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# Rubrics as a Foundation for Assessing Student Competencies: One Public Administration Program's Creative Exercise

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## **ABSTRACT**

Since implementation of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) standards for accreditation in 2009, public administration programs have been developing programmatic competencies that reflect NASPAA's universal standards. Likewise, myriad efforts have analyzed data related to student and program progress toward achievement of these competencies. This article adds to that conversation by recounting the approach to assessing competencies used in the Department of Public Administration at Portland State University. There, newly developed rubrics reflect each of the department's 10 competencies to examine whether students are acquiring the desired knowledge and skills. This article discusses the development and design of the rubrics as well as elements of gaining faculty and student input in the process.

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## **KEYWORDS**

Competencies, rubrics, assessment, accreditation

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The 2009 accreditation standards of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) prompted public administration programs worldwide to develop programmatic competencies and realign pedagogical strategies to accord with NASPAA requirements. Instituting such a competency-based education model in a public administration program is not without its challenges (Getha-Taylor, Hummert, Nalbandian, & Silvia, 2013; Mayhew, Swartz, & Taylor, 2014). These include ensuring effective engagement with stakeholders (Diaz, 2014), building and reaching consensus among multiple stakeholders

(Diaz, 2014; Rivenbark & Jacobson, 2014), and aligning programmatic competencies with both program mission and accreditation standards (Dunning, 2014). Paramount among these challenges, however, is the structuring of evaluation processes and instruments in accordance with NASPAA's new learning objectives. Competency-based models of education require a more holistic approach toward assessment of learning outcomes. By definition, such an approach pays primary attention to evaluating student achievement of a *set* of universal competencies rather than on measuring individual course learning objectives (Dunning, 2014;

Powell, Saint-Germain, & Sundstrom, 2014). In light of already existing difficulties in developing simple yet comprehensive instruments to assess the often imprecise objectives set forth by public administration programs (Williams, 2002), evaluation of competency attainment can seem a daunting task.

U.S. public administration programs have risen to the task, however, producing a veritable bricolage of evaluation approaches, processes, and tools. Programs have utilized a combination of student assessment surveys (Getha-Taylor et al., 2013), capstone projects (Diaz, 2014; Dunning, 2014; Powell et al., 2014), focus groups (Diaz, 2014), and portfolios (Mayhew et al., 2014) to evaluate student and program progress toward achievement of NASPAA's universal competencies. This variety of assessment approaches is nothing new. Indeed, scholars document that focus groups (Sink, 1991), capstone projects (Durant, 1997; Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009), portfolios (Powell, 2009; Williams, 2002), exam grades (Dalehite, 2008), surveys of alumni (Newcomer, Allen, & Baradei, 2010), and more (see Aristigueta, M., Gomes, K., & Wood, Byrd, & Associates Inc., 2006) have long been utilized to assess student achievement. While some argue that public administration education should agree on evaluation methods beyond individual schools (Diaz, 2014), it is clear that there is currently no one-size-fits-all assessment model.

With this in mind, this article aims to contribute to the field's ongoing conversation regarding assessment of competencies. Specifically, and taking inspiration from Durant (1997), we recount the "creative exercise" concerning student assessment undertaken during the 2013–2014 academic year by the Department of Public Administration at Portland State University (PSU). This creative exercise resulted in rubrics that reflect each of the department's 10 competencies and that serve two purposes. First, they help students self-assess the extent to which they are achieving the department's competencies. As will be discussed in more detail, students' subjective assessment of their

academic progress can play a key role in developing self-reflection and learning. Second, these new rubrics provide a foundation for decision making as the department moves toward developing additional objective assessments of student competencies.

The Department of Public Administration at PSU has traditionally utilized subjective assessment of student competencies—namely, student self-assessment—along with objective measurements of learning at the course level (e.g., course grades). Only now is the department undertaking the task of developing more objective approaches and instruments for assessing competency. The rubrics described in this article are a foundation for this effort, for they fully articulate the department's expectations for student achievement as expressed in each programmatic competency along a spectrum of professional development, as well as the criteria for assessing each competency.

This article first gives an overview of the Department of Public Administration at PSU, its core graduate programs, and the department competencies. Next, we discuss the function and use of rubrics, drawing on relevant literature related to higher education. Then follow the details of how the Department of Public Administration developed its competency rubrics, including theoretical underpinnings, the planning and development process, and obtaining faculty and student input. We conclude by discussing implications for practice, including PSU plans for deployment of the rubrics, how programs might use them to inform other objective approaches to assessing competency, and ideas for integrating objective and subjective assessment methods.

## **OVERVIEW OF THE PSU DEPARTMENT OF PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION**

The PSU Department of Public Administration is part of the Mark O. Hatfield School of Government in the College of Urban and Public Affairs, in the heart of Portland, Oregon. The department's current configuration reflects the merger of public administration programs

at Lewis and Clark College and PSU in 1996 and the development of the Hatfield School in 1998. As of 2016, the Department of Public Administration offers these core programs<sup>1</sup>: an undergraduate minor in civic leadership; graduate certificate programs in nonprofit and public management, collaborative governance, and sustainable food systems; a Master of Public Administration (MPA); an MPA in health administration (MPA:HA); and an Executive MPA (EMPA). Approximately 250 students were enrolled in the graduate programs in the 2013–2014 academic year. Curricula are delivered by 13 faculty members and more than a dozen adjunct instructors. The Department of Public Administration’s MPA, MPA:HA, and EMPA degrees are all accredited by NASPAA.

