

## **Report of Observations and Recommendations**

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### **Introduction**

The APSU MHA faculty have launched into a significant and important effort to have the MHA program accredited by the Commission on Accreditation of Healthcare Management Education (CAHME). CAHME accreditation is a mark of excellence that allows the program to attract more and better students while also assuring graduates are fully prepared for the workforce. CAHME is the only organization recognized by the Council for Higher Education Accreditation to accredit programs in healthcare management education. Since employment opportunities are increasingly tied to having an accredited degree, this is essential for the growth of the program.

In preparing the initial candidacy documents, faculty collaboratively developed documents that focused on core accreditation requirements, including: statements of mission, vision, and values; program competencies; and goals and objectives. These were reviewed and feedback sent to the faculty for further consideration. Verbal discussions were held via teleconference to provide a depth and context to feedback, as well as more detailed thoughts and recommendations. Additional documents will need to be created to seek accreditation, including a formal self-study; however, these were not yet available and were also not the subject of this consultant's initial CAHME preparation review.

Outlined below are the program's strengths and areas for improvement, as identified through a summative review of all documents provided and all discussions held. Also provided is a summary of potential threats to and opportunities for the program. A list of recommendations is offered through the lens of program development and with the interest of assuring the program is able to successfully navigate the process of accreditation. Finally, a summary of work ahead to achieve accreditation is offered.

### **Program Strengths**

The program faculty have established a firm foundation for a successful accreditation by clarifying the program's Mission, Vision, & Values (M/V/V) and developing a solid competency model that clearly links the M/V/V to the curriculum. These documents form the critical cornerstones of any successful program. All curricular and programmatic decisions should stem from and directly relate to these documents. While some strengthening could be had to the taxonomic levels of certain competencies, these are largely wording changes that can be operationalized through additional edits and connection to course materials and assignments.

Due to its geographic location proximate to one of the nation's premier healthcare markets in Nashville, the program has a wealth of resources in its literal backyard. The healthcare industry here, with its employers and policy makers, is an exceptional asset of the program in terms of potential expert contributors as well as an obvious recruitment base.

Online delivery is a third major strength of the program. The demand for high-quality, competency-driven asynchronous education will only increase. In the summer of July 2017, CAHME adjusted accreditation requirements for online-only or predominantly online programs. These previously were required to have a minimum of 120 residential contact hours. With that accreditation hurdle cleared, and with a well-developed and long-standing program, APSU is in an excellent position to pursue accreditation.

### **Areas for Improvement**

One area for improvement that was noted by this consultant pertains to the program's Goals, Objectives, and Performance Outcomes. While the goals and objectives reflect the competencies and stated values of the program, they do not seem actionable and/or measurable. Goals and objectives should tend towards a more operational model. The S.M.A.R.T. framework – Specific, Measurable, Attainable, Relevant, and Timely – is one that is very both simple and helpful. Site reviewers looking at the current goals and objectives would likely be asking the program faculty and leadership how they expect to measure these aspirations. The more precise and granular these goals and objectives can be made, the more well received they will be by the accreditors; not to mention they will be more useful to the strategic operation and administration of the program.

Related to this, I would encourage consideration of both educational learning outcomes (more like what is stated above) and operational/programmatic outcomes. Both can follow a more measurable format and approach. Think in terms of tools to measure (such as rubrics) more subjective competencies. One tool that might be helpful is an "OGSP" document – objective, goals, strategies, and plans:

- Objective: What is the singular, aspirational objective for which the organization is striving. This will usually be VERY related to your vision statement.
- Goals: 3-5 "SMART" goals
- Strategies: 1-3 strategies for each goal
- Plans: 2-5 plans for each strategy

As the OGSP is constructed, it is important to identify who is responsible (can be multiple people) for each plan to help assure accountability and engagement.

An additional area for improvement relates to the program competencies and how learning is integrated and measured across the curriculum. Competencies that are taught in multiple courses should be more advanced at later stages of the curriculum, with iterative evaluation both within and across courses. Students who are not given opportunities to improve will mostly likely not improve. Faculty should carefully consider how and where each competency/learning outcome will be taught, practiced, evaluated, re-practiced, and re-evaluated. Standardized measurement tools such as rubrics for writing or oral presentation can be helpful when used consistently across all courses by all faculty. This requires careful discussion and planning by the faculty, but is an exercise that will greatly enhance the effectiveness of the program.

Finally, and most importantly, the lack of current and formal leadership for the program is a noted deficiency. Among CAHME's many criteria for accreditation is program leadership and autonomy. This consultant assisted in the program's national search for a program director/faculty member and is

aware of the challenges the program encountered in so doing. To assure a successful drive to accreditation, the importance of recruiting an experienced and skillful leader for the program cannot be overstated.

### **Opportunities/Growth Areas for the Program**

As noted previously, APSU's campus lies less than an hour from one of the nation's premier healthcare hubs in Nashville. Consequently, there exists a tremendous potential to leverage local (Nashville-area) expertise as external advisors and practitioner adjunct faculty to the program, as well as to develop immensely fruitful relationships with these employers to recruit students, as well as to place graduates. An accredited, online program would be very attractive larger national employers such as HCA, Ascension, Community Health Systems, Quorum, Acadia, Brookdale, and others.

