



Communicative competence in Public Administration Graduate curricula

Claude Drolet¹

Abstract:

Communication is recognized as a core competency of professional public service and is explicitly identified within the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) accreditation standards. However, the extent to which communication is visibly represented within graduate public-service curricula remains unclear. This study updates an earlier examination of communication education by analyzing a stratified purposive sample of 64 NASPAA-accredited public-service programs from the United States and abroad. Program websites, curricula, and course descriptions were examined to determine whether communication was promoted in program descriptions, institutionalized through identifiable communication courses, and visibly associated with NASPAA accreditation. The study also compares communication coursework in public-service programs with that offered in MBA programs at the same institutions. The findings reveal a consistent gap between communication as a stated program competency and communication as a formal curricular component. While nearly half of the sampled programs emphasized communication in their public descriptions, fewer than one-third offered an identifiable communication course. Communication courses were substantially more common, and more frequently required, within MBA curricula. The findings suggest that greater alignment between accreditation competencies, program messaging, and curricular design could strengthen professional preparation for contemporary public service.

Key words: public administration; communicative competence; NASPAA; graduate education; curriculum; professional communication

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¹George Mason University, Incheon, Republic of Korea

1. Introduction

Communication to the public is unquestionably one of the most important government functions. The Government should communicate about adoption of laws, public safety issues, issues with international diplomacy and a list of other topics in an honest and timely manner. Unlike commercial communication, government communication often involves life and death subjects, as during a natural disaster, or with issues that directly impact the people, such as taxes, elections, and public policies. Furthermore, given the deteriorating trust in government and growing negative media coverage of government, public administration experts have suggested that regular, improved public communication about government performance could improve interactions with both the citizens they serve and the media they depend on to deliver their information to the public (Fairbanks, Plowman, and Rawlins 2007).

Communication is also embedded in the everyday work of public administrators. Public-service professionals must explain policies, enforce regulations, prepare reports and grants, collaborate with colleagues, manage disagreements, and interact with community members. Krebs and Tikhomirov's (2026) study of recent MPA alumni illustrates the breadth and complexity of these responsibilities. Alumni described communication as involving not only clear speaking and writing but also audience awareness, appropriate channel selection, active participation in meetings, responsiveness to criticism, and the management of emotionally charged workplace situations. Their experiences demonstrate that communicative competence is not a peripheral professional skill but an essential component of effective public administration.

Indeed, in a survey of public relations practitioners Liu, Horsley, and Levenshus (2010) found that 59% of corporate and 66% of government communicators spend most of their time on external communication activities. Given this importance and challenges, it is critical for public administration scholars to more carefully address government communication and its effect on media coverage and, subsequently, citizen trust. Nevertheless, while the role of communication has been stressed in public administration theory (Khan, 2017), communication has been fundamentally neglected in public administration scholarship and teaching with the exception of political communication (Pandey and Garnett 2006).

Recent research suggests that this situation may be changing, although communication remains unevenly represented in public-affairs curricula. Manoharan and Rangarajan (2022) examined the curricula of 356 public-affairs programs and identified 119 communication-related courses across 74 programs. Only 46 of those courses explicitly included “communication” in the course title. Their findings indicate growing recognition of communication pedagogy in MPA and MPP education while also demonstrating that identifiable communication coursework remains concentrated in a minority of programs.

The MPA has become the internationally recognized “professional” degree for individuals pursuing management careers and senior positions in the public service. MPA programs are now growing at a pace equal to MBA program offerings in the 1960s (Jones, Roberts, Martin, Ahumada, King, & Kircher, 2013). Traditionally, as the literature suggests Yeager, Hildreth, Miller, & Rabin, 2007), MPA students seek an MPA degree for its expected career benefit. Pursuant to this, the international accrediting body for public service instruction, the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration, has recognized and adopted “universal competencies” that Master of

Public Administration degree programs are expected to develop to establish a “global standard in public service education” (<http://www.naspaa.org/>). However, while other fields, such as the MBA, have made tremendous strides to incorporate communications in their academic programs, public administration programs have been slow to respond.