As with all NASPAA-accredited programs, the PSU Department of Public Administration had to develop a competency model after 2009 to maintain its accreditation. Development and implementation of the department’s competency model took place between 2011 and 2012, and our colleagues Jill Jamison Rissi and Sherril Gelmon (2014) write about this process in detail. As they discuss, development of the competencies was complicated by two factors: the multifaceted nature of PSU’s public administration programs and the university’s strong focus on community engagement. The department’s focus on both public administration and health administration and policy led it to seek accreditation from NASPAA, the Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME), and the Council on Education for Public Health (CEPH).<sup>2</sup> While multiple accreditations provide advantages, they also come with multiple (and sometimes dueling) standards, complicating the creation of standardized competencies for all students no matter the degree program. Concurrently, PSU’s motto to “let knowledge serve the city” led the Department of Public Administration to emphasize learning associated with community engagement—specifically the knowledge and skills related to teamwork, collaboration, effective communication, and other interpersonal skills—making comparison with other U.S. public administration programs problematic.

Nevertheless, the Department of Public Administration developed the following robust 10 competencies that reflect both internal priorities and those of NASPAA, CAHME, and CEPH<sup>3</sup>:

1. Articulate and exemplify the ethics, values, responsibilities, obligations and social roles of a member of the public [health] service profession.
2. Identify and apply relevant theories and frameworks to the practice of public [health] service leadership, management and policy.
3. Respond to and engage collaboratively with diverse local and global cultures and communities to address challenges in the public interest [interest of population health].
4. Identify and engage with key elements of the public [health] policy process.
5. Employ appropriate qualitative and quantitative techniques to investigate, monitor, and manage resource use.
6. Create and manage systems and processes to assess and improve organizational performance.
7. Conceptualize, analyze, and develop creative and collaborative solutions to challenges in public [health] service leadership, management and policy.
8. Assess challenges and explore solutions to advance cross-sectoral and inter-jurisdictional cooperation in public [health] programs and services.
9. Demonstrate verbal and written communication skills as a public [health] professional and through interpersonal interactions in groups and in society.
10. Think critically and self-reflectively about emerging issues concerning public [health] service leadership, management and policy.

Students in the Department of Public Administration's MPA, MPA:HA, and EMPA programs are expected to achieve these 10 competencies in some measure (see Rissi and Gelmon [2014] for a discussion of expected basic, intermediate, and advanced levels of skill attainment).

### THE FUNCTION AND USE OF RUBRICS

Rubrics have become commonplace in higher education (see Kecskes, 2013; Reddy & Andrade, 2010), and public administration programs are certainly no stranger to them (e.g., Diaz, 2014; Dunning, 2014; Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009; Getha-Taylor et al., 2014; Meek & Godwin, 2014; Powell et al., 2014). Rubrics articulate the expectations for a learning outcome (a specific assignment or program goal) by establishing clear criteria that can be measured on a scale that delineates varying levels of quality or attainment from beginner to advanced (Andrade, 2000; Arter & Chappuis, 2007). A rubric has three essential elements: evaluation criteria, quality definitions, and a scoring strategy (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Evaluation criteria are indicators or a process and content factors that the evaluators consider important to judge (Parke, 2001). Quality definitions illuminate what instructors and programs expect of the learner in terms of skill or proficiency demonstration at varying levels of attainment. Examples include "good, fair, poor" and "expert, intermediary, novice" levels of proficiency. Scoring strategies involve a consistent scale for interpreting quality judgments associated with learning attainment and demonstration (Reddy & Andrade, 2010). While "rubrics can be deceptively difficult to write" (Piedra, Chicaiza, Lopez, Romero & Tovar, 2010, p. 1512), the general steps to creating them are straightforward: (1) deciding on criteria that count; (2) determining how best to describe the rating of criteria attainment at varying levels; and (3) weighting each criterion (Peat, 2006).

The benefits of deploying rubrics at the course and program levels are well established and informed our decision to utilize the modality at PSU. For instance, rubrics can facilitate communication between instructors or between

instructors and students (Isaacson & Stacy, 2009). Indeed, as will become clear below, well-developed and -utilized rubrics can significantly clarify expectations for students; and, for instructors, they facilitate discussion that helps cohorts of professionals clarify and collectively determine values about what counts for learning attainment. In addition, when rubrics are integrated into an iterative process of reflective teaching or program delivery, courses and programs have the potential to garner key information that can enhance the course or program (Piedra et al., 2010). Finally, while the evidence is inconclusive, several studies at both the course and program level strongly suggest that deploying rubrics beyond limited, traditional evaluative ends holds great promise (see Reddy & Andrade, 2010). Specifically, these studies suggest that creatively utilizing rubrics early in the course- or program-initiation phase, as a learning strategy with students, can clarify high-end targets for students and deepen, increase, and accelerate learning outcome attainment. Using rubrics specifically and deliberately as a learning strategy is one part of the Department of Public Administration's next phase of competency assessment work, which is still under development.

