

Preparing for Political Science Careers: Getting a MPA/MPP Degree

Why would I want this degree?

Masters of Public Administration (MPA) and Masters of Public Policy programs have different names, but each helps students to synthesize their college education, volunteer work, and professional experiences into a career where it is possible to “make a difference” in a wide variety of leadership positions in government agencies (local, state or federal); nonprofits; and the international and private sectors (NASPAA).

How can I best prepare for it?

As an undergraduate, coursework in political science, public administration, economics and other disciplines (e.g., management, sociology, and psychology) is helpful. Most MPA and MPP programs do not require specific undergraduate majors as a prerequisite; however, preparation in the above mentioned fields can be valuable. This should not exclude students with other undergraduate majors (e.g., arts, sciences, health). Some graduate programs prefer students who have work experience prior to enrolling for MPA or MPP studies, but most do not require it. Undergraduate internships can provide some useful work-related exposure. Admission requirements typically include above average grades, acceptable Graduate Record Exam scores, letters of recommendation and a career goals statement or resume. International students need to provide evidence of English proficiency.

What are important things to keep in mind when selecting programs and schools ?

MPA and MPP programs have some common characteristics and some distinctive differences. The MPA degree is the professional degree for a public service career in management. MPA students are taught skills and techniques of leadership and management enabling them to translate public policies into effective programs and projects. The MPP degree stresses the research, analysis and evaluation of various public issues (e.g., social, global, economic, health) to develop effective policy solutions. In general, MPA programs give greater attention to management and implementation approaches, while MPP programs stress policy analysis and evaluation. Recently curricula have converged with a growing recognition that the implementation process can benefit from policy analysis and vice versa (NASPAA).

Coursework in both programs typically includes required core courses, concentration or specialization courses, and an internship for pre-service students. MPA and MPP programs usually take two years to complete, but it is often possible to finish in less than two years by taking more courses in early semesters. MPA and MPP programs may each offer core courses in economics and policy analysis, finance and budgeting, policy process, public management

organization and human resource management, and research methods. However, the MPP programs are more likely to emphasize economics, policy analysis, policy process, with the MPA programs giving greater attention to public management, finance and budgeting, and organization and human resource management. MPA and MPP programs each stress research methods.

A list of a dozen representative positions held by alumni of MPA and MPP programs follows:

- Analyst, Natural Resources and Environment, U.S. General Accountability Office
- Assistant Vice President, Kane, McKenna and Associates
- Budget Analyst, U.S. Department of Housing and Urban Development
- Associate Administrator for Innovation, Research and Education, U.S. Department of Transportation
- City Manager, California
- Director of City Parks and Recreation, Arkansas
- Director of Community Education, Non-Profit Organization, Michigan
- Executive Director, Alaska SeaLife Center
- Executive Director, County Mental Health Association, Florida
- Health Care Policy Analyst, Health Industry Group, Vinson & Elkins, LLP
- Ph.D Student in Public Administration
- Social Policy Analyst, National Institute of Justice, U.S. Department of Justice (NASPAA)

What sources of information are available to help me decide?

The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management (APPAM) each offer valuable information to prospective students. Visit www.naspaa.org/students/students.asp to identify MPA and MPP graduate programs that meet your criteria. There you can find a graduate school database, profiles of alumni, FAQs, resources, and information regarding online courses. Locally at the University of Miami interested students can contact Dr. Jonathan West in the Political Science Department for further information (jwest@miami.edu). Details about the University of Miami MPA program can be found at www.as.miami.edu/mpa . While UM's degree is the MPA, the course work includes key features found in MPP programs as well (e.g., exposure to policy analysis, policy process and research methods).

Sources: NASPAA, *Graduate Degrees that Make a Difference*. Washington, D.C.: NASPAA.

Hur, Y. and M. Hackbart. 2009. MPA vs. MPP: A Distinction Without a Difference, *Journal of Public Affairs Education* 15 (4): 397-424.

MPA/MPP Degrees. http://www.globalmpa.net/section/degrees_details/mpa_mpp_degrees