Although most practitioners recognize the importance of communication in the workplace, most MPA programs have not fully integrated communicative competency into their curricula. This article explores the challenge of communication in MPA degrees and the implications it represents for instructors seeking to prepare students for the profession of public service and foster a competency to articulate the public service perspective to a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry.

This study updates an earlier examination of communication in accredited graduate public-service education. Using a stratified purposive sample of 64 NASPAA-accredited public-service programs, it examines whether communication appears in program descriptions and curricula, whether identifiable communication courses are required or elective, and whether institutions visibly advertise their relationship with NASPAA. It also compares communication coursework in public-service programs with that offered in MBA programs at the same institutions. In doing so, the study considers the possible gap between communication as an asserted program outcome and communication as a formally institutionalized curricular component.

2. NASPAA Standards

In considering the core content of graduate public-service programs, several questions come to the fore: Does a degree from one institution signify the same preparation as a similarly titled degree from another? Does the same degree designation

imply comparable curricular content? Are graduates assessed according to common professional competencies? Clark et al. (2014) examined these questions in considering the core curricular components of master's-level public-management education. They concluded that the concept of a curricular core should account for the competencies required by practitioners and recognized by accrediting bodies. Identifying such competencies provides a foundation for comparing programs and assessing the professional preparation they provide.

NASPAA has long played an important role in defining professional expectations for graduate public-service education. Hays and Duke (1996) described this role as establishing a common core of professional knowledge that can guide education and assessment. NASPAA accomplishes this purpose by establishing accreditation standards and evaluating programs through self-study and peer review conducted by the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation. This process seeks “to ensure excellence in education and training for public service and to promote the ideal of public service” (Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation, 2014). The current standards continue this role by connecting accreditation with program mission, public-service values, student learning, and continuous improvement (NASPAA, 2024).

Accreditation does not mean that programs are identical. Denhardt (2001) emphasized the diversity of public-administration education and the difficulty of defining a single model appropriate to every program. Consistent with this diversity, NASPAA employs a mission-based accreditation model. Programs define their particular purposes, the students and professional communities they serve, the public-service values they emphasize, and the outcomes they intend to produce. Accredited programs consequently retain latitude in designing curricula, admission requirements, and instructional methods,

but they must demonstrate that their missions, governance, resources, student learning, and evaluation processes satisfy common professional standards.

Although NASPAA originated in the United States, its accreditation activities now extend internationally and include master's programs in public administration, public policy, public affairs, public management, and related fields. Variations in degree title are permitted when programs share the primary purpose of preparing leaders, managers, and analysts for public and nonprofit service. This broader definition of eligible public-service programs is especially relevant to the international development of accreditation and to comparisons across differently titled professional degrees.

The NASPAA standards also emphasize the values underlying public-service education. Molina and McKeown (2012) identify democratic, professional, ethical, and human values as central to the public-service profession. The current standards similarly identify accountability, transparency, professionalism, competence, objectivity, ethical conduct, public trust, participation, inclusion, equity, and fairness among the values accredited programs should embody (NASPAA, 2024). These values are expected to be reflected not only in formal mission statements but also in governance, curricula, student learning, and program operations.

Under Standard 5, accredited programs must adopt a set of required competencies based on their missions and public-service values. These competencies encompass five domains: leading and managing in the public interest; participating in and contributing to the policy process; analyzing information, thinking critically, solving problems, and making evidence-informed decisions; articulating and advancing a public-service perspective; and communicating productively and in culturally responsive ways with a diverse and changing workforce and society at large (NASPAA, 2024). Programs may

define additional mission-specific competencies and specializations, but all accredited programs must address these five general domains.

Research supports the professional relevance of competency-based MPA education. Yeager et al. (2007) examined the difference an MPA education makes for graduates and emphasized its expected professional and career benefits. Alagna's (2017) evaluation of an MPA employee-education program found that participants and supervisors perceived improvements in employees' ability to work and communicate with coworkers, supervisors, clients, and community members. Similarly, Haupt et al. (2017) found that local-government managers generally recognized the relevance of NASPAA's core competencies to public-service practice. These findings reinforce the need for educators to connect accreditation competencies with the actual knowledge and abilities graduates use professionally.

