Chapter 1

The Educational Quality of the Doctoral Programs in Public Affairs:
A Comparative Analysis of the National Research Council Data

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ABSTRACT

Public affairs scholars have been concerned about the quality of education in their field for some decades. To assess the program quality, the authors analyzed the National Research Council's most recent data. In the comparative analyses between the public affairs programs and the programs in other social science disciplines, they found that public affairs doctoral programs were behind their peer fields on most of the input-based metrics (students fully funded in their first year of education, median quantitative GRE scores, and percentage of international students in programs) but ahead of them in student-faculty ratios. The results of the outcome-based metrics were mixed. Public affairs students graduated earlier on average, but smaller percentages of them had plans for employment in academic positions. Also, the faculty productivity was lower in public affairs programs compared to the other social science disciplines. Among the subfields of public affairs, public management and public policy had more favorable input- and outcome-based results compared to public administration.

INTRODUCTION

The quality of the education in public administration programs have been a concern among the scholars of this field since the 1980s (Adams & White, 1994; Cleary, 1990, 2000; Farber Powers & Thompson, 1984; Forrester, 1996; Legge & Devore, 1987; McCurdy & Cleary, 1984; Morgan, et al., 1981; White, 1986). After the occasional early assessments of program quality conducted by these authors, more regular rankings of the quality of master's programs in public affairs have been conducted by the US News since 2002 (Morçöl & Han, 2017). The National Research Council (NRC) included the doctoral programs in public affairs for the first time in 2005 in their rankings of doctoral programs in the U.S. (Ostriker et al., 2011). The methodologies of the US News and NRC rankings have been scrutinized by some scholars and alternatives proposed in recent decades (Fowler, Frederickson & Koppel, 2016; Frederickson, 2001; Morçöl & Han, 2017; Williams, Slagle & Wilson, 2014). NASPAA, the primary accreditation organization of public affairs programs, issued a white paper on the problems and prospects of the US News rankings (Drudy & Shires, 2017).

In this chapter, the authors aim to contribute to the ongoing debates on program quality in public affairs with comparative analyses of the NRC's assessments of the doctoral programs in public affairs with the programs in other social sciences fields. To clarify the focus our study, educational program category of "public affairs," which is used commonly by the US News and NRC, includes programs in public administration public policy analysis, specialized public policy programs, and combined policy analysis and administration programs. In the analyses, the authors compared the programs in this combined category of public affairs with the other social science programs in the NRC database and made comparisons among the subcategories of public affairs among themselves.

To provide a context for the categories used in the analyses and the ongoing concerns about quality and rankings of public affairs programs, the authors note that these concerns are fueled at least partly by the relative newness of the subfields of public affairs, public administration and public policy analysis, compared to the well-established social science fields like sociology, psychology, and economics. Public administration and public policy analysis emerged from political science in the early 20th century and mid-20th century respectively. Each of these subfields has somewhat different areas of focus and scholarly traditions, but some researchers found that their educational programs have many components in common (Morçöl et al., 2020; Perry, 2016). The commonalities between these two subfields provide the justification for the assessments of their programs together. The differences between the two suggest that comparisons between them may yield meaningful results.

Also, it is important to compare these two subfields with their intellectual relatives. Political science can be considered as the "mother discipline" for both. The "founders" of public administration in the early 20th century in the US, such as Woodrow Wilson and Frank Goodnow, were political scientists (or, perhaps more appropriately, political theorists). Some of the major intellectual contributors to public administration in later decades, such as Dwight Waldo, also had their intellectual roots in political science. Harold Lasswell, who formulated the principles of "policy sciences," which later evolved into public policy analysis, was an eminent political scientist. So, it is meaningful and important to compare the educational programs in public affairs disciplines with those in political science.

Waldo (1984), who played a significant role in sharing the intellectual traditions of public administration cited business management and (administrative) law as the two other sources of public administration scholarship. Therefore, it is meaningful and important to make comparisons between public administration and these fields. In an earlier study, Wright (2011) also compared public administration

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