

## MPA Comprehensive Exam Question Examples

*Be aware that questions evolve over time as do the respective core courses. Nonetheless, this list can give you a sense of the types of questions which have reflected the various core domains. It is essential that you study the materials from your core courses to prepare for the exams: do not solely rely on this document as a study guide. These sample questions do not cover the entire range of important learning objectives from the core courses. Some questions may fit into more than one of the core domains shown, and exam questions may integrate across multiple domains.*

*Note: Statistics (PADM 6110) is not assessed on the MPA comprehensive exam. Therefore sample questions from only eight core course areas are shown below.*

*For more information on the format of the exam, how it is evaluated, and the scheduled exam date for the semester, please see the [Online MPA Handbook](#) (Section IX. The MPA comprehensive exam requirement) and the links provided in that section. If you have further questions, please check with your [advisor](#) or (in summer) the [department chair](#).*

### **Seminar in Public Administration**

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1. “Do public sector managers have to participate in the policy making process? Why? How? Isn’t it the manager’s job to just implement policies made by elected officials? Why do they have to be involved in policy-making and what kinds of skills and resources do they need to develop?” These questions have been actively explored throughout the development of public administration scholarship. Write an essay discussing the major perspectives on these questions either of the key theorists who have discussed the “proper” role of the public sector manager or from the key era(s) in public administration where that “proper” role has been debated. Include the strengths and weaknesses of the theoretical or historical perspectives you include.
2. Explain why public organizations are said to be more difficult to evaluate than private organizations. Why is this important for early-career public administrators to know?
3. Contemporary public administration has been powerfully influenced by the broader governmental system of which it is a part: by past and present political and administrative values and by contemporary social change. In recent years, increasing attention has been paid to public ethics and ‘reinventing government’ at all levels. Referring to the relevant literature, do you envision this recent trend as a permanent feature in the profession or only a fleeting phenomenon?
4. Based on the United States Constitution, which “internal and external stakeholders,” in the policymaking process, possess “constitutional legitimacy” for their role in making public policy? Do entities with “explicit power” have more influence than those entities with “implied powers” in making public policy? Should they? Why or why not?

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5. In trying to explain the constant tension built into the public manager's role writers frequently mention at least three of the following concepts:
  - a. Administrative discretion
  - b. Responsibility
  - c. Professionalism
  - d. Legal authority
  - e. Politicization

Explain to a reader outside the field how these pressures shape the complex and conflict-ridden nature of this profession.

6. Discuss the similarities and differences between the Weberian bureaucratic model, scientific management, and the "principles" approach to studying public organizations. Describe the basis of each theory and its **impact** on the development of American public administration. Also explain why critics contend these theories are not in tune with the "practice" of American public administration.
7. A fundamental assumption of administrative reformers in the late 1800s and early 1900s was that politics could have only adverse effects on administration. How valid is that belief? Why? How, and to what extent, do current administrative structures and practices reflect that assumption? And do you see another side to politics, i.e. as a constructive force in governance?
8. Several theories have been discussed throughout the semester dealing with the proper way of defining and organizing institutions in the public sector. In your opinion, which theory is most appropriate in defining and organizing public institutions? Which theory is the most ludicrous? Explain.
9. In examining the literature of public administration over its brief history, discuss the arguments that public administration is a science, a profession, and/or a craft. Which authors and arguments are the most appropriate today and why?
10. Practicing ethical public administration entails many different behaviors both internally (within the organization) and externally (outside the organization). Elaborate on the ways that corruption and graft have been discussed throughout the history of public administration, and the steps that have been taken to curtail unethical behavior. Be sure to address the role the Friedrich-Finer debate has played in the evolution of responsibility versus accountability in public sector management.
11. Regardless of a public administrator's formal position within an organization, leadership is understood as one of the key requirements for being an effective public sector manager. Drawing upon your MPA studies, address how the concept of a "good" public sector leader has changed over time. Furthermore, discuss the competing and complementary demands of being an effective internal and external leader in the public sector.
12. It is essentially impossible for any governmental unit to operate alone; therefore, it is essential for public administrators to understand the nature of intergovernmental administration and the impact of federalism. Discuss the five key eras of intergovernmental administration in the U.S.,

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and how fiscal federalism impacts intergovernmental relationships. Finally, discuss the intergovernmental tensions that emerge within states between the state, county, and municipal levels of government, and what can be done to shift from competition to cooperation.