NASPAA's annual accreditation reporting also provides information about how programs deliver and assess required competencies (Hamilton, 2018). While such reporting documents whether programs formally address accreditation expectations, the existence of a competency standard does not necessarily reveal how visibly that competency is presented or how directly it is institutionalized through identifiable coursework. This distinction is particularly important for communication because programs may address communication across multiple courses without offering a separately titled communication course.

Finally, Standard 7 requires accredited programs to provide stakeholders with current information about their missions, policies, practices, accomplishments, and student learning outcomes (NASPAA, 2024). The standards therefore connect public communication with the public-service values of transparency and accountability. Examining whether programs publicly identify NASPAA accreditation and

communication competencies is consequently relevant not only to curricular content but also to how programs communicate their missions and outcomes to prospective students and other stakeholders.

3. Communicative Competence and NASPAA

NASPAA's communication competency establishes an expected outcome for accredited public-service programs, but it does not prescribe a particular course or method through which that outcome must be achieved. Under the current standards, programs must prepare graduates "to communicate and interact productively and in culturally responsive ways with a diverse and changing workforce and society at large" (NASPAA, 2024). Programs may address this competency through dedicated communication courses, integration across the curriculum, experiential learning, or combinations of these approaches. Consequently, the presence of communication in the accreditation standards does not necessarily indicate how extensively or explicitly it is represented in a program's curriculum.

The evolution of NASPAA's standards reflects both the development of public-service education and changing expectations of the profession. Accreditation establishes common competency domains and baselines for program quality while allowing programs to pursue distinct missions. Through self-study and peer review, accredited programs must demonstrate how their curricula and assessment practices support the competencies expected of graduates (Raffel et al., 2015). This combination of common professional expectations and mission-based flexibility is important because graduate public-service education serves different levels of government, nonprofit organizations, and a wide variety of professional roles. As Riccucci (2007) observed, the

interdisciplinary foundations and organizational diversity of public administration make it difficult to identify a single best approach to public-administration education.

Evidence from practitioners and students nevertheless indicates considerable agreement about the importance of communication. A NASPAA survey of more than 400 city managers identified globalization, cross-sector management, and collaborative management among the important concerns facing the profession (Raffel et al., 2015). These responsibilities necessarily require public administrators to communicate across organizational and sectoral boundaries. Similarly, a survey of MPA students found that written and oral communication were among the skills they believed potential employers considered most important (NASPAA, 2007). Such findings suggest that communication is not merely an accreditation expectation but a practical competency recognized by students and public-service professionals.

Research examining the relationship between public-service education and professional practice has raised concerns about whether programs provide sufficient preparation in these areas. Lazenby (2010) found that MPA programs concentrating on local government did not adequately cover interpersonal communication, human relations, community building, and leadership. Haupt et al. (2017) similarly found that local-government managers viewed communication as important to public-service practice. Their findings suggest that ineffective communication can contribute to community conflict and that public administrators need to communicate effectively with individuals from government, nonprofit and private organizations, and the broader community.

One challenge is determining how a broadly stated competency becomes identifiable curricular content. Clark et al. (2014) proposed comparing public-management curricula through “normed topics” representing recognizable units of content derived from

professional and accreditation expectations. From this perspective, course titles provide one visible indication of whether a competency has been institutionalized within a curriculum, although titles alone cannot capture communication instruction embedded within other courses. More recently, Manoharan and Rangarajan (2022) identified 119 communication-related courses across 74 of the 356 public-affairs programs they examined, but only 46 courses explicitly included communication in their titles. Their results suggest growing attention to communication pedagogy while also showing that dedicated communication coursework remains limited to a minority of programs.

