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An Executive MPA Program for China: Lessons from the Field

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ABSTRACT

Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs are offered in more than 100 universities in China. All require applicants to pass a competitive national entrance exam in five subject areas. This requirement significantly discourages senior-level public administrators, many of whom graduated from college several years ago and have work schedules that do not allow time to prepare for an academically focused examination. These senior-level administrators need an Executive MPA (EMPA) or similar program with more realistic entrance requirements and a curriculum designed for people with significant professional experience. Drawing on the data collected from surveys of MPA students enrolled in six MPA programs in China and students enrolled in an EMPA program in Singapore specifically designed for Chinese public servants, this article reports how the demographic differences between MPA students and EMPA students affect their preference for professional public administration education in terms of knowledge components, managerial competencies, teaching modalities, and examination methods. The findings of the study significantly challenge not only Chinese universities that would like to adopt the existing MPA education model for EMPA education but also universities outside of China that are establishing EMPA or joint EMPA programs with Chinese governments or universities.

The origins of Public Administration as an academic discipline in China can be traced back to the 1920s when it was first introduced into the higher education curriculum as a subfield of political science. After the establishment of the People's Republic of China (PRC) in 1949, however, public administration education, along with other social science disciplines, was abolished by the Chinese government because such education was deemed irrelevant for the country's political, social, and economic development. It was not until the 1980s that public administration education was reintroduced in China (Xue, Peng, & Zhang, 2002).

From then until 2001, public administration education at the undergraduate and graduate levels in China was theoretically oriented,¹ focusing on the introduction of Western public administration theories and developing and interpreting Marxism and socialism with Chinese characteristics. Practical applications and decision making were not generally included in the curriculum (Ma & Liu, 2007).

Pushed and pulled by external and internal factors such as the transition in China from a planned economy to a more market-driven economy and the increasing demand for professional public administrators, in 2001 China's Academic Degree Commission of the State Council, Ministry of Education and Ministry of Human Resources, established the National MPA Education Steering Committee (NMESC) to initiate practice-oriented Master of Public Administration (MPA) education. The first national MPA entrance exam took place in 2001 (Tong & Straussman, 2003; Yang, 2005). In the same year, NMESC approved 24 prestigious universities to offer the MPA degree; by 2008, MPA programs had been established in 100 universities (Zhu, 2008).

As part of the MPA admission requirements, applicants must pass a competitive national entrance exam in five subject areas: English, Fundamentals of Public Management, Math, Literature, and Logic. This requirement significantly discourages senior-level public administrators, many of whom graduated from colleges several years ago and have work schedules that do not allow time to prepare for an academically focused examination. These senior-level administrators need a program with more realistic entrance requirements and a curriculum designed for individuals with significant professional experience.

This demand is not unique to China. In the United States, for example, the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Education (NASPAA) has stated on its website that "the Executive MPA is a Masters degree designed for individuals ...[who] possess significant professional achievements and are interested in advancing their careers" (NASPAA, 2011a).² A 2007 survey conducted by NASPAA found that 57 of its more than 250 member institutions were offering an EMPA or similar program (NASPAA, 2007). NASPAA has established an Executive MPA Committee to address several fundamental issues related to EMPA programs such as program formats, curriculum design, and accreditation.

Similar issues have to be addressed in establishing an EMPA program in China (Dong, 2010). NASPAA's curriculum models for EMPAs and similar programs provide some guidance (Holmes, 2006). With few exceptions, however, (Denhardt, 2001; Ventriss, 1991), the pedagogical literature on graduate programs in public administration has focused on traditional MPA programs, covering topics such as program evaluation, overall curriculum design, and teaching methods for specific MPA courses (Aristigueta, 2002; Brown, Brudney, Waugh Jr., & Hy, 2000; Holzer & Lin, 2007; Jennings, 1989; McCaffery, 1992; Rosenbloom, 2005).

In this article, we provide information that we hope will be useful in establishing an EMPA program for Chinese public officials by addressing three questions related to EMPA education from the "demand side": (a) What are the differences in the demographic characteristics of MPA students and EMPA students? (b) How do these differences influence preferences related to knowledge components, managerial competencies, and teaching and examination methods? (c) How should we teach Chinese EMPA students based on different preferences of MPA and EMPA students?