### A CREATIVE EXERCISE IN STUDENT ASSESSMENT

Since the Department of Public Administration implemented its competency model in 2012, students have been asked to reflect and report on their attainment of the 10 competencies.<sup>4</sup> As part of each course evaluation, students report the extent to which they feel the course helped them meet some or all of the department's competencies. Though students report their perceived level of competency throughout their program of study, their responses to this question have been particularly important in each degree's capstone course.

Capstone courses play a significant role in student assessment in many public administration programs. As Reid and Miller (1997) note, they are an important tool for both program leaders and students. On the one hand, capstone courses allow students to critically examine their work and integrate complex knowledge

**TABLE 1.**  
**Capstone Courses for MPA, MPA:HA, EMPA, and MPH:HMP Students**

Degree program	Capstone courses
MPA	PA 509: Organizational Experience PA 512: Case Analysis
MPA: HA	PAH 509: Organizational Experience
EMPA	PA 510: Advanced Case Analysis PA 512: Case Analysis
MPH:HMP	PAH 509: Organizational Experience

and skills across multiple specializations while such courses also serve as a rite of passage. On the other hand, for program leaders, capstone courses allow the program to assess itself by evaluating student work across a broad range of criteria. Because the PSU Department of Public Administration actively promotes reflection as a part of its mission, the capstone requirement (see Table 1) is integral to its ongoing programmatic assessment. Furthermore, a culminating experience is an ideal point in a student’s graduate career for deep reflection on and assessment of competencies obtained over their course of study. As such, we expect that capstone courses will figure significantly in the department’s ongoing efforts to more directly and objectively assess student competencies.

Despite the value of student self-assessments in their course evaluations, over time it has become clear at PSU that additional assessment tools are required, primarily because the self-reports do not assess student progress toward the department’s 10 competencies. The object of the self-report is not the student but rather the course itself. To be sure, knowing the extent to which individual courses help students attain the competencies is integral to evaluating the overall program. However, the emphasis should be on student learning outcomes (Powell, Piskulah, & Saint-Germain, 2011). Integrated assessment of those outcomes should ultimately answer the question, To what extent are students achieving the competencies? Informa-

tion on student progress toward competency attainment provides, not only measures of programmatic success, but also a path forward for making informed decisions about the curriculum, its delivery, and the competency model as a whole.

In 2013, the PSU Department of Public Administration begin implementing additional assessment processes and instruments with these aims in mind. The rubrics and their development make up one step of a longer journey toward programmatic comprehensiveness and efficaciousness; namely, competency assessment of the Department of Public Administration itself.

**Important Notes about Process**

At the start of the 2013–2014 academic year, faculty of the Department of Public Administration designated the Student Assessment Committee (SAC) to lead the effort in developing additional, more robust processes and instruments for assessing student achievement of the department’s 10 competencies. Three faculty members volunteered, including Neal Wallace and the two authors of this article. Two more faculty members, Erna Gelles and Douglas Morgan, joined later in the year. While the committee had a formal chair, in practice it operated in a participatory democratic mode in which the members came “together in person to discuss problems and forge solutions through civilized debate” (Ovans, 2012, para. 5). In

addition, from the beginning, SAC members agreed that searching for one perfect assessment process or instrument would only inhibit efforts (Williams, 2002; see also Fitzpatrick & Miller-Stevens, 2009). As a result, the process was deliberately iterative, and members fully acknowledged that any initial approach would be but one piece of a much larger effort to assess the department's competency model.

**Rationale for the Approach Taken.** The SAC began by mining extant literature on assessment and competency attainment and by gleaning examples of assessment plans from peer institutions and NASPAA's online database of resources. This resource review and subsequent discussions led the SAC to choose the development of rubrics as the most appropriate course, for four reasons. First, rubric development processes can easily support the kind of iterative approach that the SAC adopted. Second, rubric use in higher-education institutions is a well-understood, respected, and familiar practice, particularly in public administration programs. Third, the use of rubrics affords users a continuum of self-assessment options over a range of substantive areas, thus allowing for flexible use and modification over time. That is, rubrics provide students with a formal assessment instrument that can help them become more aware of and better ascertain their own learning (or lack thereof). Finally, one SAC member's scholarly agenda centers on rubric development and deployment in higher-education academic departments, in the United States and beyond (see Kecskes, 2013).

**Surprises, Confusion, and Clarity.** Having decided on rubrics, the SAC was faced with two questions: What kind of rubrics should be created? And how and when should they be deployed? The first question sets the stage for a brief discussion of the SAC's creative, engaging, and at times surprising development process. First, the SAC adopted the so-called Dreyfus model of human learning that, at its core, connects theory and practice and moves from an initial rule-bound orientation to later-stage intuition-and experience-based decision making (see Flyvbjerg, 2001). This theoretical frame

(discussed in more detail below) guided the SAC's developmental approach throughout the process.

Next, three members of the SAC who regularly teach a course on administrative ethics and values each agreed to independently create a first draft of a rubric scale for the department's first competency. This competency addresses expectations for ethical behavior for public administrators. All committee members then met to consider the three rubric drafts; members clarified the meaning of each component of each draft, explored the underlying rationale, and in real time recrafted an advanced and agreed-upon draft. The SAC members agreed that this iterative and collaborative process was valuable. Thus, from this point on, each SAC member selected a few of the competencies that mapped to their areas of professional expertise and drafted a rubric for the next scheduled meeting. Collectively, the SAC took care to have no fewer than two committee members working on each competency, thus ensuring multiple views.

