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### The MPA and Distance Education: A Story as a Tool of Engagement

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Whether excited by the prospect or not, academics realize that general interest in technology-based distance education is rapidly increasing – a fact which is particularly true for public administration and public policy programs (see, for example, Ebdon, 1999). According to the U.S. Department of Education (1997), as of fall 1995, a third of higher education institutions offered distance education and another quarter planned to offer such courses in the next three years (p. iii). In academic year 1994-1995, approximately 753,640 students were enrolled in an estimated 25,730 distance education courses offered by higher education institutions. Of those, public four-year institutions offered 45 percent, public two-year institutions offered 39 percent, and private four-year institutions offered 16 percent (pp. iii-iv). Degrees and course offerings range from business, to nursing, to social science. Graduate programs in public administration have not escaped the pressure. Interest among MPA programs in distance education has burgeoned suddenly. This is reflected, for example, in attendance at NASPAA panels on the subject. Just three years ago it was difficult to get more than a dozen participants to such panels. In subsequent years they have seen standing-room-only. Even more noteworthy is the fact that NASPAA has recently adopted new accreditation standards and guidelines addressing distance education (COPRA, 1999, pp. 24-26). NASPAA is, at least in principle, ready to embrace distance education as a legitimate component of MPA programs. Things are moving quickly, and we detect an air of urgency among politicians and administrators to jump on the distance-education bandwagon. Indeed, Rahm and Reed (1997) have conducted surveys that indicate that these officials are responsible for much of the pressure now put on faculty to offer distance courses. In this context, we offer some insight on the promise and peril of MPA distance education. We must add a caution, however, that we do not present such insight as definitive knowledge about distance learning. Rather, we treat it as “our story” – one through which we may engage readers in the process of exploring distance learning and contributing to its evolution among public administration programs. In this regard, we follow Ralph Hummel (1991) who treats “stories” as a more appropriate and common means of knowledge acquisition in the managerial world (p. 32). Merisotis and Phipps (1999) argue that experimental, descriptive, correlational, and case studies are the only appropriate way to assess the differences between distance and classroom-based learning (p. 13). We do not claim, therefore, to be detached observers, proffering an explanatory theory and presenting “objective” findings. Rather, we wish to contribute to the process of intersubjectively defining distance learning and its emerging problems in the field. We offer our story “as a tool of engagement” for others who are entering the distance-learning world (Hummel, 1991, pp. 36-37). We hope, as a result, to provoke discussion and argument about the nature and implications of this new pedagogical frontier. This paper draws on our experience as University of Wyoming MPA faculty in developing and conducting a state-wide, distance-based MPA Program over a ten-year period. In doing so, this paper maintains that programmatic success is the result of a confluence of factors not the least of which include establishing the evidence of “need” for distance education, tailoring individual distance education programs to the uniqueness of the community, providing intrinsic and extrinsic rewards to faculty who participate, establishing upper level administrative support, and encouraging faculty and administrative support mechanisms flexible enough to manage the conflicts in perspective, new bureaucratic routines, and evolving technologies. In addition, a primary theme of this paper is that beyond institutional and organizational support, success relies on building and maintaining student/faculty rapport. We believe that MPA faculty, administrators, and students at other universities will find our experience of some interest. Colleges and Universities worldwide are now confronting the question of how they can use distance education to attract new students, cut costs, or even make money (Rahm & Reed, 1997; Cartwright, 1994), and find more productive uses for all the communications technology they are acquiring (Lewington, 1995). Toward this goal we begin with a brief history of UW’s MPA distance program, and then present our thoughts on the pedagogical, organizational, and administrative aspects of our experience.

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