Public Administration as an Interdisciplinary Field: Assessing Its Relationship with the Fields of Law, Management, and Political Science

Public administration is an interdisciplinary field, building on a variety of disciplinary approaches and values. But how well does the field of public administration reflect those values and processes? In contrast to previous arguments regarding the degree to which the field does or should incorporate values and lessons from other academic disciplines, this study provides a systematic assessment of the field’s reliance on research and theory from the fields of law, management, and political science. An analysis of journal citations across these fields suggests that research in public administration is largely isolated from the three disciplines that are commonly believed to form its foundation.

Public administration is an interdisciplinary field that builds on a variety of disciplinary approaches and values (Kettl and Milward 1996; Rosenbloom 1983). Even so, there are three disciplines that form the underlying foundation of the field. In addition to the traditional managerial emphasis on efficiency and effectiveness, the field of public administration is heavily influenced by the representative and responsive nature of our political system, as well as our legal system’s emphasis on individual rights and social equity. Thus, public administration is an interdisciplinary field, defined by the need to address conflicting political, legal, and managerial values and processes (Rosenbloom 1983).

But exactly how well does the field of public administration reflect those values and processes? Several scholars have suggested that the field has ignored key managerial (Kelman 2007), political (Appleby 1945; Box et al. 2001; Sayre 1958), or legal values and processes (Box et al. 2001; Moe and Gilmour 1995; Rosenbloom 2007). Others have criticized the field for failing to keep up with the theoretical (Rhodes 1991; Van Wart 2003; Wright 2001) and methodological (Brower, Abolafia, and Carr 2000; Cozetto 1994; Houston and Delavan 1990, 1994; Rhodes 1991; White, Adams, and Forrester 1996; Wright, Manigault, and Black 2004) approaches of relevant disciplines. While arguments about the relative importance or prevalence of these disciplines are useful in keeping the field balanced, such arguments are inevitably subjective and tend to begin with base assumptions that favor one set of disciplinary values over another. Arguments regarding the field’s failure to keep up with the contemporary theory and research of relevant disciplines can be supported by data, but usually are made on a topic-by-topic basis and are prone to counterarguments regarding that topic’s relative worth or applicability in the public administration context. The objective of either argument, however, is to redirect the efforts of the field.

The objective of this research note is not so ambitious. In contrast to previous normative arguments regarding what the field should or should not do, the current study informs these prescriptions for the field by providing a broad but systematic assessment of the field’s reliance on the fields of law, management, and political science. In other words, it describes the degree to which the interdisciplinary field of public administration imports lessons from (or exports lessons to) other key disciplines.

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