Over the next few months, highly engaging and informative discussions ensued. Indeed, one committee member commented that this kind of scholarly exploration and intellectually satisfying dialogue were well overdue. In essence, the SAC discovered that—at times surprisingly—members' interpretations of particular competencies sometimes deviated significantly within the group. The robust discussions and eventual creation of consensus language for each competency led, not only to a deeper commitment to the process itself and a high-quality final product, but also to an increased spirit of collegiality, clarification of values and biases, and ultimately a more robust common understanding of the essential nature of each competency. In short, members' collective knowledge and understanding of the subject matter of each competency became more sharply defined.

Ultimately, the SAC created working drafts of 10 rubrics, one for each competency. This proved a significant accomplishment, especially given that the five SAC members represented diverse subareas of expertise. The SAC sent the working

drafts to the full public administration faculty for review and commentary. Several members of the SAC followed up individually with faculty members who had specific concerns regarding the content and form of the rubrics. Concomitantly, one SAC member agreed to pilot-test the draft rubrics with a group of students in the MPA program, at the end of the term, to garner initial feedback on both content and form.

While the full faculty at this initial stage provided general and overall positive feedback, confirming for the SAC that it was proceeding in the right direction and ensuring validity of the instruments, student feedback was considerably more detailed, identifying areas of perceived redundancy and confusion in terms of both content and form (e.g., the use of the instruments). Students' guidance and insightful suggestions led the SAC to hone and clarify the content as well as simplify the format of the rubrics. SAC members intentionally adopted a co-production model of public administration (see Ostrom, 1996), a view of the discipline popular among PSU Department of Public Administration faculty. Specifically, we view the learning process as a cooperative enterprise, in which both students and faculty produce and apply knowledge in the pursuit of developing lifelong learners as well as skilled professionals (McCulloch, 2009).

Over the next several months, the SAC created final drafts of each competency's rubric and provided it to the full public administration faculty. A follow-up presentation on the rubrics included a general orientation, rationale for use of the rubrics, and a facilitated discussion. The faculty formally voted to approve the rubrics and discussed pilot-testing them (discussed briefly in the conclusion of this article).

### Learning and Professional Development

Public administration programs have drawn on several educational assessment models and associated theoretical frameworks to develop approaches for student assessment. These include, most prominently, Benjamin Bloom's taxonomy of educational objectives (e.g., Dale-

hite, 2008; Dunning, 2014; Rivenbark & Jacobson, 2014) and Donald Kirkpatrick's four-tiered model for evaluating educational programs (Mayhew et al., 2014; Newcomer & Allen, 2010). Kirkpatrick's model has proved particularly popular and useful, as it provides a holistic view of an educational program's success. It measures the following: (1) students' reaction to and valuation of the program; (2) their overall learning; (3) whether learning resulted in changed (better) behavior in the workplace; and (4) whether students and their places of work were ultimately better off as a result. Yet, as Newcomer and Allen (2010) note, the Kirkpatrick model can be challenging to implement due to lack of resources, and most public administration programs halt their assessment efforts at Tier 2. This challenge is no less true for the Department of Public Administration at PSU. While implementation of the full model is the department's goal, the SAC's initial efforts focused on the primary concern of both NASPAA and the department: student learning outcomes, the second tier of Kirkpatrick's model.

As there are myriad approaches for assessing educational programs, so too are there a multitude of methods for understanding and evaluating student learning. The SAC's approach was to view student learning through a prism of professional development. While it has been a matter of debate whether public administration can be viewed as a profession (see Green, Keller, & Wamsley, 1993; Schott, 1976), it is clear that many public administration programs seek to develop professional public administrators through competency-based programs (see Diaz, 2014; Rubaii & Calarusse, 2014; Williams, 2002). This includes the Department of Public Administration at PSU, which views its offerings as "*professional* graduate degree programs" (Rissi & Gelmon, 2014, p. 335, emphasis added). It naturally follows to assess student learning in these programs as a matter of professional development.

There exist a host of models to evaluate learning in professional development programs (see Dall'Alba & Sandberg, 2006), but one of the

more accepted ones is the so-called Dreyfus model. Developed by philosophers Hubert and Stuart Dreyfus and summarized by Flyvbjerg (2001), it offers a phenomenology of human learning that delineates the linkages between knowledge acquisition and context. In the familiar parlance of public administration, the Dreyfus model explicates the relationship between theory and practice as it becomes manifest in the human learning process. It incorporates both rational decision making and more context-based decision making, allowing for an interplay between rules, formal knowledge, and practical experience. Furthermore, the Dreyfus model implies that moving beyond rule-based thinking is the most important element for action for a professional. As we will discuss in the next section, while rules are important at every level of learning and development, at each successive level context and intuition become important elements for action.

