Integrative Learning for an Interdisciplinary Field  
— A Graduate Learning Community

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**Abstract**

Learning communities for undergraduates have become a common practice. However, far fewer learning community programs for graduate students are available. Certain fields of study that are interdisciplinary by design and require interpersonal skills, such as public administration, may lend themselves especially well to learning communities as an instructional model and may offer students additional benefits they would not gain otherwise. This article examines a successful MPA program that utilizes a learning community model for its core instruction. The strength of the program rests on four dimensions: the collaboration of the faculty, particularly the teaching teams in the core programs; the program philosophy and curriculum; the program’s cohort model; and a learning community approach to the core program, with approximately half of students’ class time spent in seminars and other collaborative activities. The interplay of these four dimensions builds the strength of each, creating a uniquely effective environment for teaching the analytical and leadership skills required for public sector professionals.

**Introduction: Learning Communities for Graduate Students**

Learning communities come in many forms, from linked courses to living-learning communities to full-time coordinated studies. Hundreds of colleges and universities across the United States offer some form of learning community. The vast majority of these programs serve undergraduates, with many taking the form of first-year learning communities.[[1]](#footnote-1) Far fewer learning community programs are available for graduate students.

The challenge for graduate learning communities is to successfully combine disciplinary depth with interdisciplinary and integrative learning, so students’ learning and proficiency within the field is enhanced rather than compromised. Certain fields of study that are interdisciplinary by design and require interpersonal skills, such as public administration, may lend themselves especially well to learning communities. And students pursuing degrees in these fields may reap even greater benefits from a program that emphasizes integrative learning and collaboration.

[Institution]’s Masters in Public Administration (MPA) program is one example of a successful graduate-level learning community that brings together disciplinary depth with collaborative, integrative learning. This article explores how faculty from different disciplines work together to design and teach the program, and the role that a strong cohort of adult learners plays in shaping program outcomes.

**Why Public Administration?**

As Richard C. Box (2009) describes, public administration is a relatively new discipline that incorporates many fields of study, including political science, economics, sociology, statistics, philosophy, planning, accounting, management, and others. There are many areas of knowledge and skills in which students of public administration must develop proficiency. However, to understand and address the problems one encounters in public service, to grapple with their complexity and work with others to develop appropriate solutions, a case can be made that administrators must draw on those 21st century skills articulated by the National Leadership Council for Liberal Education and America’s Promise (LEAP; AAC&U, 2007): To be effective actors in public life, practitioners must have inquiry and analysis skills; they must have cultural competencies to work with and understand the concerns of individuals and populations that are very different than themselves; they must be committed to civic knowledge and engagement; they must be able to communicate well and work collaboratively with other agencies and departments, as well as the public; and they must be open to continued learning in order to develop new solutions to challenging problems. Moreover, skilled public administrators must be able to synthesize and integrate the many disciplines and technical skills in their toolbox with an understanding of the environment in which they are working and the solutions others have used to solve similar problems. Learning communities done well are one high-impact strategy identified by LEAP for teaching these skills.

Learning communities have one additional benefit that is of particular value to students of public administration. A well-designed, well-taught learning community is a laboratory for democratic participation. Every student in the class is an active participant in the community, faculty and students work together as peers in the learning process, class members share responsibility for the collective construction of knowledge and understanding, and respectful inquiry and debate are encouraged as an essential part of the learning process.

**About the Program**

[Institution]’s MPA program began in 1980. The college is located in the state capitol and, from its inception, the college anticipated that many graduates would seek positions in state government. Also, from the beginning, the program was designed with working students in mind, many of whom are already employed in state agencies. Initially, all courses were taught during evening hours. Currently, intensive courses spanning one or more weekends are also offered. In this respect the program is similar to the many Executive MPA programs for mid-career professionals that have proliferated in the past two decades (Holmes, 2007). The program is designed for completion in two years, but students may take up to 6 years to earn a degree. Developing students’ skills as agents for change is also emphasized; in fact, the program’s motto is, “You must be the change you wish to see in the world” (M. Gandhi). Unlike the typical Executive MPA program—which is limited to mid-career professionals with significant work experience (Holmes, 2007)—this program is open to all students, whether they’ve worked in the public sector for years or are beginning the program immediately after completing their undergraduate degree.[[2]](#footnote-2)

The strength of the program rests on four dimensions: the collaboration of the faculty, particularly the teaching teams in the core programs; the program philosophy and curriculum; the program’s cohort model; and the design of the core course as a learning community, with approximately half of students’ class time spent in seminars and other collaborative activities. The interplay of these four dimensions builds the strength of each, creating a uniquely effective environment for teaching the analytical and leadership skills public sector professionals need. Another factor that sets the program apart is that students’ work is assessed through narrative evaluations rather than letter grades.