To answer these questions, we surveyed students enrolled in several MPA programs in China and in an EMPA program at Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore specifically designed for Chinese senior public officials. We hope that the findings reported in this paper will inform the development of EMPA programs in China and that they will be useful for universities outside of China that are establishing EMPA or joint EMPA programs with Chinese governments or universities. This objective is especially important given the increasing number of senior public administration officials being sent outside of China for advanced public management training (Ye, Sun, & Wu, 2009).

The article consists of four sections. The first section briefly introduces the development of MPA and EMPA education in China. The second section discusses our research methods. The third section presents our findings, and the fourth provides suggestions for educating Chinese EMPA students.

MPA AND EMPA PROGRAMS FOR CHINESE STUDENTS

From the earliest days of MPA education in China, the targeted student body has been civil servants and others working for public institutions (*Shiyedanwei*).³ In fact, NMESC requires that 80% of intakes of each MPA program come from the public sector. NMESC also requires that applicants must hold a nationally recognized college degree, have at least 3 years of work experience, and pass a national entrance examination.

Although the delivery of Chinese MPA programs has evolved from the initial mandated 1-year, full-time model to a much more flexible system including some 2- to 4-year, part-time options to meet public administrators'

practical needs, the three admission requirements listed earlier apply to all applicants. The third admission requirement, passing a competitive national entrance exam, significantly deters senior-level public managers from pursuing an MPA degree. Information gleaned from our interviews with deans of schools with MPA programs in China revealed that most MPA students are junior-level public officials with less than 10 years of work experience and are in relatively low positions in the Chinese government.

These interviews also revealed that there is increasing demand among higher-level public administrators for graduate-level public administration. Senior public administrators want to be systematically trained in public administration to improve their management competencies. Having an MPA degree will significantly improve their image as experienced public administrators equipped with cutting-edge knowledge and skills. Senior-level officials also want an MPA because an increasing number of their subordinates are pursuing the degree, and for them not to have one would result in their “losing face” (Chen, personal communication, Dec. 6, 2009).

In the absence of an EMPA program in China, Nanyang Technological University (NTU) in Singapore, a city-state located about 4,000 miles from mainland China, offers an EMPA degree program specifically designed for China’s senior public officials. Since 2004, about 100 public officials have been sent to NTU each year by Chinese governments at various levels. To date, almost 700 persons have graduated from the program. A significant number of alumni have been promoted to important government positions in China, such as vice governor, mayor, and party general secretary (Wu, 2007).

The EMPA program at NTU is a 1-year, full-time residential program. Students must complete at least 12 courses or 40 credits and a master’s thesis to obtain an EMPA degree.⁴ Although English is the working language of NTU, its bilingual faculty members also teach courses in Mandarin. Because of its uniqueness and success, NTU’s EMPA program is seen as a model for China’s public administration educators looking to develop their own EMPA degree programs (Ma, personal interview, June 15, 2009). The findings presented later can be used to design these programs.

METHODOLOGY

In December 2008, we distributed questionnaires to students attending the EMPA program at NTU in Singapore and six MPA programs in China that were established before 2003 and are considered to be the leading programs in the country. We distributed the questionnaire to all 83 EMPA students in the 2008 cohort at NTU. Sixty-two valid questionnaires were returned, for a response rate of 75%. We also created a focus group of 20 EMPA students to obtain additional information about attitudes toward Nanyang’s EMPA curriculum, teaching, and examination methods.

In China, we were unable to select students for participation in the survey randomly due to the inaccessibility of the population of students in all MPA programs and our limited resources. Instead, using convenience sampling, questionnaires were distributed by liaisons at each of the six universities included in our study to their MPA students; 212 responses were received. We could not calculate the response rate, because information was not available on the exact number of questionnaires that were distributed. We also interviewed five deans at leading schools of public administration in China to obtain their opinions on the development of MPA and EMPA education.