At the same time, the model does not privilege any one level of learning. This is important within the context of public administration programs. In the classroom we can have novices, advanced beginners, competent performers, proficient performers, and perhaps even experts (see Table 2). This would not be unusual in an MPA program populated by students seeking an advanced degree after years in the field; students who have a few years of experience as an entry-level manager and want a master's degree to advance; and students who matriculate directly from undergraduate programs. Based on this reasoning, the SAC chose the Dreyfus model to guide its development of assessment rubrics. It follows, then, that SAC members intentionally incorporated into all 10 rubrics an understanding of student learning that begins with a rule-based framework and ends with a specific focus on context and intuition.

### The Rubrics

Figures 1 and 2 depict the rubrics developed for Competencies 1 and 2. Space does not allow for inclusion of the rubrics for all 10 competencies, but as these two examples indicate, there is continuity in formatting and language between them. Read from left to right, the rubric in each

figure details the progression of student learning from novice to exemplary status. These categorizations of learning and progress in professional development are based on the Dreyfus model's five levels of human learning (see Table 2). First, *novices* are defined by their inexperience both in the classroom and in a public service professional setting. As students, then, they may have an interest in public service and public organizations but at the same time be uncertain about what it means to be a public servant and a competent practicing public administrator. Therefore, they must learn the facts and rules and the knowledge and skills that define the profession. Until they are able to master this knowledge and these skills and apply appropriate contextual elements, their decision making remains inherently rule-based. They are judged by how well they follow the rules.

In the second level of human learning, *advanced beginners* possess the characteristics of the novice but have benefited from some practical experience. Advanced beginners are thus able to apply the rules, knowledge, and skills they have learned in diverse situations because they can recognize similarities between situations. For example, drawing on Competency 1 (see Figure 1), an advanced beginner has learned what it means to be an ethical public servant and is thus better able to recognize an ethical dilemma despite the context. The advanced beginner recognizes the dilemma as ethical and not simply organizational or interpersonal, whether it occurs in a government agency or nonprofit organization, in a human resources department or at the executive level. The success of an advanced beginner depends on trial and error through the application of acquired knowledge within the varying contexts.

At the third level of learning, *competent performers* have more real-life experience. They are better able to prioritize between sometimes conflicting goals and values and then make plans, and goals to achieve those plans, to mitigate, if not resolve, most conflicts. At this level of professional development, students have learned to deal with a smaller set of factors that they have defined as meaningful and thus are better

**TABLE 2.**  
**Dreyfus Model: The Five Levels in the Human Learning Process**

Level of learning	Characteristics
Novice	Is learning what the rules are for action Is unprepared to account for situational context in application of the rules Evaluates oneself based on how well one follows the rules one has learned
Advanced beginner	Has learned the rules but also has some real-life experience Is able to base action on both the rules and situational elements. Knows when to bend or ignore the rules. Evaluates oneself based on success through trial and error
Competent performer	Is able to prioritize decision making and develop goals and plans for action. Goals and plans are based on both context-dependent and context-independent information. Feels the need to have plans on which to base action, but deciding on a plan takes time and deliberation Feels responsible for the consequences of choices made because they have been deliberated on and selected based on options considered
Proficient performer	Readily identifies problems, goals, and plans intuitively based on one's own experientially based perspective Makes choices confidently and simply Checks intuitive choice by analytical evaluation prior to action
Expert	Behaves intuitively, holistically, and synchronically Takes action in such a way that a given situation releases a picture of problem-goal-plan-decision-action in one instant and with no division into phases Does not engage in protracted problem solving but rather in critical reflection over one's intuition and its application

Source: Flyvbjerg (2001).

able to evaluate a given situation. Involvement in decision making becomes more personal, then, because there is more responsibility for action. This is so because decision making now involves interpretation of key elements and personal judgment.

For *proficient performers*, decision making is continuous and based on a perspective informed by prior learning, actions, and experiences in varying contexts. Decision making of this variety involves spontaneous interpretation, intuitive judgment, and memory. It also involves periodic reflection for analysis of situations and decisions made. At this level of development, there is a marriage between intuition and analytic decision making.

Finally, when one becomes an exemplary public servant, or an *expert* public administrator, decision making becomes an intimate, virtuosic experience such that it is second nature. This individual is one with his or her intuition and experience, in that there is normalized alignment between the individual's intuition, experience, and action. Furthermore, these experts become models of public service or examples to follow. They become leaders.

As explicated by Flyvbjerg (2001), each level of learning builds on the previous one. In the visual depiction of our rubrics (Figures 1 and 2), we show this progression in learning and development by using arrows and plus signs to describe not only students' acquisition of know-