**The Curriculum**

The MPA program is designed around first- and second-year core courses that meet one night a week each quarter for two years. [Like undergraduate studies at this institution], the core program is designed to be collaborative and interdisciplinary, to provide disciplinary grounding and development of the skill sets required in the field of public administration, but also to dig deeper, to explore the intersections between these disciplines. Students augment their work in this core program with a broad menu of electives, ranging from specific policy areas to human resource management to non-profit administration, designing their own degree through these selections. Students seeking a degree with a policy emphasis are also required to take two additional courses, *Foundations of Public Policy* and *Advanced Research Methods*. A separate track in tribal governance, with its own cohort and required courses, is also offered.[[3]](#footnote-3) Students from all cohorts take electives together.

The first year core course examines “the foundations of public administration; the economic and political context of the public sector; concepts of democratic governance; policy, finance and budgeting; and additional practical knowledge and skills needed to run an organization in the public, nonprofit or tribal sectors” ([Institution] website; link will be added once peer review is complete). During fall and winter quarters of the second year core, students focus on analytic concepts and techniques, including research methods and the application of analytical techniques in administration (e.g., policy analysis, performance measurement, fiscal analysis, program evaluation). The final quarter of the core program is organized around design, implementation, and completion of a capstone project that applies and demonstrates the skills the students have learned in the two-year program. These projects are usually done by groups of students and often involve working directly with a government agency or non-profit organization. Although students have the option to write a thesis, a vast majority of students choose the capstone option. First and second year core is taught by a team of three faculty members; enrollment is capped at 55 students.

Small group seminars (15-20 students and a faculty member) are an integral part of each week’s class and are initiated on the first day of the orientation weekend. Workshops with group activities are a part of most week’s classes. Even during lectures, student participation is encouraged, resulting in a seminar-like quality to even large-group activities.

Disciplinary depth is, of course, critical in a graduate program. As DS, a faculty member in the program, puts it, “you’re coming out as a master of something.” Therefore, the curricular design is more restricted than for a typical first-year undergraduate-level experience learning community, which is generally designed to give 18- to 20-year olds an expansive set of skills and an opportunity to explore new intellectual, social, and personal frontiers.

LL, program director says the program “has a core focus thematically and within a discipline,” however the interdisciplinary philosophy of the program provides opportunities for richer and deeper learning opportunities than a more compartmentalized program. This commitment to disciplinary depth as well as the exploration of the intersections of different fields and theories is what sets the program apart.

MB, an adjunct faculty member who also serves as Director of the Forecasting Division for [State name] State’s Office of Financial Management emphasizes the need for disciplinary grounding in this type of program:

If you’re going to do alternative economics, the only way is through the traditional economics. You can’t get through an alternative program without knowing the basic stuff. I think it makes for better scholars. ‘Cause you have to learn the neoclassical [theory] to get to the next thing… you’ve got to get through this stuff; you’ve got to at least read it, consume it…But we never stop there.

Since public administration is a field that draws from many disciplines, MPA programs generally offer courses in many different disciplines and skills; thus, the traditional MPA program might best be described as *multi-disciplinary*. DS describes her experience as a graduate student in a program at a more traditional university as including faculty who represented many different disciplines but who were, for the most part, silo’d in their own departments. The students—as a cohort—rotated through these classes, but no class time was focused on the linkages between them.