Communicative competence also requires more than technical proficiency in writing or public speaking. Kapucu and Koliba (2017) argue that public-administration education should provide opportunities for students to exchange and debate ideas through discussion and reflection, thereby strengthening their critical, reflective, and collaborative capacities. Public administrators must work with elected officials, citizens, community organizations, businesses, and government employees, often in situations involving conflicting interests or perspectives. Communication education should therefore develop students' abilities to listen, deliberate, adapt messages to different audiences, explain public value, and navigate disagreement.

These abilities also affect the relationship between government and the public. Improved government communication can contribute to transparency and public trust (Fairbanks et al., 2007), while external communication practices can influence media coverage and public perceptions of government (Liu et al., 2012). Public administrators must therefore be able not only to transmit information but also to explain decisions, demonstrate responsiveness, engage different stakeholders, and communicate the public value produced by government activity. The breadth of these responsibilities reinforces

the importance of examining whether communication is merely identified as a desired competency or is visibly institutionalized within public-service curricula.

The increasing internationalization of higher education and the global labor market has transformed communication competence into an essential component of graduate employability. Graduates entering multinational organizations are expected not only to possess disciplinary knowledge but also to communicate effectively with colleagues, clients, and employers from diverse linguistic and cultural backgrounds. Consequently, employment interview preparation should equip learners with the ability to communicate across a range of professional contexts rather than preparing them for a single culturally bounded interview model.

Contemporary research on professional communication emphasizes that workplace interaction extends beyond linguistic accuracy. Effective communication requires individuals to explain ideas clearly, justify decisions, respond appropriately to unfamiliar situations, and adapt their communication to different audiences and organisational contexts (Bhatia & Bremner, 2014; Holmes, 2015). Within multilingual workplaces, English frequently functions as a shared means of communication among speakers from different linguistic backgrounds. Accordingly, successful communication depends on communicative effectiveness, pragmatic awareness, interactional flexibility, and the ability to negotiate meaning rather than strict adherence to native-speaker norms (Louhiala-Salminen, Charles, & Kankaanranta, 2005; Kankaanranta & Louhiala-Salminen, 2013).

These perspectives have important implications for employment interview preparation. If communication styles and interview expectations differ across professional and cultural contexts, learners should be prepared to recognize diverse questioning styles, interpret communicative intentions, and adapt their responses

appropriately. Interview preparation therefore involves developing flexible communication strategies rather than rehearsing fixed answers or following a single interview convention.

Recent research further argues that successful communication in multilingual workplaces requires linguacultural competence, integrating linguistic proficiency with pragmatic awareness, intercultural understanding, and adaptive communication strategies (Peltonen & Hu, 2025). Such competencies enable professionals to recognise differences in communication styles, adjust their discourse to diverse interactional contexts, and establish effective professional relationships across linguistic and cultural boundaries.

Viewed collectively, this literature suggests that effective employment interview preparation should expose learners to a wider range of question forms, communicative functions, and interactional styles than those represented in a single national or cultural context. Preparing learners for multilingual professional communication therefore requires instructional materials that reflect the diversity of contemporary international employment practices rather than a single standardized interview model.

4. Comparing Communication Education in Public-Service and MBA Programs

Graduate public-service programs have frequently been compared with other forms of professional education, particularly MBA programs. Both degrees prepare students for managerial and leadership responsibilities, although they differ in their institutional settings, professional values, and intended sectors of employment. Scholars have consequently questioned the extent to which business-management models should inform professional education in public and nonprofit administration (Hallinger & Lu, 2013).

The comparison nevertheless provides a useful basis for examining how different professional degree programs institutionalize competencies that are important across sectors.

The inclusion of communication in MBA education is not new. As early as the 1980s, business and communication scholars advocated incorporating communication instruction into business curricula to prepare future managers for the changing demands of organizational life (Wright, 1982). Communication ability has subsequently been associated with managerial performance and leadership effectiveness (Penley et al., 1991). Datar et al. (2010) similarly identified clear communication and critical thinking among the capabilities business schools needed to develop more effectively in their graduates. Within MBA education, communication has variously been approached as a technical skill, a managerial competency, and a strategic leadership function (Rath, 2013).