The Surveys

In the questionnaires, we solicited students' attitudes toward knowledge components, managerial competencies, teaching methods, and examination methods. We used "knowledge components" instead of courses because a knowledge point may be covered in several courses. We compiled a list of 26 knowledge components taught in public administration and public policy courses in China, Singapore, and the United States, drawing heavily on Holzer and Lin's study of MPA curricula in the United States (Holzer & Lin, 2007), NASPAA's accreditation guidelines (NASPAA, 2008), China's National MPA Education Steering Committee guidelines (NMESC, 2000), and NTU's EMPA curriculum (see Table 2).

For managerial competencies, we relied on models developed by Quinn, Faerman, Thompson, McGrath, and Clair (2006) and Whetten and Cameron (2006). We grouped 15 selected competencies into four categories: intrapersonal competence, analytical reasoning competence, interpersonal competence, and group management competence (see Table 3).

For teaching methods, we asked respondents to rank seven widely used teaching methods: formal structured-lecture teaching, case studies, group project and presentation, class discussion led by professors, peer discussions, role playing, and site visiting. For examination methods, MPA/EMPA students were asked which of seven examination methods they preferred: closed-book exam, open-book exam, term paper, take-home exam, and other types of exam methods appropriate for specific subjects.

FINDINGS

As shown in Table 1, EMPA and MPA respondents were quite different in their demographic characteristics. MPA students were much younger than the EMPA students. Among MPA students, 54% were 30 years of age or younger; one EMPA respondent was less than 30 years old. In the United States, there is also an age differential between MPA and EMPA students, but it is not nearly as pronounced as that in China. Among the schools responding to the 2006

NASPAA survey referred to earlier, the average student enrolled in their executive education programs for public service professionals was over 30 years of age compared with 27 years of age for the average student enrolled in a traditional MPA program (NASPAA, 2006). Of the responding schools, 70% “estimated the average age of the Executive Masters students between 36–45 years old” (NASPAA 2006, p. 4).

Table 1.
Demographic Characteristics of EMPA and MPA Respondents

	Characteristic	EMPA	MPA
Age	20–30	1 (1.7%)	86 (53.6%)
	31–40	28 (48.3%)	69 (43.1%)
	41–50	29 (50.0%)	5 (3.1%)
Gender	Female	7 (12.1%)	78 (45.9%)
	Male	51 (87.9%)	92 (54.1%)
Position*	Ke	5 (8.6%)	77 (56.2%)
	Chu	45 (77.6%)	20 (14.6%)
	Ting	6 (10.3%)	0
	Other	2 (3.5%)	40 (29.2%)
Tenure	Less than 1 year	0	5 (2.8%)
	1–5 years	2 (3.5%)	66 (36.7%)
	6–10 years	10 (17.2%)	68 (37.8%)
	11–15 years	22 (37.9%)	30 (16.7%)
	More than 15 years	24 (41.4%)	11 (6.1%)

*In China’s public administration system, the bureaucratic ranks are provincial/ ministerial level (Sheng), divisional/municipal level (Ting), departmental level (Chu), and office level (Ke).

The EMPA students in the Nanyang EMPA were much more likely to be male than were MPA students in Chinese universities: 88% of the EMPA students compared with 54% in the MPA programs. This, to a large degree, reflects the different gender composition in lower-level versus senior-level public officials in China. The gender proportions differ, however, from those in EMPA programs in the United States, where 50% of EMPA students in the schools responding to the 2006 NASPAA survey were male and 50% were female (NASPAA, 2006). Similar to China, this is generally reflective of women's representation in government in the United States. In 2009, women comprised approximately 46% of state and local government employees in the United States and 44% of all federal government employees (U.S. EEOC, 2009).

As would be expected given the age differential between the two groups of Chinese students, EMPA respondents had several more years of work experience than did MPA students. More than three times as many EMPA students (79%) had 10 or more years of work experience when compared with MPA respondents (23%).

