Hank Savitch

This article discusses the University of Louisville's recent experience with its Ph.D. program in Urban and Public Affairs. By stating criteria which can be used to evaluate such programs, the article underscores the favorable results of locating such a program in a former School of Business, now a College of Business and Public Administration. The supportive environment of the College, its strong commitment to community service, and its general visibility provide valuable support for an interdisciplinary program. The article concludes with general principles regarding program definition, approach, strategy, and institutional setting.

The Louisville Experience:
A Second Look

How Might We Evaluate Urban and Public Affairs

The Spring 1995 issue of *Metropolitan Universities* carried a description of Graduate Programs in Urban and Public Affairs across the country (Scott Cummings, "Graduate Programs in Urban and Public Affairs: The Missing Components of the Urban Mission"). Louisville is featured (along with Milwaukee and Michigan State) as having strayed from the ideals of nationally prominent programs. The judgement is surprising since as recently as three years ago, Louisville achieved highest national rankings in several categories and peer ratings which put the Louisville program sixth in the nation (James G. Strathman, "A Ranking of US Graduate Programs in Urban Studies." *Journal of Urban Affairs*, Vol 14, No. 1, 1992. pp. 79-92.)

However one might dispute the validity of these earlier rankings, Louisville has gotten stronger and better. The facts bespeak a positive outlook. This assessment is based on several key ingredients which make up a distinguished program: 1) quality of faculty, 2) content of curriculum, 3) composition of the student body, 4) availability of resources, 5) opportunities to conduct research, 6) interaction with the public sector and the scholarly community, and 7) program organization. A fair appraisal might assess Louisville by each of these criterion.

Since the program became part of the College of Business and Public Administration (CBPA) in 1992, the "core" faculty described in the article as initially consisting of four members has grown to seven: six individuals whose appointments are in UPA, and a seventh position composed of two faculty with primary appointments elsewhere but

part of whose time and teaching responsibilities are formally allocated to the program. All of these full time faculty have degrees in social science or law. Despite the fact that Urban and Public Affairs (UPA) is located in a former School of Business, none of these faculty have degrees in business. This full time faculty is supplemented by an equal number of university wide faculty who are mostly drawn from Arts and Science (sociologists, political scientists, an architectural historian, a geographer, and a civil engineer). All of the faculty are well published in urban affairs, public administration and management, planning and development, regional economics, architecture, methods of social research and administrative or public law.

On matters related to course of study, the apprehension that Urban and Public Affairs (UPA) would somehow be compromised by "an inappropriate mixture of competing programs" has not materialized nor is it anywhere in sight. Recent curriculum revisions furnished a core of eight courses (methods, statistics, urban theory and public affairs, urban economics, urban government, public finance, program evaluation, and a research seminar) plus elective courses in three tracks (policy, planning and development, organizational administration, and infrastructure and environment).

Each track contains at least ten elective courses — most of which deal with policy, administration, community development, land use, architecture, economics, geography, and mainstream topics related to cities and the public sector. These courses would be familiar to most of us versed in the field. Compared to the earlier curriculum, the new offerings are more closely integrated and highlight the importance of urban theory and its applications to public policy, planning and development.

Additionally, requirements in research methods have been strengthened (a core course in program evaluation, short courses in statistics, and a marked improvement in the content of the qualifying exam). While credit hours for completion have been reduced by six hours, the total hours exceed or are directly in line with the most prominent national programs (48 hours beyond a master's degree).

The student body has a relatively wide geographic distribution and over the years has acquired a broad international character. Using the last three years as a benchmark, 47 percent of the student body was drawn from outside Louisville (12 percent from outside the metropolitan area and 35 percent from abroad). These students have an average GRE score of 1576, an undergraduate grade point average of 3.16, and a masters level grade point average of 3.45. Out of a student body of more than forty students, fourteen have assistantships, and a fifteenth has been designated a University Fellow for a period of four years. From the moment the program joined CBPA, assistance for Ph.D. students was made a top priority. $100,000 in new, recurrent funding was sought and found. This gentle and steady advocacy enabled the program to boost the number of graduate research assistants and increase compensation. As of this year, stipends range from $8,000 to $10,000 per student plus full tuition remission. Of the ten students who have graduated from the program, 80 percent are employed (academic or research settings, non profit organizations, public sector agencies or private business).

Since joining CBPA, student participation at Urban Affairs conferences and other scholarly meetings has markedly increased. Since 1993, fifteen students made formal presentations at the annual conference of the Urban Affairs Association. Last summer two Louisville students were sponsored to participate at an international conference in Bristol, England (co-sponsored by the Urban Affairs Association and the School for Advanced Urban Studies at the University of Bristol). Other

students have been supported to participate at planning and public administration conferences.