Business schools have adopted several approaches to developing communication competence. Cyphert (2002) found that students considered communication-focused coursework valuable and that integrating communication with business content offered pedagogical advantages. Business programs have also employed experiential and service-learning activities involving nonprofit organizations, social enterprises, and international organizations to prepare students for leadership in complex organizational environments (Metcalf, 2010). These approaches reflect an increasing recognition that effective management requires more than technical business knowledge.

Marcel and Ross Mahon (2019) provide more direct evidence concerning the place of communication in MBA curricula. Using the rankings of the top 100 U.S. MBA programs as a proxy for program quality, they found that a higher ratio of graduate communication courses to internal case competitions was associated with higher program rankings. Required communication coursework was also associated with reputational

advantage. Their findings suggest that prominent business schools treat communication as a formal curricular component rather than relying exclusively on extracurricular competitions or assuming that students will acquire communication skills indirectly. The authors' abstract supports these specific findings.

Comparing public-service and MBA curricula at the same institutions therefore offers a focused way to examine how communication is treated across professional fields. The comparison does not assume that MBA practices should serve as a model for public-service education, nor does it suggest that a separately titled course is the only means of developing communicative competence. It does, however, reveal whether universities that formalize communication instruction in one professional program do the same in another. This distinction is particularly relevant because communication is an explicit universal competency for NASPAA-accredited programs.

5. Research Questions

NASPAA-accredited public-service programs must demonstrate how their students develop the universal competencies required for professional public service. However, the inclusion of communication within NASPAA's standards does not necessarily indicate how visibly programs promote that competency or how explicitly it is represented in their curricula. This study therefore examines communication both as an asserted program outcome and as an identifiable curricular component. It also compares communication coursework in public-service and MBA programs at the same institutions.

The following research questions guide the analysis:

- To what extent do NASPAA-accredited public-service programs identify communication in their program descriptions, learning outcomes, or other promotional materials?
- To what extent do these programs offer identifiable communication courses, and are those courses required or elective?
- To what extent do the institutions in the sample offer MBA programs, and how frequently do those MBA programs include required or elective communication courses?

What relationship exists between promoting communication as a program competency and offering an identifiable communication course?

How does the curricular treatment of communication in NASPAA-accredited public-service programs compare with its treatment in MBA programs at the same institutions?

To what extent do the sampled programs make their NASPAA accreditation visible on their public websites?

6. Method

6.1 The 2019 Baseline Study

The original study used NASPAA's online database to identify accredited MPA programs. Data were collected from publicly available program websites, university catalogs, curricula, and course listings. Program and curriculum pages were searched visually and through browser search functions for evidence of communication coursework. Communication courses were coded according to whether they were included in the curriculum as required courses or electives.

The original analysis identified 239 accredited MPA programs. The institutions were also examined to determine whether they offered MBA programs and whether those MBA programs included communication coursework. Of the 239 institutions, 224 offered an MBA.

Two supplementary analyses were conducted. First, a random subsample of 100 programs without an identifiable MPA communication course was examined for references to NASPAA accreditation and communication as a program outcome or competency. Second, a purposive sample of 10 highly ranked public-affairs programs was examined using the 2019 U.S. News & World Report rankings.

6.2 The 2026 Update

The updated study employed a stratified purposive sample of 64 institutions appearing on the 2025–2026 NASPAA roster. The sample consisted of 48 U.S. and 16 international institutions. It included accredited public-service programs bearing several degree titles, including Master of Public Administration, Master of Public Policy, and closely related public-management and public-affairs degrees.

Institutions were selected to provide geographic and institutional diversity while retaining programs examined in the original study wherever possible. The U.S. sample included institutions from the Northeast, Midwest, South, and West, while the international sample included programs from Latin America, Asia, the Middle East, and Central Asia. The resulting sample is intended to support descriptive and comparative analysis; it is not statistically representative of all NASPAA-accredited programs.