Chinese MPA and EMPA students also differed with respect to their positions in government bureaucracies. Within China's public administration system, the bureaucratic ranks are provincial/ministerial level (*Sheng*), divisional/municipal level (*Ting*), departmental level (*Chu*), and office level (*Ke*).⁵ Among MPA respondents to our survey, only 15% were at *Chu* or higher, compared with 78% of EMPA respondents. Among the EMPA students, six were at the *Ting* level; none of the MPA respondents had attained this rank.

The following sections examine the impact of these demographic differences on the preferences of MPA and EMPA students related to knowledge components, teaching methods, and examination methods.

Knowledge Components

In Table 2, we show the preferences of EMPA and MPA students for knowledge competencies in terms of the mean score of each competency.

Table 2.
Perceived Preferences for Knowledge Components of EMPA and MPA Respondents

Rank	EMPA Students	Mean	MPA Students	Mean
1	Macroeconomics	2.91	Public human resource management	2.54
2	Microeconomics	2.85	Communication in public settings	2.54
3	Public policy theory	2.79	Leadership	2.45
4	Economic development policy	2.79	Chinese government and politics	2.45
5	Leadership	2.76	Public policy theory	2.45
6	Chinese government and politics	2.71	Program performance management	2.44
7	Communication in public settings	2.69	Constitutional and administrative law	2.4
8	Public budgeting/financial management	2.63	Economic development policy	2.39
9	International finance and trade	2.62	Public organization theory	2.38
10	Program performance management	2.61	Public budgeting/financial management	2.33
11	Education policy	2.60	Qualitative research methods	2.33
12	Public organization theory	2.57	Administrative ethics and anticorruption	2.32
13	Administrative ethics and anticorruption	2.56	International/comparative public administration	2.32
14	Information technology and e-government	2.56	Macroeconomics	2.31
15	Urban planning	2.55	Quantitative research methods (statistics)	2.31
16	Public health policy	2.53	Information technology and e-government	2.31
17	Environmental policy	2.52	Microeconomics	2.25
18	Public human resource management	2.52	American government and politics	2.20
19	International/comparative administration	2.51	International finance and trade*	2.20
20	Constitutional and administrative law	2.50	Nonprofit organization management	2.20
21	Nonprofit organization management	2.46	Public-private partnership	2.17
22	Energy policy	2.41	Public health policy	2.17
23	Public-private partnership	2.39	Environmental policy	2.13
24	American government and politics	2.38	Energy policy	2.12
25	Qualitative research methods	2.31	Education policy	2.12
26	Quantitative research methods (statistics)	2.30	Urban planning	2.10

Note. Students were asked to show their preferences for the usefulness of knowledge components using a 3-point scale (1 = not that useful, 2 = somewhat useful, 3 = very useful). The mean was calculated as the average of student responses. The same mean score for competencies with different ranking is due to rounding to two decimal places.

Among MPA students, human resource management was the most preferred knowledge component; EMPA students ranked it 18th of the 26 components. Among EMPA students, macroeconomics and microeconomics were the most preferred knowledge components, while MPA students ranked them 14th and 17th, respectively. The high ranking by EMPA respondents for economics reflects the emphasis on economic development in China. For the past 30 years, administrative performance in promoting local economic development has been the most important factor determining senior public officials' promotion and career progress in China (Zhou, 2007).

Although both EMPA and MPA respondents showed lower preferences for analytical methods (both qualitative and quantitative) than other knowledge components, EMPA respondents were more likely to consider analytical methods unimportant than were MPA respondents. Both qualitative and quantitative research methods were ranked the lowest of all knowledge components by EMPA students. Several EMPA students told us that as senior-level administrators in their agencies or jurisdictions, their responsibility is to make decisions and not to collect and analyze data. They do not see any practical relevance of analytical methods in their positions (Zhao, personal communication, Dec. 8, 2009).

Quantitative and qualitative teaching methods, however, are not only about data collection and technical analyses. They inform sound decision making and strategic planning. The problem here may not be about whether we have to teach research methods, but about how we show their relevancy.