### Public Policy Analysis

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1. In what ways can interest groups influence the making and implementation of public policy?
2. Imagine that a portion of “Interstate 100” under construction in Jones County is strongly opposed by local residents. Assume Jones County is a semirural county lying within a larger metropolitan area associated with a large central city. As a policy analyst for the Governor’s Office, you have been asked to perform a stakeholder analysis of the issue. In writing that analysis, also include a discussion of who has primary standing and who has no standing.
3. The essential consensus among policy analysis professionals is that the rational model of public policymaking represents the standard normative model (what “should be”) for understanding and analyzing public policy. Identify and define all stages the rational model of policy analysis, illustrating the stages using any public policy you would like. Do you believe this rational model also serves as a descriptive model (what “does happen”)? Why or why not? Thoroughly explain your answer; you may find it useful to draw on Deborah Stone’s work here.
4. Explain the concept of Pareto efficiency. What is its relevance to policy analysis, given that it is an abstract benchmark unlikely to be achieved by most policies that are subject to debate? Continue by explaining the Kaldor-Hicks compensation principle and its significance to rational policy analysis – in particular, the practice of cost/benefit analysis. What makes the Kaldor-Hicks compensation principle a “weaker” criterion to satisfy than the Pareto criterion? Do you think Kaldor-Hicks is a sound basis for making policy decisions; why or why not?
5. Discuss the nature of the “externality” market failure. What are possible policy responses to remedy this situation? Contrast the approaches of Pigou (based on taxes or subsidies) and Coase (based on assignment of property rights) in your answer, and illustrate by describing a negative externality of your choice and potential policy remedies. If faced with a negative policy externality, would you as an analyst tend to advocate for a Pigouvian or Coasian approach? What factors would influence your decision?
6. Markets, politics, and experts can each be a source of accountability for a policy after it is implemented. Each thus can fill an *ex post* (“after the fact”) policy analysis function. Under what conditions do markets serve as a useful *ex post* evaluation of a policy’s success? What question can the market answer about a policy? Under what conditions can politics serve as a useful *ex post* evaluation of a policy’s success? What question can politics answer about a policy? What types of *ex post* evaluation do experts carry out, and what question does each attempt to answer?
7. Deborah Stone’s work *The Policy Paradox* explores the way that core values or goals that policy analysts in the rational mode may take for granted are actually highly contested in the intrinsically political policy arena. Choose one of the following values, discussed in that text, and

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explain how her thesis applies: equity; efficiency; liberty; or security. Illustrate your discussion with examples from past or present policy debates whenever possible.

### **Information Technology**

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1. Information technology (IT) has impacted public administration theories and practice. In terms of the impact of technology on social and organizational change, what are the three main theories of public administration and IT? Discuss how the three theories examine the impact of IT on organizational change with an example.
2. Information and communication technology (ICT) plays a critical role in building e-democracy in which broadening citizen participation by enabling the public to connect with one another. As a case of ICT, what role do social media technologies have in building e-democracy? Discuss the pros and cons of social media use in enhancing trust and confidence in government.
3. e-Participation, as civic engagement based on Information and communication technology (ICT), has contributed to the policy-making process of government. What are the three models of e-participation? Discuss at least three dimensions of e-participation by using the three models on a continuum.
4. What is e-governance? Is it a concept or paradigm? Discuss how e-governance changed public service delivery at local level.
5. How is e-government different from or similar to bureaucracy? Explain changes seen in a shift from bureaucratic to e-government paradigm.
6. In terms of information security and privacy, cybersecurity is one of the greatest challenges that current governments encounter. What are the sources of emerging cybersecurity threats? Discuss what are the key components of government's cybersecurity plan.
7. What are the major ethical issues involved with the expansion of the information age?
8. Discuss the computer network: the advantages and disadvantages, way it can be compromised, and security issues.
9. In what ways has information technology increased or decreased accountability of public sector agencies. How does this affect the public's right to know?
10. Discuss the implications of IT for "the human side of the enterprise."
11. Explain how organizational structure and IT facilitate (or hinder) the creation of work groups, the use of power, and job satisfaction.

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### **Public Budgeting and Finance**