We agree, as the article by Scott Cummings declares, that "a high quality doctoral program entails cultivation of a major research and grants agenda" and "senior faculty should be engaged in research and contract activities . . ." through a "center or institute." The Louisville program clearly fits that description. Since joining CBPA the program has been closely associated with the Center for Urban and Economic Research, a research unit at the university. The Center has sixteen faculty or professionals associated with it and last year generated $3 million in research and contracts. At this time six doctoral students actively conduct research at the Center, compared with a negligible number at the inception of the program.

The research component is buttressed by activity-based grants. A nationally recognized project, Housing and Neighborhood Development Strategies (HANDS), is now in its third and final year of funding from federal, university, city, and private sources. The HANDS experiment, led by a member of the UPA faculty, has developed outreach programs in home ownership, community design, social work, leadership training and education. Students and faculty from UPA are active participants. A two year review of HANDS showed impressive gains and a successful extension of talent and resources into the nearby community (Reginald A. Bruce, *HANDS 1994: Year Two in Review*, University of Louisville, College of Business and Public Administration, 1995).

Active engagement is also backed up by CBPA's strong mission and identity. Its strategic plan, mission statement and personnel document require that faculty validate themselves through external involvement and local service.

An exciting development is happening in the program's organization. As announced last winter, UPA will now be joined by Economics and by the Center in a new School of Economics and Public Affairs, which along with two other units will compose a reorganized CBPA. As of July 1, 1995, this reorganization brings vital academic programs and a research arm into formal collaboration. As part of the UPA evolution, a Master of Public Administration will be administered under the same roof. Faculty are also taking steps toward long term development of a planning degree.

UPA has always enjoyed its own separate budget; none of its financial assets have ever been transferred to other departments. That budget will continue to be dedicated toward the advancement of doctoral studies, and has been given top priority for enhancement for the coming fiscal year.

These fundamental facts reflect a philosophy that urban and public affairs should strike a balance between active engagement in the community and national/international involvement; between theory building and applied research, and; between major disciplines that comprise the field. They also reflect a view that diverse approaches can complement one another and can be collectively brought to bear on problem solving.

For various reasons, the CBPA environment has helped the program sustain this equilibrium and nurtured its complementary features. Perhaps this can be attributed to the interdisciplinary culture of a business environment or to its habit of mixing theory and application or to the instinct for problem solving. Whatever the reasons, Urban and Public Affairs at Louisville has retained the integrity of the field — indeed enhanced its composition — and thrives in a supportive environment. Louisville intends to take more steps to assure distinction, but it is surely on the correct path and confident of its future.

What Principles Might Be Gleaned?

In some ways every program is unique — resources, location, size and university environments vary enormously, and these factors influence program development. Still, there are essentials that cut across all programs. These encompass issues of definition, approach, strategy, and institutional setting.

Definition: Urban and Public Affairs is a young field, whose genesis goes back to the 1960s. By comparison sociology had already established itself during the 19th century, economics also has a long tradition, although its paradigms became more rigorous during the mid-twentieth century, and political science traces its origins to the turn of the century. All of these disciplines went through a period of evolution, not unlike what urban and public affairs continues to experience.

As matters stand, we are a composite of social science disciplines, planning, and public administration. Our professional reference points reflect that composition, and are centered within various disciplinary "sections" or in interdisciplinary associations such as the Urban Affairs Association, the American Society for Public Administration, and the American Collegiate Schools of Planning.

Programs have different emphases — as can be seen from the inclusion of key words within their titles. Is it just "Urban Affairs" (Cleveland State University), or simply "Public Affairs" (University of Washington, CUNY's Baruch College), or is it both (University of Delaware, University of New Orleans)? Is the word "Urban" linked with "Public Administration" (Georgia State University, the University of Akron), or with "Planning" (Virginia Commonwealth University, Virginia Polytechnic University), or with "Labor Studies" (Wayne State University)? Is the program contained within a department and treated as part of a traditional discipline (Temple University)? Some legitimate programs do not even contain the word "urban" (Indiana University, University of Pittsburgh).

Nor should we forget the reference to "public affairs" as something different from "urban." That side of the field encompasses public administration and policy. Depending upon the title, content and professional references will change. We need to be alert to how different institutions define themselves before making assessments. Those definitions do not just bear upon how we construct an intellectual inquiry, but reflect the mission of a particular institution. For one reason or another, Indiana University has chosen to emphasize environmental issues while the University of Pittsburgh stresses international aspects.

Another piece of the same puzzle can be found in what a program can feasibly do and what its constituents actually need. Any program needs to identify itself carefully. In doing so, it will have to decide whether to span the entire turf or limit itself. These are tough but often crucial decisions, and they should be tested against the institutional environment before abstract judgements are made about what constitutes an intellectual core.