At [Institution] the core program is taught in a four-hour block each week for six quarters, and is organized to promote—and provoke—integrative thinking. During a four-hour class period, students might listen to a lecture on decision making and conflict within the public arena, with opportunities for dialogue between students as well as comments and perspectives from the two faculty members who are not lecturing. Then students might break into small groups for a case analysis workshop on the same topic, followed by a large group debriefing/sharing session. Finally, the class of 45-60 students will break into three seminar groups, with a faculty member assigned to each group. The seminar is a time for group analysis and reflection on the week’s assigned readings. When functioning at its best, the entire four-hour period—with its amalgam of activities—can operate as an extended period of dialogue, critical analysis, and knowledge construction.

**The Teaching Team**

As in any effective learning community, the faculty teaching teams are at the core of the program’s success. A small team of program faculty rotate into the 1st and 2nd year core programs. All have disciplinary expertise in fields that are central to public administration, but they also tend to be comfortable stepping outside of their own field. On a given night, one faculty member generally lectures, while another person may give a second lecture on a different topic or facilitate a workshop in which students break into small groups. One teaching team describes the person lecturing as the person who is “on” that week, the person who is responsible for the lion’s share of preparation for the evening. But everyone on the team is paying attention and is involved in the material. And faculty generally welcome comments—and contrary perspectives—from their colleagues.

DS describes it this way:

First off, they’re paying attention to what I’m saying. Hey, that’s a joy, right? They could be playing with their phones. So the fact that M and C are seeing things and contributing to the conversation and giving different perspectives enriches the whole experience for myself and for the students, and shows that everybody’s on, to some degree. Everybody’s paying attention. They’re engaged.

She describes the benefits of this approach this way: “Public administration is complicated. We as a teaching team illuminate different aspects that strike us as important, and complement each other in the process…[so] the students can go back to their agencies differently post-program than when they came in.”

The program has been in place for more than 20 years, but it continually evolves. While the program has a director who also teaches in the program, decisions about curriculum as well as most decisions about how the program will be run are made collaboratively—decisions about the first and second-year core programs are made by those teaching teams; decisions about the program as a whole, including what electives will be offered each year, are made by all of the faculty who are assigned to the program.

A large part of the success of the program is this commitment of the faculty to continue to develop the model, to function as a learning community themselves. In part, this has to do with the core faculty’s comfortableness with interdisciplinary and integrative learning; many come from professions, like public administration, that are inherently interdisciplinary. But it also stems from a shared commitment to an integrative approach.

As CSK, incoming director for the program, explains,

If you’re too attached to content…[and] your view of what the content should be—you can’t be a good colleague…one of the most important things to be a good, collaborative colleague is that you really have to step back from your own ‘attachments,’ for lack of a better word, about the content that needs to be delivered and trust that…the intersection of the team, the learning environment that you’ve built, the teaching, and the learning experience of the students are going to get us where we need to go. You have to trust that. It doesn’t need X, Y, and Z; we could get there through A.

The faculty team for the core program meets once a week. More often than not, faculty meetings include a seminar on the week’s readings. But the way faculty meetings work can vary widely between teaching teams. While the 2011-12 first-year team scheduled 30 to 40 minutes for a faculty seminar on the week’s readings, the second-year team did not conduct formal seminars at all—in part, because of the more practical natural of many of the readings on research methods. One member describes it this way, “We spend as much time as we want and need talking about it [the readings], and then we let it go. But we are talking about it; it’s a constant conversation.”

CSK expounds on this relationship between colleagues:

Nietzsche said that marriage is the great conversation…Lots of times people use the marriage metaphor to talk about teaching teams…You can’t take that metaphor too far because it has limitations, but good teams are good conversations.

The willingness of faculty within the program to explore the material together and compromise is, in part, a function of the stability of the core teaching team.

According to LG, who has taught in the MPA program for ten years,

At the undergraduate level, you teach with someone—and you might teach with them again four or five years down the road…It’s a little different when you’ve got a small group and you know you’re going to be teaching together regularly. There’s a realization that we ought to be treating each other with more respect because we’re going to be back around the same table again.

Effective collaboration by the faculty is, in part, a product of trust and respect established over time. But it also reflects each faculty member’s confidence in his or her own disciplinary grounding and skills as a teacher. As CK describes it, “We don’t look to our colleagues to be validated. We don’t need to be in competition with our colleagues…Those are the things that I think get in the way of good teams, [when] people end up being in competition with each other for space and time and attention.”