Except for economic development policy (ranked 4th), EMPA students ranked policy areas such as education policy (11th), environmental policy (17th), energy policy (22nd), and public health policy (16th) lower than other knowledge components. The apparent lack of interest in any specific policy area (i.e., the generalist orientation of senior-level officials) may be explained by the human resource policy adopted by the Chinese government. Senior public officials are often rotated or promoted to different agencies, even to different jurisdictions, that involve different functions from their previous positions. They thus perceive general knowledge and skills in leadership, decision making, and policy making and implementation to be more important than knowledge or techniques in a specific policy area. One EMPA student told us that "the scope of knowledge is much more important for us than the depth of knowledge" (Huang, personal interview, Dec. 11, 2009).

Our findings also show that both MPA and EMPA students perceive international/ comparative administration as relatively unimportant, but EMPA students see it as even less important than do MPA students. This knowledge component was ranked 19th by EMPA students and 13th by MPA students. The knowledge component, American government and politics, was ranked 18th by EMPA students and 24th by MPA students. Instead, EMPA and MPA students both expressed strong interest in learning more about Chinese politics and government (ranked 6th and 4th, respectively). Three factors explain these rankings.

First, although in the past 30 years China has achieved rapid economic development by adopting its “Reform and Opening-up” policy, the nation’s internationalization and openness are generally limited to international finance and trade and foreign investment in the regions located along the east coast. For most of the public officials working elsewhere in China, their focus and responsibilities are still internally oriented.

Second, a prevailing public discourse in China is that because of its unique history, culture, and current economic and social development, foreign practices—particularly public administration practice in the United States—may not be applicable. According to our interviews and personal observations, this sentiment was ubiquitous.

Third, because humanities and social science education were ignored in China before the 1980s due to a variety of political factors, most of the EMPA students in the survey had relatively limited knowledge of Chinese history, political science, public administration, and law. Their on-the-job training has focused primarily on specific technical and administrative issues and political doctrine. Thus they would like an understanding and a broader picture of the intricacy of Chinese politics and the operation of Chinese government at all levels. More important, because of the “group thinking” practiced by Chinese governments, media, and Internet management (Donald, Keane, & Hong, 2002), Chinese public officials are more interested in learning about different opinions and perspectives on Chinese politics and government than about foreign practices.

We also found that although democratization and rule of law are considered crucial by experts for China’s long-term sustainable economic development (Yao, 2010), the ranking by EMPA students (20th) on the knowledge component of “constitutions and administrative law” shows that the importance of democratization and rule of law has not been commonly recognized by Chinese senior public service administrators.

Managerial Competencies

Similar to knowledge components, we found differences between EMPA and MPA respondents in their perceptions of the importance of managerial competencies. In Table 3, we show the rankings of the perceived importance of managerial competencies for both groups of students. EMPA students were more likely to emphasize analytical reasoning competencies (strategic thinking and planning and the ability to apply theory to problem analysis), while MPA students were more likely to prefer group management competence and interpersonal competence (working in teams, motivating others, and managing conflicts). This disparity may be explained by the different professional responsibilities of the two groups.

Table 3.

Perceived Preferences for Managerial Competencies of EMPA and MPA Respondents

Rank	EMPA Students	Mean	MPA Students	Mean
1	Strategic thinking and planning (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.84	Working in teams (Group Management Competence)	2.59
2	Ability to apply theory (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.80	Creativity (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.59
3	Creativity (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.78	Motivating others (Interpersonal Competence)	2.58
4	Negotiation (Interpersonal Competence)	2.76	Managing conflict (Interpersonal Competence)	2.57
5	Motivating others (Interpersonal Competence)	2.74	Strategic thinking and planning (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.56
6	Managing conflict (Interpersonal Competence)	2.73	Negotiation (Interpersonal Competence)	2.56
7	Oral communication (Interpersonal Competence)	2.69	Oral communication (Interpersonal Competence)	2.56
8	Understanding the external environment (Interpersonal Competence)	2.66	Ability to apply theory (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.54
9	Critical thinking (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.65	Written communication (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.52
10	Working in teams (Group Management Competence)	2.65	Taking initiatives (Interpersonal Competence)	2.49
11	Leading people (Group Management Competence)	2.64	Understanding the external environment (Interpersonal Competence)	2.49
12	Written communication (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.62	Leading people (Group Management Competence)	2.48
13	Taking initiatives (Interpersonal Competence)	2.60	Critical thinking (Analytical Reasoning Competence)	2.48
14	Managing time and stress (Intrapersonal Competence)	2.57	Managing time and stress (Intrapersonal Competence)	2.46
15	Giving presentations (Interpersonal Competence)	2.57	Giving presentations (Interpersonal Competence)	2.46