It is also recommended that the program connect with Nashville-area professional associations, including local chapters of the American College of Healthcare Executives (ACHE of Middle TN) and the National Association of Health Services Executives (Great Nashville NASHE), as well as TN Hospital Association and TN Primary Care Association. Such connections would not only help inform program development, but would also assist the program to identify broader educational/workforce development needs and the role APSU could play in meeting those needs. Such relationships could also be a boon for program advisers and adjunct faculty as needed.

The program has a clear opportunity to become Tennessee's premier online MHA program. Such a position of excellence should not be undervalued. To achieve this, the university and program must assure excellence in online curriculum delivery. This can be accomplished through curriculum/instructional design efforts to optimize student learning in a virtual and largely or predominantly asynchronous environment. Many best practices exist nationally and the university likely has resources to help program faculty achieve a seamless look and feel and approach to their online courses.

The faculty have created a very comprehensive curriculum that addresses much of the core needs for healthcare administrators. The addition of courses in health information management, organizational leadership, and quality improvement are notable examples. Still, there may be opportunities to further enhance and refine the curriculum. For example, two research methods courses is not consistent with other MHA programs nationally. This second course could potentially be better served by focusing on additional areas of emphasis within healthcare administration: organization of U.S. health systems, population health management, etc.

Finally, to fully establish itself as a nationally player in healthcare management education, the program faculty must become more fully involved nationally through membership in and attendance/presentation at national conferences. In addition to CAHME accreditation, good programs will be institutional members of the Association of University Programs in Health Administration (AUPHA) and faculty will be members of ACHE, NAHSE, and/or other national professional associations. Faculty should have the resources to attend the AUPHA Annual Meeting (in June each year; location varies) and the annual AUPHA Graduate Program and Practitioner Workshop (in Chicago each March). Such participation on a national level will assure the program maintains not only national reputation/recognition, but also stays current with best practices and emerging trends in healthcare management education.

## **Potential Threats to the Program**

In addition to the potential opportunities for the MHA program, there also exists several potential threats that must be accounted for in order for the program to succeed. The first of these is the existence and/or growth and development of other in-state and regional programs (Western KY) and in-state (Lipscomb, ETSU) programs. The University of Memphis has a long-standing, nationally-ranked (#33) program and is expanding with an accredited executive program that will be delivered primarily online. Western Kentucky University also has both traditional and executive MHA programs; and the University of Tennessee (Knoxville) has a healthcare management emphasis within its MBA program. Lipscomb University is the most direct competitor with a location in Nashville and a primarily online program. Finally, East Tennessee State University has previously and for several years discussed launching an MHA program.

The proliferation of online MHA-type programs nationally is an important strategic threat that APSU must address to excel nationally. Given this increasingly competitive space, APSU's MHA program must quickly and proactively identify its competitive advantages, as well as strategies to rise above the competition (cost, value, experience, resources, specializations, etc.).

## **Work Ahead**

As the APSU MHA faculty continue to pursue accreditation, there are several important steps that must be taken. The first is attendance at a CAHME Boot Camp. These are held each March (in Chicago) and each June (location varies). CAHME Boot Camps are led by national accreditation experts and help assure that program leaders (accredited and those seeking accreditation) are aware of the most relevant information and tools.

The CAHME Accreditation Handbook (revised July 2018) is a wonderful resource to program leaders and faculty. Accreditation begins achieving Candidacy. Now that program has submitted its eligibility statement, it must compile and submit information pertaining to accreditation criteria, including:

- Description of the university setting, administrative structure, organizational chart, and accreditation status
- Description of the organization of the Program and its relationships with the primary academic unit in which it is located.
- The Program(s) and/or Degree(s) for which accreditation is sought;
- A statement of Program Mission with supporting goals and measurable objectives.
- A description of how program evaluation is conducted and the role of external stakeholders in this process.
- Information on class size, admission process, student qualifications and student completion rates.
- The organizational structure with assigned primary responsibility for curriculum development, admission standards, faculty selection and retention and fiscal planning;
- The program's identified set of competencies and relationship to the mission and curriculum design

To accomplish these, the program must revise the goals/objectives as noted in this document. The program should also establish an external advisory board that meets at least annually (better if twice annually) to review program progress and advise on critical issues.

Once the candidacy status is approved, CAHME will establish a self-study year. The self-study must be done on one of the four full academic years subsequent to the candidacy approval. The program will then conduct a self-study on all CAHME accreditation criteria and submit this prior to a site visit.

### **Summary of Recommendations**

In conclusion, the APSU MHA program has made great strides in preparation for accreditation, but there exists some important work to be accomplished. The following recommendations have been outlined above:

- Hire full-time program director to provide leadership
- Explore use of practitioner adjunct faculty, especially to meet new teaching needs in the expanded curriculum (quality improvement, organizational leadership, health information management, etc.)
- Consider further curricular revisions to assure the full breadth of necessary topics is covered
- Obtain institutional/programmatic membership in AUPHA and maintain presence/participation at annual meetings and workshops (March and June)
- Identify and leverage instructional design resources (either APSU resources or national best practices) to enhance online delivery
- Develop clear, actionable "S.M.A.R.T." goals
- Utilize an OGSP document to link vision/objective and goals to actionable plans
- Develop rubrics for evaluating written and oral communications, including papers and presentations, to assure consistency and objectivity in student competency assessment

CAHME Accreditation is a critical step in validating a program's excellence in delivery healthcare management education. APSU's MHA program is well along this important trajectory. With additional work and resources, the program's pursuit of accreditation should be successful. Further consultancy and/or mock site visits can help in this process to assure that the program is optimizing its accreditation potential.