This doesn’t mean that everyone agrees with each other, or acquiesces. DS reflects on the process within one of her teaching teams:

It wasn’t like we agreed on everything. There was a lot of give and take…the space was created to critique [the existing curriculum] or say “Maybe we shouldn’t use this book next year.” [Then someone else would ask], “Why do you think that?”…And LL might say, “Well the reasons you’re giving for why we shouldn’t use it may be exactly why we should use it.…because the text is so polarizing that the seminar feeds itself.”

The inclusion of new adjunct faculty, even in the core courses, who often have strong expertise in the field and limited teaching experience—and no past teaching experience in learning communities—is a testament to the faculty’s commitment to collaboration in service to students’ learning, and their tendency to see opportunity within dialogue around difference. LL speaks appreciatively about the knowledge of their field and the disciplinary expertise that one of these adjuncts brought to the program—as well as the value of having peers with a very different perspective on the teaching team:

…the interdisciplinary mix was amazing, because the tension [as a result of the differences in faculty members’ approach and perspective] actually strengthened the program. Because of lot of our students were expressing exactly what the faculty member was expressing, saying, “I just don’t see what the theoretical thread over the past 50 years has to do with what I’m seeing in the office.” And because we had struggled with that in our faculty meetings, we were able to talk about that in the classroom, and in seminars…It made a different set of dynamics, not necessarily a disadvantage…In many ways it made us delve more deeply into questions such as, what was the core of the theoretical threads, and why did the field develop in the way it did? And why do current events force us to reconsider these things?

Ultimately, the teaching team remains focused at both the course and the program level on—as CSK puts it—“the totality of the experience…we’re always asking, ‘What are our core competencies? Is it mission-driven?’ [At] other places, in my experience, you’re focused on your courses…so it’s more silo’d. We’re less silo’d here, and we really do have a big picture.”

**The Cohort and the Seminar**

The two other factors that set this program apart are related—the emphasis on the student cohort and the central role that the learning community and, in particular, the seminar plays in the instruction model. Students are accepted and enrolled as a cohort. And many of these people bring a significant amount of professional experience in with them, which enriches the program and provides additional opportunities for students to learn from their peers. A foundational value of the program is that all members of the learning community have valuable experience and insights to offer. This is most apparent in seminars, but it permeates the core program and is apparent even in weekend electives, which combine students from different cohorts and often are taught by adjunct faculty. Most students are active participants, providing insights and commentary about the topic at hand as well as questions.

With a student-faculty ratio of approximately 18:1, the core course quickly develops a strong identity as a learning community. This begins in a very intentional way with the design of the two-day orientation program, held on the weekend preceding fall quarter. Every year the faculty, program director, and assistant program director re-think the design of this defining element.

LL describes the process:

The goals are, quite simply, how do you make folks feel that they’re part of the learning community? You admit that it’s going to be uncomfortable at the beginning. That’s a given. There’s always going to be a mix of students …But what’s the dynamic you start with?

Our approach is, where are the strengths—and not just communicating that to us, but how do you communicate that to others? Because that‘s the core of a learning community: Who are you? What do you bring to this? What’s your experience? How do I get comfortable with you? How do I get comfortable enough to listen and, more importantly, to share?

In DS’s words, “we’re trying to sow the seeds of the learning community.”.

The faculty’s respect for the students—as individuals and collectively as a cohort—is apparent from the outset, and the students tend to rise to the occasion.

The design of the program and classroom activities during the four hours the core class meets each week are designed to foster the learning community, to bring out each student’s voice and experience.

LL continues:

You understand that the seminar really is an important dimension; it’s not an add-on. Workshops after lectures are important for students to interact; this is where the really important mixing sometimes happens. Giving students the opportunity—and a number of different approaches and mechanisms—to participate in some way, whether you’re shy, whether you’re verbose…how do you create the right techniques and approaches to have that happen? …Having different kinds of seminars—small groups, large groups—workshops, case study analysis, potlucks, peer reviews…these are actual techniques and approaches that are antidotes to the sage on the stage…send me a paper, you get a grade. And they’re intense and they’re time-consuming and sometimes they’re challenging, but they’re absolutely vital.

