65 students with a rigorous education and professional experience contributing to their job placement and to their influence in the development of public policy. As the recommendations in this report suggest, the next steps should focus on keeping to the current trajectory, improving the delivery of classes, responding to the growth of the program, and maturing the program as faculty mature that support it.

Additionally, the external review committee supports the trend and forecasts as well as the self recommendations found in the Self Study (pages 47-48). Borrowing from the Self Study as well as the observations of this committee, the challenges in relation to the MPP program will likely include the following:

(1) The implementation of the PhD program and the taxing of already stretched faculty time and effort.
(2) A dual effort to decentralize and support the leadership offered by the Graduate Program Director and the Director of the School of Public Policy;
(3) The implementation of the Oregon Policy Analysis Laboratory (OPAL) and its integration with faculty and students in the School of Public Policy and throughout Oregon State University.
(4) Completing accreditation of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and developing strategies for establishing and maintaining a national reputation as one of the top public policy programs in the country.
(5) Issues of expansion of the program either through electives or concentrations to span more broadly the strengths of Oregon State University to serve its mission of outreach and engagement of the people of Oregon, the nation, and the world.