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1. “On what basis shall we allocate resources to program A instead of program B,” is the perennial statement in public sector budgeting. Identify and discuss at least five attempts, found in the budgeting literature, used to answer V.O. Key’s famous budgeting question. In your professional judgment, which type of budgeting system is most appropriate for public administration? Why do you feel this way?
2. Compare and contrast, in as many discrete ways as you can, the US federal budget process and state/local budgeting.
3. Define – then compare and contrast – line-item budgeting, performance budgeting, planning programming budgeting system (PPBS), and zero-base budgeting (ZBB). What are the features, advantages, and disadvantages of each? Which do you think should be used today? Defend your answer.
4. Describe the FOUR classical types of potential market failure, in detail, and provide examples of each type. What is the relevance of the concept of market failure to government intervention in the economy? Explain as fully as possible.
5. Pick an agency (government or nonprofit). Briefly describe the agency and its function, and then give concrete examples of inputs, outputs, and outcomes relevant to the core function of this agency. Which of these three elements does a traditional line-item budget focus on? When pressed to develop performance measures, which (outcomes or outputs) would will the agency tend to propose? Why? Which (outputs or outcomes) will the principal (legislative, executive, or funder in the case of a nonprofit) attempt to compel the agency to use? Why?
6. Federal, state and local governments use a variety of taxation policies to generate revenue, and these policies are coordinated in a number of ways. “Source separation” is evident in the way certain types of tax instrument tend to be associated with each of these levels of government. Explain this statement, and give an example for each level of government. In those cases where tax bases are shared, however, what other types of coordination mechanisms are possible? Give examples.
7. Tiebout’s theory has important implications for fiscal federalism. Explain this statement as fully as you can, and provide real-world or hypothetical examples to illustrate your explanation; clearly your essay must address what Tiebout’s theory and fiscal federalism are as a starting point.
8. A variety of Federal legislative reforms have sought to address the erosion of budgetary norms and process discipline and the growth of the deficit. Discuss these as fully as you can. Does the same issue arise at the state level? Explain.
9. Distinguish between operating and capital budgeting. Include a summary of the prevalence of capital budgeting across the levels of US government (federal, state, local) in your answer. Why might a jurisdiction practice separate operating and capital budgets? Why is debt finance potentially appropriate for capital budgeting but not for operating budgets?

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10. Discuss thoroughly two of the principles often used in evaluating tax policy: ability to pay (include horizontal and vertical equity), and the benefits principle. Can these principles typically be satisfied simultaneously? Why or why not? Provide an example of a tax policy or instrument which primarily emphasizes the “ability-to-pay” principle and also an example which primarily emphasizes the “benefits” principle.

### **Research Methods**

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1. Considering the possible relationship between education and gender, describe how to examine the relationship through deductive and inductive methods.
2. What distinguishes a quantitative method from a qualitative method? Explain three characteristics of both methods as well as mixed methods.
3. What is the unit of analysis? Discuss two types of faulty reasoning about units of analysis: the ecological fallacy and reductionism.
4. Explain operationalization using the relationship between concepts and variables. What are the levels of measurement in operationalization?
5. A good measurement should be both valid and reliable. What is validity and reliability? Discuss a tension between reliability and validity with an example.
6. Questionnaires are generally administered in one of four main ways: through self-administered questionnaires, face-to-face interviews, telephone surveys, or online survey. What are the strengths and weaknesses of the four ways?
7. To discuss the strengths and weaknesses of experiments, surveys, and field research, choose a general research area of public administration (such as performance, accountability, and public service motivation) and write brief descriptions of studies in that area that could be conducted using each of these three methods. In each case, explain why the chosen method is the most appropriate for the study you describe.
8. Discuss how the time series designs and the comparison group pretest-post design (before-and-after-with-control group designs) compare to the experimental design in handling threats to internal validity. Cite the relevant threats to internal validity in your discussion.
9. Assume you are a researcher in a state’s department of health. One of the programs in the department is designed to improve neonatal care. The aims of the program are to reduce neonatal deaths. The program seeks to do this by providing certification when neonatal facilities and personnel in the hospitals reached a prescribed adequate level. Hospitals are not required by law to be certified but receive some financial assistance when they are. Describe and discuss two alternative research designs that would allow you to evaluate the success of the program. What are the key questions you will ask, and how will your design allow you to answer these questions?

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10. A public relations office of the State of Tennessee considers two alternative plans to evaluate a change in how it uses press releases.

Plan A: Send press releases 1-5 (Group 1) using the existing approach. Send press releases 6-10 (Group 2) using the new approach. All newspapers on their list will receive both groups of releases. Compare average number of news items resulting from Group 1 with average number resulting from Group 2.

Plan B: Compare average number of news items appearing in three groups of newspapers.

- Group 1: 25 randomly assigned papers will receive press releases 1-5 using the new approach.
  - Group 2: 25 randomly assigned papers will receive press releases 1-5 using the old approach.
  - Group 3: 25 remaining papers will not receive press releases 1-5.
- a. Evaluate how plan A and Plan B control for any two of the following threats to internal validity, maturation, and selection.
- b. What is the advantage of including group 3 in Plan B?
- c. Someone proposes applying Plan A to only 40 randomly selected newspapers. No data will be collected on the other newspapers. The person proposing this approach argues that this strategy controls for selection as a threat to internal validity. Do you agree with this observation? Justify your answer.