Data were collected from publicly accessible program websites, curriculum pages, university catalogs, course descriptions, and, where necessary, archived or

supplementary program documents. Each institution was coded according to six variables:

- 1) whether NASPAA accreditation was mentioned or visibly identified on the program website;
- 2) whether communication appeared in the program description, stated competencies, learning outcomes, or promotional language;
- 3) whether the public-service curriculum contained an identifiable communication course;
- 4) whether the communication course was required or elective;
- 5) whether the institution offered an MBA; and
- 6) whether the MBA curriculum included a required or elective communication course.

For curricular coding, a course was counted when communication was explicitly identifiable in its title, including titles referring to managerial, organizational, strategic, professional, political, or intercultural communication. A course was not coded as a communication course solely because its description mentioned communication or because it contained broadly adjacent content. For example, a course such as “Digital Communities and Public Transformation” was not counted without more explicit evidence in the course title. This stricter criterion provided a consistent and reproducible distinction between communication embedded across the curriculum and communication institutionalized as an identifiable course.

The analysis is subject to several limitations. University websites and catalogs change over time, and publicly available materials may not capture all courses currently offered. Communication may also be taught within courses whose titles do not identify it explicitly. Therefore, a “No” designation means that no qualifying evidence was

identified in publicly available materials; it does not establish that students receive no communication instruction. Finally, differences between the 2019 and 2026 sampling designs prevent the two sets of percentages from being interpreted as direct estimates of change over time.

7. Results: 2019 Baseline and 2026 Update

7.1 The 2019 Baseline

The original analysis identified communication courses in 34 of the 239 accredited MPA programs, or 14.2%. Among the 224 institutions that also offered an MBA, 86 MBA programs, or 38.4%, included communication coursework. Communication courses were therefore more than twice as common in MBA curricula as in the MPA curricula examined.

The supplementary analysis of 100 MPA programs without identifiable communication courses found that 69 mentioned or advertised NASPAA accreditation on their websites. Forty identified communication as a program outcome, competency, or other element of the program description. Thus, communication was promoted more frequently than it was represented through an identifiable course.

A separate examination of 10 highly ranked public-affairs programs produced a similar pattern. Only one offered an identifiable communication course, while six mentioned NASPAA and five referred to communication as an outcome or competency.

7.2 The 2026 Sample

The 2026 analysis found that 57 of the 64 sampled programs, or 89.1%, made their NASPAA accreditation visible on their websites. Communication appeared in the

program description, competencies, learning outcomes, or promotional language of 31 programs, or 48.4%.

Twenty-one programs, or 32.8%, offered an identifiable communication course. Of these 21 courses, 13 were required and eight were elective or optional. Thus, 61.9% of the identified public-service communication courses were required, while 38.1% were elective or optional.

Table 1: Characteristics of the 2026 Sample of NASPAA-Accredited Public-Service Programs

2026 measure	Programs	Percentage
NASPAA identified on website	57/64	89.1%
Communication promoted	31/64	48.4%
Public-service communication course	21/64	32.8%
Required public-service communication course	13/21	61.9%
Elective or optional public-service course	8/21	38.1%
Institution offers an MBA	56/64	87.5%
MBA communication course among MBA institutions	34/56	60.7%

7.3 Communication as promotion and Curriculum

The results reveal a gap between communication as a stated program characteristic and communication as an identifiable curricular component. Of the 31 programs promoting communication, 12 offered a communication course and 19 did not. Therefore, only 38.7% of programs promoting communication supported that emphasis with an identifiable communication-titled course.

Nine additional programs offered a communication course without emphasizing communication in their program descriptions. Among the 33 programs not promoting communication, 27.3% nevertheless offered an identifiable course.

Table 2: Communication as a Promoted Competency and an Identifiable Curricular Component

Communication presentation	Has communication course	No communication course	Total
Communication promoted	12	19	31
Communication not promoted	9	24	33
Total	21	43	64

The largest substantive category was therefore composed of programs that promoted communication but did not offer an identifiable communication course. Nineteen of the 31 programs promoting communication, or 61.3%, fell into this category. Promotional language consequently did not reliably indicate whether communication had been institutionalized as a separate curricular offering.

