

Using Capstone Case Studies to Assess Required Competencies
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Abstract

The 2009 NASPAA standards have the potential to fundamentally change the assessment systems utilized by graduate public affairs programs. These standards require programs to focus on creating systematic processes for assessing the five universal required competencies as well as applicable mission specific required or elective competencies. Flexibility is also a hallmark of the standards as programs may determine the specific assessment mechanisms that are most appropriate for achieving program mission and goals. Many programs utilize a variety of direct and indirect assessment measures to achieve compliance with Standard 5. Despite this flexibility, NASPAA still expects programs to use direct measures of student learning outcome assessment. Direct assessment measures can take the form of examinations, embedded questions, essays, portfolios, and case studies among others. This paper examines the use of capstone case studies and their utility in effectively measuring the universal competency “to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems and make decisions.” It reports the results of an analysis of research methods case studies over a one year period in a large NASPAA accredited MPA program. The analysis illustrates a practical approach to identifying areas of deficiency in student acquisition of the chosen universal required competency.