### Organization Theory

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1. "Open systems theory" has been used to explain organizations. Explain open systems theory using examples from the public or nonprofit sectors of society. Is this theoretical construct useful in illuminating "why organizations exist?"
2. Tom Burns & G.M. Stalker (1961) in *Mechanistic & Organic Systems* stipulated that two types of management systems are essential in defining organizations: "Mechanistic & Organic Systems." Distinguish the differences between these two management systems. From which school of thought are these two scholars theorizing about organizations? What are the basic tenets of this school of thought?
3. Henry Mintzberg, in *The Five Basic Parts of the Organization*, and again in *The Power Game and the Players*, wrote about the structure of the organization from the modern structural school of thought, and the power and politics school of thought. Describe and define the "structural" components of Mintzberg's argument in *The Five Basic Parts of the Organization*. Secondly, what modifications did he make to his model in *The Power Game and the Players*?
4. The power and politics school of thought expresses concerns over how to define "power and politics." Delineate the differences between the terms "power and politics." What are the "five types" of power in public organizations, according to the instructors *interesting and thought provoking* lecture? How is power achieved in the organization? How does power become authority?

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5. The Neoclassical school of thought emerged as a result of certain aspects that classical scholars failed to account for in the development of organization theory. One scholar in particular (Simon) is given credit for “challenging” the classical school of organization theory. What additions to organization theory did he contribute that lead to refinements in how we study and view public organizations?
6. Classical organization theory deals with the “systematic processes necessary to make bureaucracy more efficient and effective.” Two scholars (Weber and Taylor) are credited with the development of classical organization thought. What were the basic arguments articulated by each in their contributions to the development of classical organization theory?
7. Organizational culture is the culture that exists in an organization, “something akin to a societal culture.” Therefore, organizational culture is “contextually driven” and is comprised of many intangible things such as “*values, beliefs, assumptions, perceptions, artifacts, and patterns of behavior.*” What does all this mean? Use the previously stated concepts in answering your question (e.g., “unwritten rules” and “unspoken language”).
8. In the class lecture on leadership, six approaches to “effective leadership” in organizations were discussed. What are these leadership techniques, and which style of leadership, in your opinion, is most appropriate for public and nonprofit organization theory?
9. According to Jones, there are three kinds of product structures: product division structure, multidivisional structure, and a product team structure. Identify and discuss each structure. What are some competing alternatives to structuring the organization based on the product? In the context of public organization theory, which structure is most appropriate for bureaucratic organizations? Why?
10. Parkinson’s Law stipulates that “growth in the number of managers and hierarchical levels is controlled by two principles,” what are these principles and how do they work in controlling the hierarchy? In public organizations, do we need to control the hierarchy? If so why? In your explanation, discuss how Jones uses the concepts of centralization and decentralization in controlling the hierarchy.

### **Politics of Administration**

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1. A fundamental assumption of administrative reformers in the late 1800s and early 1900s was that politics could have only adverse affects on administration. How valid is that belief? Why? How, and to what extent, do current administrative structures and practices reflect that assumption? Finally, suggest a few of the many ways in which bureaucrats can use knowledge of system politics to further the public interest.
2. In attempting to define the field of public administration several authors have commented that PA has its origins in the progressive era and the reform of government and/or society. The field, according to these authors, has not ever deviated from these roots. Explain how this statement is or is not true today.



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3. How can bureaucrats and bureaucracies be held accountable? By whom and by what means can they be held accountable? Describe the steps and the measures that can be taken to increase bureaucratic accountability. How do the judicial, the executive, and the legislative branches of government hold bureaucrats and bureaucracies accountable?
4. Federalism is a distinct characteristic of American democracy. Explain the history of federalism and identify the three leading models utilized by scholars in understanding how federalism works in American democracy. Which model is commonly used today in understanding federalism and what purpose do bureaucrats have in administering the public's will according to the ideal of federalism?
5. What is public administration? Define bureaucracy and identify the job functions performed by agency members as expressed by the public's will. Is there constitutional legitimacy for public administration? If so, what powers are given to public administrators to formulate and implement the public's will?
6. Administrative agencies in a sense replicate three constitutional powers exercised by the executive, legislature and courts. First, identify these powers and discuss how they are used by public bureaucracies in American government.

### **Public Personnel Management**

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1. What roles does human resources management play in a public or nonprofit sector organization fulfilling its mission and effectively pursuing its strategic goals?
2. Employment anti-discrimination laws have changed in many ways over the years. Discuss these key changes, and how these legal shifts relate to an HR Manager's continuous effort to negotiate internal personnel changes and external legal changes.
3. In many ways there is a symbiotic relationship between employee development and performance management. Discuss the relationship between the two HR management functions, and how you can effectively use performance management to ensure effective employee development and use employee development to ensure high-quality employee performance.
4. Public sector HR Managers have an obligation to effectively manage a diverse workforce. Discuss why this is so important in the public sector, the value of diversity for an organization, and how managing diversity and complying with anti-discrimination laws are *not* the same.