Note. Students were asked to show their preferences for managerial competencies using a 3-point scale (1 = not that useful, 2 = somewhat useful, 3 = very useful). The mean was calculated as the average of student responses. The same mean score for competencies with different ranking is because of the rounding to two decimal places.

As discussed earlier, EMPA students hold management or institutional level positions in their organizations. They are thus responsible for designing organizational rules and procedures, allocating organizational resources, and dealing with the interaction between organizations and their environment. They make decisions and are held accountable for the consequences of their decisions. Therefore, analytical reasoning competencies such as strategic thinking and planning and the ability to apply theory to problem analysis are considered important by EMPA students.

In contrast, most MPA students in China hold positions in lower levels of government and are primarily responsible for implementing decisions and policies made by senior management. They thus need skills about how to work within a team and cooperate with team members to accomplish their missions.

We also found that while both groups rank creativity as an important competency for their career development—EMPA students ranked it third, and MPA students 13th—they did not see the same level of importance for critical thinking. The tension between creativity and critical thinking among Chinese EMPA students and MPA students, in some sense, reflects the conflicts between traditional administrative culture, education, ways of governance, and the rapid changes of political, social, and economic landscapes in contemporary China.

On the one hand, the increasing problems arising in the process of urbanization and democratization in China require public officials to come up with new ideas and devise new policy tools. On the other hand, values such as obedience, rote learning, government secrecy, traditional administrative culture, and education have long-lasting effects on Chinese public officials (Nussbaum, 2010; Piotrowski, Zhang, Yu, & Lin, 2009).

One finding that needs to be further explored is that both groups of students ranked “giving presentations” as the least important managerial competency (both ranked it 15th). A possible explanation could be the difference between Western and Chinese cultures. In Western culture, effectively reporting performance to stakeholders is considered an important part of managerial competence. In the Chinese culture, “speak less and do more” is a moral imperative for public officials (Casimir & Waldman, 2007).

Teaching Methods

In Table 4, we compare the rankings of MPA and EMPA students of seven teaching methods used in public administration education. In general, our findings show that EMPA students were more likely to prefer formal, structured lectures and less likely to favor peer discussions than were MPA students. EMPA students told us that while they have been working in government for a long time, they are rarely trained in public administration and public policy. With very tight schedules, it would be difficult for them to find additional time to systematically learn about public administration and policy. They preferred to take advantage of

the opportunity to learn from teaching materials, assigned articles, and lectures rather than participating in discussions with other students (Wang & Li, personal communication, Jan. 5, 2009). In contrast, MPA students prefer to learn from the experiences of their peers and are more open to interactive teaching methods.

Several EMPA students also told us that they did not like the group projects approach to teaching, because it is time consuming and presents the “free-rider problem.” Some of them told us that some senior officials took advantage of classmates with lower ranks and did not contribute to their group projects. They believe that performance evaluation based on group projects is unfair and does not reflect individual efforts and performance (Huang, Zhao, & Wu, personal communication, Jan. 5, 2009).

Table 4.

Teaching Method Preferences of EMPA and MPA Respondents

Rank	EMPA Students	Mean	MPA Students	Rank
1	Case studies	3.43	Case studies	3.34
2	Formal structured-lecture teaching	3.18	Class discussions led by professors	3.29
3	Site visiting	3.16	Site visiting	3.29
4	Class discussions led by professors	3.08	Group projects and presentations	3.22
5	Group projects and presentations	2.95	Role playing	3.16
6	Role playing	2.89	Peer discussions	3.07
7	Peer discussions	2.69	Formal structured-lecture teaching	2.70

Note. Students were asked to rank seven teaching methods in terms of their effectiveness using a 7-point scale (from 1 = the most effective to 7 = the least effective). The same mean score for teaching methods with different ranking is due to rounding to two decimal places.