**FIGURE 1.**  
**Rubric for Competency 1**

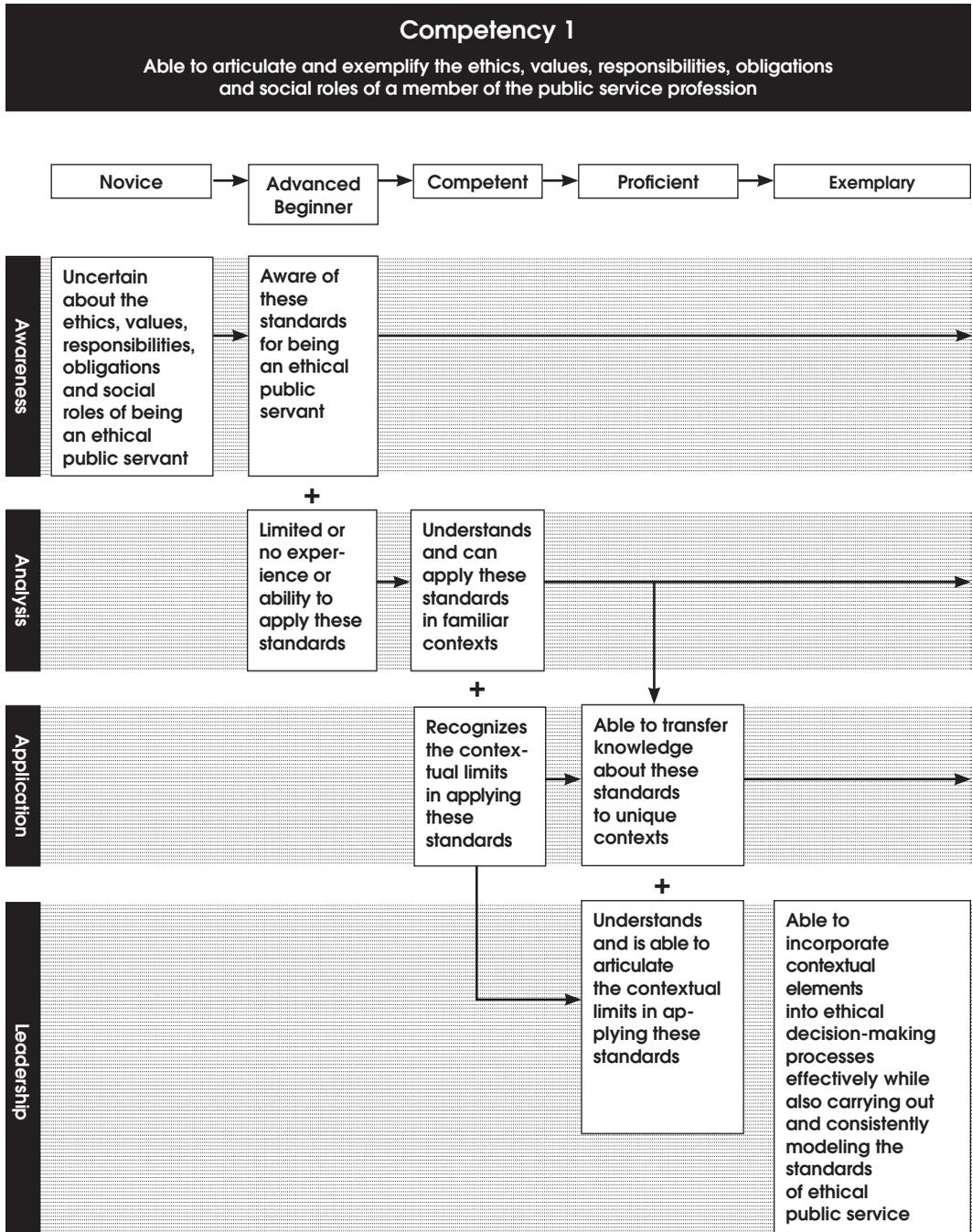
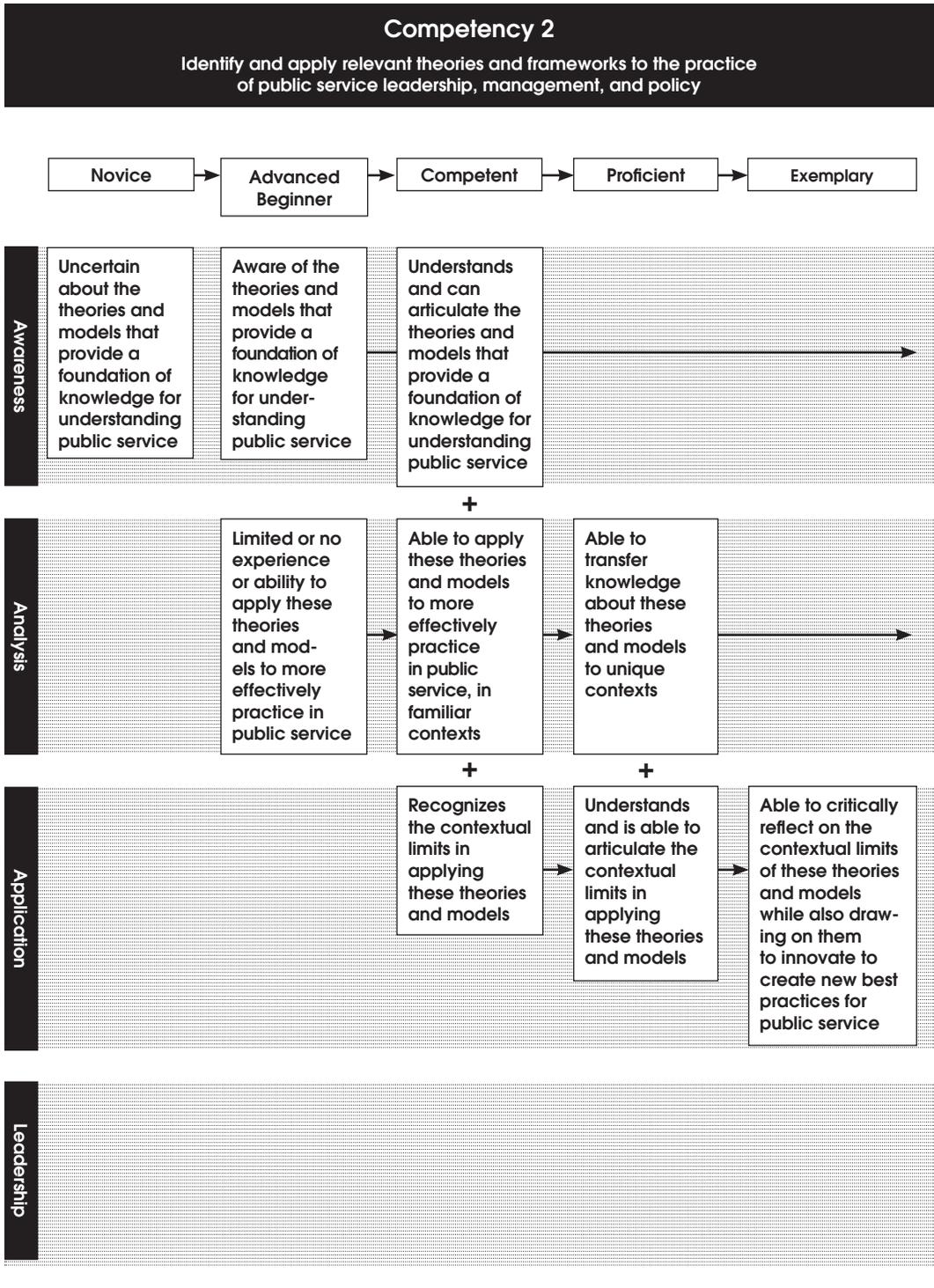