The intentionality of creating the cohort begins even earlier, as part of the admissions process. While the GRE is not required for admissions, the application requires two essays—a personal statement of purpose and a policy paper, as well as completion of an upper-division undergraduate statistics course. The admissions committee includes two faculty as well as the assistant director; they review each application in its entirety. This committee, along with the director makes the first round of selections, based on academic capability. The second round is made with the creation of a cohort in mind: Among this pool of qualified candidates, how do we create a diversity—of interests, of experience, of perspectives?

All of the faculty members emphasize the differences from cohort to cohort. As CSK says, “Every cohort is different…You can’t know what it’s going to be like…irrespective of what we do, cohorts have their own rhythm, their own pace; they have their own relational styles. You do your best and bring all of these things to bear—good intentions and good work…and then the cohort itself has its own energy that has nothing to do with us…”

But the importance of the cohort model to student learning is attested to by both students and faculty. One indicator of this significance is students’ nearly universal appreciation of seminars as one of the most important elements in the program. In a focus group of 2nd year students, references to the value of the cohort were everywhere. These students, most of whom were immersed in completing their capstone projects before graduation, talked about how much they missed seminaring with their peers. In a program in which the largest assignments are often quarter-long group projects, several mentioned their respect and appreciation for the peers they worked with.

One student said, “My [previous] experience with group projects was that I was always the one that ended up doing everything, because other people would always fall through.”

Another responded, “I think we were all like that before we came here. I’ve talked to my teammates, too. I’ve never worked on a project where I didn’t do all the work; everyone says that.

In reviewing and highlighting their experiences in the program, these students also acknowledged how much they’d learned from other students, as well as the faculty—the managerial and budgeting experience of a fellow student who served as the budget authority in her agency, the statistical expertise of another student. They spoke with admiration about how much everyone in the cohort had grown. When one said, “I’ve seen a lot of changes in everyone in the class—a lot more confidence, and not just because we know each other,” others agreed.

**Discussion and Conclusions**

While over half of Executive MPA programs identified in a 2006 survey of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) member schools[[4]](#footnote-4) use a cohort model (Holmes, 2007), it is not clear whether the cohort is as integrated into the program design as it is in this program. A review of Executive MPA program websites shows that many of the programs that use a cohort model begin with an orientation week or weekend for the cohort. But, after that, the cohort goes through a sequenced series of weekend courses, taught by individual faculty members, that emphasize practical skill sets. The intensive exploration of theory and practice in this part-time program, the constancy of the faculty team throughout the year, and the fact that on a weekly basis this group of students is meeting together for four hours and spending 50% or more of their time each week actively engaging with each other tends to create a strong bond within the class, a learning community in the best sense of the term.[[5]](#footnote-5)

The strength of [Institution’s] program, its transformative nature for students and for teachers, is not located solely in the elements themselves; but in the intentional connection and interplay of these elements in the two years of required courses. The philosophy of the program lays a foundation for the design and re-invention of the curriculum. The commitment of the faculty to the program model and to this teaching model, along with the trust and collegiality they have built over time, ensure that the philosophy is carried through in the curriculum, even when changes are made. The care and feeding of each new cohort creates a strong learning community among the students. And the confidence of the faculty—in themselves and their colleagues—as well as their faith in this teaching model allow them to cede a significant amount of agency to the cohort.

Teitel (1997), in a study of two graduate programs, one a doctoral program and one a master’s program, finds that the effect of the cohort model included “a change in the depth of discussion in cohort classes, especially about sensitive issues like race; changes in interpersonal relationships among students, changes in power relationships between students and faculty in classes; and changes in program-planning and decision-making” (68-69). Students in those programs talked about “getting to know each other well enough to share and challenge each other as leaders at a deeper level than usually occurs” and how “engagement in class discussion is almost immediate” (70). Certainly, this has been the experience for students and faculty in [Institution]’s program.

The cohort model has been used in graduate programs in education leadership for the same reason it is used in Executive MPA programs—because leadership in these fields requires the ability to work effectively with others. But there’s another reason this type of educational model is particularly valuable for those who enter public service.