Approach: It is rare for a program to start from scratch. Most programs recruit an existing faculty and attempt to optimize those resources. Under the circumstances, grand designs may be unrealistic. First, because they fall victim to faculty dissensus. Second, because there is too little time or resources to test them against the realities of a market place or the long term needs of the public sector. Third, because the timetable and pressures of public institutions do not easily accommodate grand designs.

In most cases the best approach is to work incrementally, yet keep a vision and achievable goals in sight. Too many contingencies upset the best plans, and we

need to cope with change rather than lock resources into fixed commitments. Build block by block through a careful, sustained, consistent process. In his classic 1969 paper on "muddling through," Charles Lindbloom has a great deal to teach us about incrementalism ("The science of 'Muddling Through.'" *Public Administration Review*, Vol 19, 1959, pp. 79-88). One of his most potent messages is that policy is not made once and for all time. Rather, it is made and re-made endlessly through a "succession of limited comparisons." The idea is to test parts of a program against empirical conditions; to be ready to adjust its elements; and to lay out a potential direction for expansion or contraction.

Strategy: While incrementalism underscores the idea of adjusting parts to a changing environment, we should not ignore strategy. All programs need to establish priorities with an eye toward reaching attainable goals. Those strategies, however, must be flexible so they can be adapted over a long term.

Program themes or areas of specialization should embrace long term viability. We should remember that expertise can be ephemeral and what is high on the agenda today, can fade tomorrow. During the 1960s the hottest issues revolved around "poverty" and "neighborhood control." By the 1970s more abstract and theoretical concerns gripped the field. Another turn was taken in the 1980s when research and teaching focused on "cutbacks," "privatization," and "fiscal stress." As we head toward the next century, economic growth, urban development and "private-public" partnerships loom across the academic horizon. But these issues too will shift in content or be replaced by others

Issues have a life span which is quite a bit shorter than the length of faculty tenure. The best way to assure academic longevity is to appoint faculty whose skills can be brought to bear on a variety of issues and whose research agenda reflects diversity and adaptability. Programs need to keep one step ahead and not just account for what faculty are presently doing. We can prepare for the future by prompting faculty to identify subsequent projects and inquire whether current skills are up to those objectives. Other questions follow: How creative is the faculty? Can they identify emerging trends? Help junior colleagues carve out directions?

Among the most important decisions institutions make is selecting a faculty. While it is important to assure program autonomy and link complementary units, we should keep in mind that real people must operate within those neat boxes we draw. In particular, interdisciplinary fields require a degree of consensus, mutual respect, and colleageship. We are, after all, in the business of putting together many kinds of expertise to solve problems, train students, and conduct research. Not the least, our field is based on interaction with citizens, practitioners, and institutions within the surrounding region. That interaction requires an extraordinary breadth of knowledge, diplomatic skill, and a willingness to engage a diverse public. Programs then need to be built not just by the boxes and arrows placed on charts, but by the content and professional character of the people who staff them.

Institutional Setting: Much as urban and public affairs has developed a variety of linkages with other fields and disciplines, so too is it located in a number of different academic settings. Programs can be found in arts and sciences (University of Wisconsin, Milwaukee); in schools of architecture (University of Virginia); and in colleges of business and public administration (University of Louisville); or as stand alone institutions (University of New Orleans).

There is no prevailing orthodoxy nor need there be a single setting. To the contrary, different settings afford richer experiences and an opportunity to learn from one another.

We might also recognize that different settings optimize differing approaches. A program which seeks closer linkages with traditional disciplines could benefit from a location in arts and science. By contrast, programs which emphasize physical planning or design might best be situated in a school of architecture and planning. Still other programs might want to underscore development or connections between public and private sectors — these can profit from being close to business and public administration.

As we put this in context, we can readily spot the advantages of diverse institutional settings. Diversity adds new dimensions to the field, allows us to measure the comparative utility of institutional settings, and permits the field to optimize its progress. More pointedly, it gives universities needed flexibility for coping with an assortment of environmental demands.

Last, we might also understand that influence is reciprocal. Urban and public affairs may be modified by its institutional setting but it is also likely to shape that setting. At Louisville, we have helped business to facilitate its linkage with the public sector. Business is more than just a single constituency subject and goes beyond the world of commerce. As a practical matter it recognizes its role within a larger public and its linkage to policy planning and development. As an intellectual field it is ecumenical, freely borrowing concepts from the social sciences in organizational theory, in policy sciences, and in its strategic approach to problem solving.

We have a lot to learn from each other. The best way to foster progress is to recognize multiple opportunities; to be willing to use those opportunities for experiment; and to see those experiments as a long term process of growth and improvement.