Examination Methods

Table 5 shows that EMPA students preferred open-book tests and term papers. MPA students showed much more flexibility in examination methods; close to one third had no preference. Although closed-book exams were the least preferred examination method, 8% of the EMPA respondents selected the closed-book test as their preferred examination method, while none of the MPA students did so. Linking this finding with those concerning teaching methods

would seem to indicate that the traditional Chinese teaching and learning methods emphasizing rote learning and structured teaching have a stronger influence on older Chinese public officials than on the younger generation (Infeld & Li, 2009; Nussbaum, 2010).

Table 5.
Examination Methods Preferences of EMPA and MPA Respondents

Rank	EMPA Students	Percentage	MPA Students	Percentage
1	Open-book exams	39.3%	It depends on the type of course	31.7%
2	Term papers	23.0	Open-book exams	28.3
3	It depends on the type of course	19.7	Take-home exams	24.9
4	Take-home exams	9.8	Term papers	15.1
5	Closed-book exams	8.2	Closed-book exams	0

Note. The percentages indicate the proportions of students who chose the examination method as their favorite.

SUMMARY AND CONCLUSIONS

EMPA education is the next growth area for public administration education in China. In establishing an EMPA program, an important question is how to distinguish it from a regular MPA program. We tried to answer this question based on (a) our surveys of MPA students in six universities in China and students in the EMPA program at NTU; (b) focus group discussions with Chinese EMPA students at NTU; and (c) interviews of deans of five prestigious schools of public administration in China. We found that the demographic differences between the MPA and EMPA students influence their preferences in relation to knowledge components, managerial competencies, and teaching and examination methods.

Our study shows that Chinese EMPA students have a very strong interest in micro- and macroeconomics and in international trade and finance, areas not always stressed in traditional MPA programs. Chinese EMPA students showed a lack of interest in constitutions and administrative law, which constitute the spirit of public administration and are at the core of public administration education worldwide (Frederickson, 2004; Rosenbloom, 2005). Moreover,

Chinese EMPA students showed strong interest in Chinese government and politics rather than in comparative public administration, a subject area that has long been advocated by many public administration scholars and educators (Dahl, 1947; Jreisat, 2005; Peters, 2001). Both EMPA and MPA students expressed their disinterest in research methods that are considered to be important for public administrators and policy makers (McNabb, 2002; Meier, Brudney, & Bohte, 2008).

In terms of teaching and examination methods, the finding that Chinese EMPA students prefer the “hard” teaching and examination approaches instead of peer discussions and group projects reveals that for most senior Chinese public administrators, pursuing an EMPA degree probably is a “catch-up activity.” They prefer hard examination approaches because they believe that those methods are fairer and more efficient. These senior officials are influenced by traditional Confucianism and the idea of meritocracy in which having a good exam score “saves face” and provides better promotion opportunities.

In general, our findings suggest that an EMPA program developed for Chinese public officials consider the following recommendations:

1. Emphasize the practical relevance of an EMPA degree.
2. Balance internationalization and localization.
3. Educate generalists rather than experts in specific policy fields.
4. Cultivate critical thinking.
5. Emphasize the uses of research, and demonstrate how quantitative and qualitative research methods can inform decision making.
6. Use formal structured lectures, and pay special attention to free-rider problems that may occur in group projects.
7. Use exams (closed book and open book) and term papers as primary examination methods to evaluate students’ academic performance.

We acknowledge, however, that EMPA program curricula and pedagogy cannot be developed based solely on the perspectives of current students and educators. EMPA program development must also consider the perspectives of other stakeholders such as government agencies and nonprofit organizations. While there is no body of literature that speaks to these perspectives, Holmes states in her seminal article on Executive MPA programs that assessing their value “usually turns to defining critical competencies necessary for executive leadership in the public sector” (Holmes, 2006, p. 3).

