

# **Fit or Miss? Preparing the Next Generation of Public Servants Thursday, February 5, 2009, 4:30 to 8:00 p.m., St. Lawrence Hall**

**Co-sponsored by IPAC National and IPAC Toronto Region Group**

## **Report summary prepared by Sarah Shurr**

### **The Toronto Event**

The Toronto region is home to five post-graduate public administration and policy schools. Graduates of these programs go on to find rewarding work in government, broader public, private and non-profit sectors. However, it is important to question if the graduates are ready for the challenges they will face in the workplace, and what other skills or knowledge could be developed by the students, enabling them to be more successful and be more attractive candidates for employers upon completion of their programs.

IPAC's Toronto Region Group (TRG) held an information and networking event to bring together current and prospective students, professors, public servants, and employers. The event explored the fit between the competencies required to excel as a new public policy professional and the skills and curriculum taught in the Toronto area public policy and administration programs

The event began with a moderated panel discussion, where panelists responded to four questions focusing on the theme of "Head, Heart and Hands". Head – inquiring if students are receiving adequate, analytical training. Heart – inquiring to the level of public service values taught, and integrated into the students' learning experiences. Hands – to know if students are being shown the mysterious art and skill of getting things accomplished. The discussion panel questions consisted of:

1. What do new graduates need to know?
2. How do new grads measure up?
3. How do the schools' address these needs?
4. What is the experience of graduates on the job? Do they feel well prepared or not?

Panelists included:

- Dr. David Zussman, President of the Canadian Association of Programs in Public Administration (CAPPA) and Stephen Jarislowsky Chair of Public Sector Management, University of Ottawa (moderator)
- Dr. Gervan Fearon, Associate Dean, Atkinson Faculty of Liberal and Professional Studies, York University
- André Côté, Graduate Student, School of Public Policy and Governance, University of Toronto
- Peter Heimler, Senior Principal, KPMG, attended in the absence of Richard M. Harris, Partner, Advisory Services, KPMG
- Dr. Carolyn Johns, Associate Professor, Department of Politics and Public Administration, Ryerson University
- Larry Till, Assistant Director, Ontario Ministry of Finance/Revenue and Faculty Member, Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning

The audience of 128 included 48 students and 80 participants from academic institutions, the federal, provincial and municipal governments, and private sector employers.

Following the panel, participants were given the opportunity to talk with others through a "Table Talk" exercise. Four discussion questions were provided:

1. What are the areas of strong preparation in the view of graduates and host organizations?
2. What are the weaker areas?
3. How does this fit with the schools' goals and programs?
4. What are the responsibilities of the graduates and employers to make the fit work?

From the exercise, several discussion themes emerged including: the need for students to have core competencies (communication, analytical, priorities, and adaptability), values and ethics, leadership. The discussions focused on the importance for students and new professionals to gain practical experience (internships, co-ops and placements) and the strategic use of tools and networking for success. Many of the tables directed discussions towards the various skills required of new professionals, including: French language, team-building, management, research, and communication skills.

A representative of a school or employer organization served as the “host” of each table and they were asked to present in the report back session. Panellists were encouraged to join a table and contribute to discussions. The report back session lasted approximately 30 minutes. A (buffet) networking dinner followed and allowed participants to visit a specific host table of their choice.

## **Hosts**

This event was co-sponsored by IPAC Toronto Region Group and IPAC National. Table hosts included representatives from the University of Toronto, York University, Ryerson University and the Humber Institute of Technology and Advanced Learning, as well as the Ontario Public Service, KPMG and the City of Toronto.

## **Survey Monkey Evaluation Results**

After the event, participants were invited to fill out a short survey on the Survey Monkey system, indicating their thoughts on the event, reflecting on their expectations and how the event met them (or not). The results were for the most part encouraging, with many participants taking the time to answer the qualitative question.

1. To what extent was the event of value to you?
  - The majority of the participants found it either somewhat valuable or very valuable (20 and 17 of 60 responses respectively)
2. The ‘table talk’ group discussion and report back was beneficial and met my expectations
  - The majority said that they mostly agreed (32 of 59 responses)
3. The networking hour was engaging and met my expectations
  - The majority said that they mostly agreed or completely agreed (25 and 20 of 58 responses respectively)

Other comments or suggestions included:

- More representation from the private sector and NGOs
- Better acoustics and lighting in the hall
- Making events more interactive and engaging
- More focus on the applicability of the programs to the workplace rather than a review of the programs
- More representation of public servants over academics
- A good first step in building relationships among schools, practitioners and employers; a follow-up event would be useful.

## **Conclusions**

A very successful event from all perspectives, Fit or Miss succeeded in actively raising the profile of public policy schools, while also providing information to students and employers. It also succeeded in creating bridges between “Town and Gown” and increased networks within public policy and public administration communities. IPAC and TRG-IPAC both benefited from this joint event and it could serve as a model for other regional group events.