Chapter 10

Development and Outcomes of a New Institutional Ranking System for Public Administration Research and Scholarship

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ABSTRACT

The focus of the chapter will be two-fold: concentration on input and outcomes of an international, institutional ranking for scholarship and research. After a review of the literature, the first portion will examine the development of a new objective institutional ranking system for public administration research and scholarship. Emphasis will be placed on differences and similarities from previous institutional ranking systems. The second portion will focus on the outcomes and resultant consequences – both intended and unintended – for development of an international ranking system away from traditional domestic methodologies based on reputational-subjective measures.

INTRODUCTION

Public administration is a discipline relatively underexplored when discussing the use of ranking systems. In the context of the United States, a common measure for public administration programs can be found in the use of the U.S. News and World Report on Graduate Programs in Public Affairs. Curiously, these rankings use a singular Likert Scale question to determine the perception of significance a program has within the discipline. This is not an uncommon practice in public administration - or many other disciplines for that matter. According to Garand and Graddy (1999), perception is a common practice in

previous uses of ranking systems for public administration research and programs. This also translates into a perception-based ranking of journals that are discipline-relevant.

Whilst use of perception can be justified in the context of a singular field of study through 'knowledge of the discipline,' it leaves a significant gap psychologically and statistically. In terms of psychology, there is a tendency for 'groupthink' to occur when stronger individuals are able to impose their will on others (Janis, 1971). This could certainly be relevant in any form of perception-based ranking. For example, the journal that is the place of publication can easily sway the conversation of what journals, scholars and programs are 'best' in the field. Having these 'drivers' leads to problems of bias in the ranking systems. Such bias partially identifies the statistical gap within these ranking systems. Firstly, perception as a parameter is to willingly accept bias - or error - into the system. It could be argued that this is one of the biggest mistakes that could be made in the development of these systems. Secondly, and more in an effort to address the problem of the U.S. News and World Report ranking system, using ordinal data and expressing results with means as the measure of central tendency is statistically incorrect (O'Sullivan et al., 2007). Therefore, efforts to develop new systems must account for these normative and empirical problems prior to attempting to produce results labeled as significant in any discipline.

In an attempt to evaluate and react to these perception-based criteria, the following chapter explores these criteria and presents an alternative in the area of research within public administration. The first section of the chapter develops a background of the extant literature relating to rankings systems within public administration while highlighting the relevance to the developments made by the proposed changes found within this chapter. In the second section, the presentation of a newly designed ranking system utilizing Thomson Reuters Journal Citation Reports as a tool for evaluating discipline-specific research is examined with justification for the unique indexing strategy associated with the ranking system. Finally, the third section details the usefulness of the ranking system by examining its applications and limitation.

BACKGROUND

The usage of ranking systems and bibliometrics have become "increasingly common" in public administration, university management, and science policy (Van De Walle & Van Delft, 2015, p. 87). Perry (1995) noted that the rankings of public administration not only communicate prestige but in a broader sense, rankings symbolize the growing professionalization and legitimacy of public administration. Publications such as the U.S. News and World Reports, in the ratings, give public administration the same standing as sociology, political science, nursing, and economics. Adams (2006) illustrates the relevance of this in expanding on Perry's (1995) discussion and explaining that this growth gives public administration the ability to dissociate from the view that it is merely a subfield of political science.

Ranking and indexing within the field of public administration, and other related disciplines, is a highly debated and controversial topic for the field and its classification. In any given ranking system there will be obvious inherent limitations and subjectivity concerning the outcomes on an academic level. Previous studies, as well as the ones presented here, have within their design and methodology both positives and negatives that lend to this controversy and debate. However, despite methodological shortcomings university 'rankings' are often taken at face value.

Olssen and Peters (1998) cite the growth of ranking systems as reflective of a more general impact by globalization, as well as, the increased influence of New Public Management within higher education. Olssen and Peters (1998) continued that demand from policymakers and universities for indicators

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