7.4 Comparison to MBA programs

Fifty-six of the 64 institutions offered an MBA. Among these institutions, 34 MBA programs, or 60.7%, included an identifiable communication course. MBA communication courses were therefore substantially more common than communication courses in the public-service programs, where the corresponding figure was 32.8%.

MBA communication courses were also more likely to be compulsory. Of the 34 identified MBA courses, 28 were required, four were elective or optional, and two did not have a clearly specified status. Required courses therefore represented 82.4% of identifiable MBA communication courses, compared with 61.9% of communication courses in the public-service programs.

Among the 56 institutions offering both types of professional education:

- 13 offered communication courses in both programs;

- 21 offered an MBA communication course but no public-service communication course;
- Six offered a public-service communication course but no MBA communication course; and
- 16 offered no identifiable communication course in either program.

The most notable category consisted of the 21 institutions that formalized communication within their MBA curricula but did not offer an identifiable equivalent in their NASPAA-accredited public-service programs.

7.5 U.S. and International Programs

Communication appeared in the program descriptions or stated outcomes of 10 of the 16 international programs, or 62.5%, compared with 21 of the 48 U.S. programs, or 43.8%. International programs were also somewhat more likely to offer a public-service communication course: seven of 16 international programs, or 43.8%, compared with 14 of 48 U.S. programs, or 29.2%.

MBA availability differed considerably between the two groups. Nine of the 16 international institutions offered an MBA, compared with 47 of the 48 U.S. institutions. Four of the nine MBA-offering international institutions, or 44.4%, included an MBA communication course. Among U.S. institutions, 30 of the 47 MBA programs, or 63.8%, included one.

These regional results should be interpreted descriptively because of the small and purposively selected international sample. Nevertheless, they suggest that international public-service programs were more likely to promote communication and offer identifiable communication coursework, while communication courses were more prevalent in the MBA curricula of the sampled U.S. institutions.

7.6 Interpreting the Historical Comparison

The 2019 census and 2026 purposive sample both show that communication coursework was more prevalent in MBA programs than in public-service programs. However, the increase from 14.2% in the 2019 MPA census to 32.8% in the 2026 sample should not be interpreted as a direct measure of curricular growth. The original study examined a census of accredited MPA programs, whereas the updated study used a purposive sample that included MPA, MPP, public-management, and related public-service degrees. It also deliberately retained several programs previously known to offer communication coursework.

The appropriate longitudinal conclusion is therefore limited: despite differences in sampling and program composition, the updated results reproduce the central pattern identified in 2019. Communication is more frequently formalized in MBA curricula than in NASPAA-accredited public-service curricula, and public-service programs are more likely to promote communication as a desirable competency than to offer an identifiable course devoted to it.

8. Discussion

Graduate public-service education is intended to prepare students for professional roles involving the development, implementation, and evaluation of public policies, programs, and services. Although public administration has intellectual roots in political science and has also been influenced by business and management education, its defining purpose remains preparation for work in the public and nonprofit sectors (Shevchenko, 2016). Communication is central to that purpose because public administrators must

explain policies, collaborate across organizational boundaries, engage citizens and stakeholders, and articulate the public value produced by government activity.

The results nevertheless reveal a distinction between communication as an asserted competency and communication as an identifiable curricular component. Almost half of the sampled programs referred to communication in their descriptions, competencies, learning outcomes, or promotional materials, but fewer than one-third offered a communication-titled course. Most notably, 19 of the 31 programs promoting communication did not offer an identifiable communication course. Communication therefore appears more frequently as an expected attribute of graduates than as a separately visible area of curricular instruction.

This finding does not necessarily mean that those programs fail to teach communication. NASPAA's mission-based standards permit programs to develop the universal competencies through different curricular and pedagogical arrangements. Communication may be embedded in courses involving policy analysis, public management, research methods, capstone projects, internships, or experiential learning. A website and course-title analysis cannot capture all such instruction. Nevertheless, a program that publicly emphasizes communication without identifying where or how the competency is developed leaves prospective students and other stakeholders with limited evidence of its curricular implementation.