The research presented in this paper has opened the dialogue for identifying critical competencies for EMPA programs in China. The next step in our research is to survey EMPA degree holders from NTU—most of whom hold high positions in all levels of government in China—to ascertain their perspectives on competencies necessary for effective leadership in public service.

Research is also needed to assess the value of an EMPA degree in China and elsewhere. Again, there is no body of literature that speaks to this topic,

but testimonials from EMPA program graduates in the United States provide anecdotal evidence as to the positive value of their degree.⁶ Most are employed by—and many are in charge of—government agencies and nonprofit organizations in the United States. And NASPAA's Executive MPA Committee “is actively pursuing additional opportunities to...articulate the value of Executive MPA programs” (NASPAA, 2011b).

Assessments undertaken to identify the value of the Executive MBA (EMBA) can inform research concerning the value of the EMPA to graduates and its contribution to improving the provision of public services. For example, satisfaction indicators such as that developed by the Executive MBA Council to measure the importance of the EMBA to business school alumni (Executive MBA Council, 2011) could be used to assess the value of the EMPA to program graduates. Surveys such as those conducted by the *Wall Street Journal* to assess company satisfaction with EMBA graduates (Dizik, 2008) could be used to gauge the value of the EMPA degree to public service providers.

In closing, we also suggest that EMPA programs focused on Chinese public officials take advantage of the invaluable socialization process that can be derived from program participation, not only equipping students with practical management strategies and techniques and cultivating their managerial competencies but also stressing the need to “think outside of the box”; the willingness to challenge entrenched stereotypes and assumptions; and, most important, the examination of constitutional and democratic values.

Although Chinese EMPA students are very practically oriented and may seek only the knowledge and skills that they think will help them address immediate management issues, they also need to understand (a) that the *raison d'être* of public organizations is to pursue democratic values as well as administrative efficiencies, and (b) the importance of the rule of law for China's political and economic reforms. Incorporating these values into EMPA programs will not only help Chinese students move ahead in their careers but also help promote excellence in China's public service.

However, despite the support for EMPA degree programs by China's National MPA Education Steering Committee and the strong demand from practitioners for developing these programs, it may take several years for such programs to emerge in China. One reason for this delay is that the Organization Departments of the Chinese Communist Party at various levels of government have concerns that changing admission MPA admissions policies, such as replacing the entrance exam with interviews and other “softer” methods, would compromise the quality of the MPA education and could encourage high-ranking public officials to use various methods to influence admission decisions (Chen, personal communication, Dec. 20, 2009). A second reason might be that MPA education, in general, is still under development in China and pretty much a “foreign thing.” Just as in other realms of administrative reform, the tensions

between internationalization and localization (i.e., how to balance Western culture, values, and ideologies with traditional Chinese culture and socialist ideology), cause concern among many Chinese public administration educators and Chinese governments. This is especially true given that most public officials are Communist Party members (Yang, 2005). When EMPA programs are established in China, however, an appropriate education model that is able to address these tensions is needed. We hope that lessons learned from NTU's EMPA program will inform efforts by Chinese universities as well as universities outside of China to educate experienced public officials.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 Before 2001, the master's degree in public administration in China was called the Master of Administration. For more details, see Yang (2005).
- 2 NASPAA is the institutional membership organization in the United States that promotes excellence in public service education. Its membership includes U.S. university programs in public affairs, public policy, public administration, and nonprofit management as well as selected programs outside of the United States.
- 3 In China, some individuals working for public institutions are not part of the civil service system and therefore are not considered to be civil servants (*Gongwuyuan*).
- 4 Most of NTU's EMPA courses are four credits, but some electives are three credits.
- 5 The Chinese administrative system has five layers: the central government (*Zhongyang*), provinces (*Sheng*), centrally controlled municipalities (*Zhixiashi*), and special administrative regions including Hong Kong and Macau (*Tebixingzhengqu*), municipalities (*Shi*), counties (*Xian*) and townships (*Xiang*).
- 6 See, for example, EMPA student testimonials from Columbia School of International and Public Affairs (Columbia, 2011) and from the Evans School of Public Affairs at Washington University (Evans, 2011).

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