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ScienceDirect

Policy and Society xxx (2016) xxx–xxx

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Editorial

## Teaching public policy: Global convergence or difference?

### Abstract

To the extent the policy outcomes depend on policy capacity, an important ingredient in that capacity is the training of public servants, and in particular through MPP and MPA programs. As the introduction to this journal issue dedicated to that theme, this article reviews debates about the content and convergence of such programs around the world. The appropriate nature and quality of that content has been the object of attention of accreditation schemes and best practice research, and in the spread of programs internationally. A framework for understanding that spread or diffusion is presented which highlights the interaction of national context, international dynamics, and institutional isomorphism. The articles in this issue clearly show that there has indeed been diffusion, but only modest convergence or programmatic isomorphism. At the same time, there is a persistent sense of an emergent epistemic community and practices in the field, suggesting that the next stage of research should focus on international networks in the field, and the connection between programs, practice, and capacity.

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### 1. Introduction

The adage that “those who can’t do, teach” has its corollary: “those who do, must be taught.” The assumption typically is that those who “do better” have been “taught better,” or at the very least that their training and education has equipped them for their work. This applies as much to brain surgery as it does to public policy-making and administration. There is a clear link (we assume) between ability, or capacity, and training and education. This is the rationale for this issue and its articles, a rationale that springs from the growing interest in policy capacity and its constitutive components. As [Wu, Ramesh, & Howlett \(2015: 167\)](#) note: “the policy capacity of a government plays the key role in determining policy outcomes.” They go further and argue that, at the individual level of policy-makers, public managers, and policy analysts, policy capacity is determined by their knowledge and skills. Despite this clear connection between capacity and training, we know little about the key graduate programs that provide this training – programs in public policy, public administration, and public affairs (we shall refer to all of these generically as MPP/MPA). Howlett and colleagues have done the leading work on this question, surveying policy analysts in government and providing a sketch of their background education and training (which always includes public administration or some mix of social sciences), but they have not examined that education itself ([Howlett, 2009](#); [Howlett, 2015](#); [Howlett & Migone, 2014](#); [Howlett, Migone, Wellstead, & Evans, 2014](#); [Howlett & Newman, 2010](#); [Howlett & Wellstead, 2011, 2012](#)). Most of the work on MPP/MPA programs has had a pedagogical and curricular focus ([Breux, Clynych, & Morris, 2003](#); [Ellwood, 2008](#); [Geva-May & Maslove, 2006](#); [Hur & Hackbart, 2009](#); [Straussman, 2008](#)), though more recently there has been interest as well in their migration and spread ([Fritzen, 2008](#); [Geva-May, Nasi, Turrini, & Scott, 2008](#); [Mahbubani, Yiannouka, Fritzen, Tuminez, & Tan, 2013](#)).

<http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2016.11.006>

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Please cite this article in press as: L.A. Pal, I.D. Clark, Teaching public policy: Global convergence or difference?, Policy and Society (2016), <http://dx.doi.org/10.1016/j.polsoc.2016.11.006>

The point is that if we are interested in policy capacity, we should be interested in a key ingredient in that capacity – the training of people who will be engaged in public policy and public administration, which includes those who will work within government, those who will work in organizations that develop advice for government, and those who will work in non-profit organizations that perform social functions that might otherwise be provided by government. The debate over what constitutes governance, and more importantly, “good governance,” reflects this link to the extent that civil service systems, training, and capacity are all assumed to be part of the mix (Fukuyama, 2004, 2011, 2013, 2014; Holt & Manning, 2014; Pollitt & Bouckaert, 2011). When we consider that training, at least in the form of MPP/MPA programs, two basic research questions arise. One is the pedagogical content, and what is considered “essential” or core to the field. It is quite important to recognize that these programs are embedded in, and reflective of, the academic and practice fields of “public administration” and “public policy.” Fields are constituted in a variety of ways – canonical texts (e.g., Lindblom on incrementalism), textbooks which purport to introduce the field (usually summarizing and presenting the canonical texts – e.g., Dunn, *Public Policy Analysis: An Introduction* or Weimer and Vining, *Policy Analysis: Concepts and Practice*), encyclopedia and handbooks, journals, and conferences. Academic programs (and the schools or departments in which they are housed) are the main “delivery” and replication mechanisms for the field. And this raises a second question about these programs, whether what is considered “essential” varies in systematic ways, or is in fact converging toward a general model. Is an MPP/MPA the same in Boston and in Beijing?

The articles in this issue explore the content of MPP/MPA programs through a comparative lens, with a focus on the overarching question of whether there is any global convergence toward a standard model in terms of content and pedagogy. The content question matters for capacity; the convergence question matters for what we might think of as “interoperability” of governance regimes through the spread of standards (Brunsson & Jacobsson, 2000; Rieneke, Gond, & Moon, 2012; Sahlin-Andersson, 2000). The “interoperability” of governance regimes works at several levels and through several mechanisms. We take it for granted, for example, that governments report their public accounts (more or less) according to certain accepted accounting standards (the UN Classification of Functions of Government, or COFOG), which in turn allows comparison. Transparency International provides an annual Corruptions Perceptions Index that actually ranks countries, on the assumption that there is a standard of good governance against which all can be measured. The work of international aid agencies in “capacity-building” and good governance assumes that some types of systems and practices work better than others. All of these together create a transnational space of governance principles and practices. On top of all that, we are seeing the emergence of global public policy regimes and transnational administration (more on this below), and the personnel who manage these regimes are increasingly part of an informal cadre of international public servants. The possible convergence of training in graduate programs may be an important, but unacknowledged, ingredient in the creation of global policy making.

## 2. What’s in a name? The distinctions between MPP and MPA

Many have argued that the distinction between the MPA and MPP degrees has diminished in the half century since the latter degree was developed at Harvard, Berkeley and the other Ford Foundation funded programs. Indeed, as discussed in the Pal and Clark article in this issue, some of the long-established schools like Princeton and Columbia have maintained the name of the MPA degree, even though their curricula have evolved to offer a higher proportion of policy-oriented courses than many MPP programs.

NASPAA currently describes the two degrees as follows:

*What is an MPA degree?* The Masters of Public Administration (MPA) degree is the core professional degree for a management career in public service. The curriculum is designed to aid students in developing the skills and techniques used by leaders and managers to implement policies, projects, and programs that resolve important societal problems. Graduates of an MPA program work in all levels of government (federal, state, and local), in nonprofits, in international organizations, consulting firms, and in the private sector.

*What is an MPP degree?* The Masters of Public Policy (MPP) degree emphasizes analyzing and evaluating information to solve policy problems. As analysts, managers, and leaders, MPP graduates work with quantitative and qualitative data to develop, assess, and evaluate alternative approaches to current and emerging issues. Their careers are in variety of public service fields and in all levels of government (federal, state, and local), in nonprofits, international organizations, consulting firms, and in the private sector.

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