The findings are broadly consistent with Manoharan and Rangarajan's (2022) conclusion that attention to communication pedagogy is growing but remains concentrated within a minority of public-affairs programs. Their broader definition identified communication-related courses addressing writing, media, advocacy, storytelling, marketing, and data visualization, whereas the present study applied the narrower requirement that communication be explicitly identifiable in the course title.

The two studies consequently measure somewhat different forms of curricular visibility, but both indicate uneven institutionalization of communication education.

The comparison with MBA programs makes this pattern more pronounced. Among the 56 institutions offering an MBA, 60.7% included an identifiable MBA communication course. At the same institutions, only 32.8% of the sampled public-service programs offered one. Twenty-one institutions offered communication coursework in their MBA programs but not in their public-service programs, while only six displayed the opposite pattern. This comparison does not suggest that public-service curricula should imitate MBA curricula. Public administration involves distinct professional values, audiences, responsibilities, and communication contexts. It does demonstrate, however, that many universities formally recognize communication as a teachable managerial competency in business education without giving it equally visible curricular status in public-service education.

Course status reinforces the contrast. Approximately 82% of the identifiable MBA communication courses were required, compared with approximately 62% of the public-service communication courses. MBA programs were therefore not only more likely to offer communication courses but also more likely to require students to complete them. This finding suggests that communication is more consistently institutionalized as a common component of professional preparation in the sampled MBA programs. In public-service programs, communication instruction was more likely to depend on program choice, student selection of an elective, or integration within other coursework.

The U.S.–international comparison provides an additional, although tentative, perspective. The sampled international public-service programs were more likely than the U.S. programs to promote communication and to offer identifiable communication coursework. However, the small, purposively selected international group does not

support broad generalizations about regional differences. It does suggest that the international expansion of NASPAA accreditation has not produced a single uniform curricular approach. Programs adapt the universal competencies to different institutional, professional, and national environments.

The findings also help clarify what communicative competence entails. Recent MPA alumni have described professional communication as extending beyond clear writing and speaking to include audience analysis, channel selection, meeting participation, responsiveness to criticism, collaborative decision-making, and the management of disagreement and emotionally difficult interactions (Krebs & Tikhomirov, 2026). Programs may therefore need to consider not only whether communication appears somewhere in the curriculum but also whether students receive deliberate instruction, practice, feedback, and assessment across this broader range of professional situations.

The appropriate implication is not that every accredited program must create a standalone communication course. Programs may reasonably integrate communication across the curriculum when that approach is systematic and assessable. The findings instead point to a need for greater alignment among stated competencies, curricular design, and publicly available evidence. If communication is presented as an important program outcome, programs should be able to identify where it is taught, how students practice it, and how achievement of the competency is assessed.

9. Conclusion

Communication is a central component of effective public service and an explicit competency within NASPAA's accreditation standards. Public administrators must communicate across organizational, professional, cultural, and national boundaries while

responding to diverse and changing workplaces and societies. Communicative competence therefore extends beyond the ability to transmit information; it includes the capacity to listen, deliberate, collaborate, explain decisions, navigate disagreement, and engage different stakeholders productively (Appel et al., 2016; Krebs & Tikhomirov, 2026).

The 2026 findings reproduce the central pattern observed in the 2019 study, although the different sampling designs prevent direct estimates of change over time. Communication remains more frequently formalized through identifiable—and especially required—coursework in MBA programs than in NASPAA-accredited public-service programs. The updated analysis also reveals a gap between communication as a promoted competency and communication as a visible curricular component: most programs emphasizing communication in their public descriptions did not offer an identifiable communication-titled course.

These findings should not be interpreted as evidence that communication is absent from programs without a dedicated course. Communication may be embedded effectively throughout the curriculum, and course titles provide only one measure of curricular attention. Nevertheless, accredited programs that identify communication as an important outcome should make its curricular location, pedagogical development, and assessment more visible. Greater alignment between accreditation expectations, program claims, and curricular practice would strengthen professional preparation and provide clearer evidence that graduates are being prepared for the communicative demands of contemporary public service.

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