Patrick Hill, a past provost at [institution] made the following case for learning communities.

…learning communities are responding [to] the growing complexity and interdependence of the problems we face with our disciplines—the problems we are trying to solve…The unmanageability and incomprehensibility of contemporary events underline the need for an additional set of skills in the educated person. As John Kemeny, former president of Dartmouth said, “We desperately need individuals who can pull together knowledge from a wide variety of fields and integrate it in one mind. We are in an age where we are facing problems that no one discipline can solve. What we’d like our best students to be able to do is to walk in on a problem, a problem they know nothing at all about, and by working hard, in six months’ time become fairly expert at it.” He said “fairly expert,” not “expert.” My feeling is that unless we can do that, then democracy will fail. Unless we can train people to become fairly expert, at least expert enough to participate in decisions, then we are going to be relying on experts to make decisions for everybody.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Beyond just working effectively with other people, those in public service are in the business of solving problems in the public interest. And being part of a participatory community, where all members are expected to contribute, digging deep to examine problems from a variety of perspectives, acknowledging a diversity of views and navigating differences is the ideal training ground for the work these people will do in their professional lives.

Maher (2004), also studying a graduate program, speaks about the sense of cohort agency that develops within a strong cohort:

I discovered that soon after the group was formed, students began to describe their relationship with instructors in terms of “we-they,” not “I-she” or “I-he,” even when I specifically asked, “How would *you* describe *your* relationship with faculty members? For example, students replied, “We had suggestions and they were open to them”; “She was always supportive about ironing out anything we were upset over”; and “Somewhere along the line, we all got confused with what she said.”

Teaching a strong cohort of adult learners with a sense of collective agency is not for the faint of heart. The faculty in such a program must see the value and the richness of having this level of student engagement—of student voices agreeing, questioning, dissenting—even when it makes course management more challenging: It’s not just one’s colleagues views one has to navigate; it’s also the collective voice of the cohort.

At the undergraduate level, we often talk about learning communities creating life-long learners. In a professional program, this means that one is creating active members in the field, who will grow the professional field itself.

LL describes it this way:

I think it’s something we and the students share, and that is how can you re-contextualize what you think you know. And that is an amazing dimension of a good learning community. You know, you come in with amazing amounts of experience and knowledge, both theoretical and practical, and yet you’re open to an amazingly rich diversity of students and co-teachers. But you’ve got to be open to that, so that you’re not just taking theory and going, well, there it is—whether it’s modern theory or old theory, which is not exactly dead, but is in some state of transition, some state of development. There’s a history to it, there’s a growth to it, there’s a development to it, that you are a part of. You are part of the adventure of the development of the field...The things we’re talking about are at the core of what learning communities are.

Teaching this way requires more work and more risk. You can do all you can to ensure the academic success of each student, you can do all you can to create a rich and inclusive learning experience, but there are factors that go beyond any individual’s ability to control. Since the cohort, the learning community itself, plays such a large role in what happens in the classroom, instructors can’t assume that what worked last time will work the same way this time.

CSK describes the following approach:

One of the most important things that one needs to bring to one’s orientation toward this type of teaching and learning environment is that everything changes…you can never have the same experience, twice, period. It’s just not gonna happen, so don’t bring that expectation to the table…I call it passionate detachment. You’re passionate about what you do, but you’re detached from a particular set of outcomes.

For faculty in the MPA program at [Institution]—and for their students—the rewards have definitely been worth the risk.

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1. Of the 326 listings for institutions with learning community programs in Washington Center’s National LC Directory, 108 (33%) indicate that they offer first-year experience learning communities. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. Students who do not have previous work experience in the public or non-profit sector are required to take an internship before graduating. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. This is the only MPA program in the country with a tribal concentration; consequently, it draws students from throughout the nation. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. [Institution] is not a member of NASPAA, but the schools included within this association have comparable programs. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. These relationships often provide the foundation for students’ professional networks long after they graduate. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Quoted in Barefoot, B. (2013). Foreword. In M. Soven, D. Lehr, S. Naynaha, and W. Olson (Eds.), *Linked Courses for General Education and Integrative Learning: A Guide for Faculty and Administrators.* [↑](#footnote-ref-6)