FIGURE 2.  
Rubric for Competency 2



ledge and skills but also their deployment of the same. In addition, we characterize the overall progression of learning and development along the vertical axis from awareness, to analysis, to application, and finally to leadership. As students progress in their learning and development from novice to exemplar, they first become *aware* of the knowledge and skills that underpin the competency and that are required for the profession. Then they become better able to *analyze* given situations and contexts through the prism of their knowledge and skills. Building on this, students are then better able to competently *apply* their knowledge and skills in varying contexts. Finally, they are able to *lead* because they have become exemplars in their field. They are able to incorporate their knowledge, skills, and relevant contextual elements such that they exemplify the very essence of the competency itself.

### Deployment of the Rubrics

After completion of the rubrics, the question became how best to deploy them. The SAC, in consultation with the larger public administration faculty, chose to initially deploy the rubrics through existing modalities, namely student self-assessments. The department already had in place several subjective approaches to assessment, and building on existing strategies seemed a natural progression.

Additionally, the SAC wanted to engage students themselves in the assessment process as a form of self-reflection and learning. While, in a typical educational setting, instructors use rubrics to assess students performance based on predetermined criteria (see Arter & McTighe, 2000), rubrics themselves can also enhance and accelerate learning. Nicol and Macfarlane-Dick (2006) write that formative assessments of student learning can be joined with self-regulated learning such that students can, at least in part, guide their own learning. Formative assessments, which can be either formal (e.g., grading assignments, assigning course grades) or informal (e.g., verbal feedback), provide students with information about their performance in order to contribute to their learning (Yorke, 2003). Self-regulated learning involves students moni-

toring their own learning processes. Specifically, self-regulated learning is

manifested in the active monitoring and regulation of a number of different learning processes: e.g. the setting of, and orientation towards, learning goals; the strategies used to achieve goals; the management of resources; the effort exerted; reactions to external feedback; the products produced. (Nicol & Macfarlane-Dick, 2006, p. 200)

When formative assessment tools and approaches are married with an emphasis on self-guided reflection, students become better enabled to regulate their own learning throughout the course of their studies. In turn, this helps prepare them for learning outside the program and throughout their lives (Boud, 2000).

During the 2014–2015 academic year, we invited students in PSU's MPA, MPA:HA, and Master of Public Health (MPH) capstone courses (see Table 1) to assess themselves in relation to the Department of Public Administration's 10 competencies. The online survey asked them to consider each rubric and assess their own competence in relation to it. For each competency, did students view themselves as a novice, advanced beginner, competent performer, proficient performer, or exemplar, now that they are completing their graduate studies? We are in the process of analyzing the data from these self-assessments, but in general it appears that students tend to rate their achievement level more highly than their instructors might (see Ross, 2006). There is a clear need to marry more-objective assessments with existing subjective ones. Nonetheless, the very act of putting the questions to the students engages the students in self-reflection, a core value of PSU's public administration programs.

Going forward, we will begin asking students to engage with the rubric self-assessment tool at the beginning of their studies. Over time, the data gleaned should allow the Department of Public Administration to assess students' individual and overall movement along a spectrum

of learning, in addition to other more objective measures that the department develops over time. By utilizing the competency rubrics as a foundation for assessment—and connecting them to and associating them with additional subjective and objective assessment modalities—we hope to both increase students’ self-reflection about their learning process and facilitate a common understanding among faculty about what learning outcomes we are seeking.

## CONCLUSION AND EPILOGUE

This article recounts initial ideas and development at PSU’s Department of Public Administration concerning implementation of rubrics for assessing student achievement of programmatic competencies. We do not propose that this particular approach to competency assessment is the best or right one for all public administration programs. Rather, we seek to demonstrate the rigorous and surprisingly engaging process that can develop when program faculty fully immerse themselves in discussions of student learning and competency achievement, as well as to share the fruits of our labors (the rubrics themselves). Through this process, we have learned the importance of these two issues.

**1. The Imperative to Infuse the Process with a Spirit of Co-Production.** Theorists discuss co-production as a series of processes through which inputs from individuals inside and outside an organization are transformed into goods and services by that organization (Bovaird, 2007; Ostrom, 1996). Infusing our developmental experience as a faculty engaged in this intensive process with this spirit of collaboration has produced three interconnected insights.

First, NASPAA’s requirement for assessment of competency attainment initiated a largely instrumental, faculty-focused process to meet the requirements. Throughout the process, however, students were invited to test a prototype of the instruments and provide feedback. Student feedback surfaced valuable content and process insights, which required faculty architects to discuss their own biases, intellectual histories, and an emerging *shared meaning* of the compe-

tencies themselves. This naturally transformed an erstwhile instrumental activity into a meaning-laden and constitutive effort for all involved.

Second, involving students in the process informed the notion that faculty may wish to integrate the rubrics as a formative learning strategy (Isaacson & Stacy, 2009; Piedra, Chicaiza, Lopez, Romero, & Tovar, 2010; Reddy & Andrade, 2010).

Third, the SAC recognized that additional validation of the instruments will be required. For example, to increase the rubrics’ content validity, we will solicit input from community practitioners to ensure that the rubrics and the competencies reflect the realities of public service as a profession. Just as we solicited input from community practitioners during development of the competencies themselves (e.g., from preceptors who hosted students during their capstone projects and from the Hatfield School’s advisory council; see Rissi & Gelmon, 2014), so too will we solicit their input to inform the rubrics. And as we develop more-objective measures of competency attainment and seek to gather data related to Tiers 3 and 4 of Kirkpatrick’s evaluation model, we will analyze the data not only to measure competency attainment and achievement of programmatic goals but also to assess the criterion validity of the instruments over time.

**2. Allowing for Sufficient Time to Discuss and Elucidate the (Shared) Meaning That Underpins a Program’s Competencies.** Each program competency is value-laden and as such can be interpreted and made meaningful for individuals in vastly different ways (see also Diaz, 2014; Dunning, 2014; Rivenbark & Jacobson, 2014). Time must be allowed for faculty to find common ground concerning the full meaning of each competency. Only then can appropriate measures be developed that accurately and robustly reflect the conception of each competency’s meaning for the students and the program overall.

The SAC’s work is ongoing. The committee is considering several avenues by which to deploy

the rubrics as self-assessment tools at the beginning of a student's program of study. This includes asking students to either fill out an assessment in their first course, or at an orientation, or on their own when they receive their admission letter. Each of these approaches has advantages and drawbacks. The SAC is also considering convening groups of students to pose the question to them: when is it best to assess your competency level at the start of your program of study?

Based on feedback from students and community members, we will make any adjustments needed to the form, content, and delivery of the rubrics. We will also look to expand the process of self-assessment to the EMPA program and to two capstone courses (PA 510: Advanced Case Analysis and PA 512: Case Study).

Finally, the SAC will begin to develop more-objective approaches and instruments for the assessment of competency attainment as well as do the challenging work of connecting current subjective assessments with newly developed objective ones. The SAC and the Department of Public Administration as a whole understand that assessment of student learning and achievement of program competencies are an ongoing process and an undertaking filled with depth and nuance. No one approach can fully capture all the depths and details. Therefore, we specifically seek to identify interconnected assessment approaches to better enable the Department of Public Administration to synthesize objective findings with student perceptions of learning and competency attainment. We will carry on, using these rubrics as a guide and inviting our students and our community to inform us along the way.

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## NOTES

- 1 The Department of Public Administration also offers a doctoral program in public affairs and policy, managed through the Hatfield School and delivered in cooperation with the Department of Political

Science and the Department of Economics. In addition, a Master of Public Policy, offered jointly with the Department of Political Science, enrolled its first cohort of students in the 2015–2016 academic year.

- 2 Since the writing of this article, PSU and the Oregon Health and Science University established a joint School of Public Health. The Master of Public Health in health management and policy (MPH:HMP) that was formerly conferred through PSU's Department of Public Administration is now conferred by the School of Public Health.
- 3 See Rissi and Gelmon (2014) for a full account of the development of the department's competencies, including integration of both public administration and health administration standards, integration of the expectations and standards of multiple accrediting bodies, and the involvement of multiple stakeholders in the process, including faculty, the Hatfield School's advisory board, current and former students, and community practitioners.
- 4 While student self-assessments provide some benefits, evidence of their validity as indicators of student performance is, at best, mixed (see Ross, 2006). The Student Assessment Committee at PSU's Department of Public Administration recognized the limitations of self-assessments as a sole measure of competency attainment, which fueled development of the rubrics discussed in this article as well as the committee's plans for creating additional objective measures.

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