



Public affairs graduate education in Latin America: Emulation or identity?[☆]

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Abstract

In this paper, we explore the state of the art of public affairs education in Latin America and compare it with the evolution and current character of MPA/MPP education in the United States. In doing so, we are able to identify ways in which there is a Latin American model (or at least identifiable patterns) of public affairs education in sharp contrast to what might be expected in terms of emulation of international programs, particularly from the United States and Europe. As the basis for our analysis, we rely on three main sources of information. We use extensive data gathered from a survey of nearly 50 programs of public affairs in Latin America, which we administered in 2015 in order to identify patterns and trends in public affairs education in the region. Then, we compare our data with two data bases: (1) the Atlas of Public Policy and Management (Carleton University and the University of Toronto), which provides an international profile of programs, and (2) NASPAA's Data Center, which summarizes the characteristics of NASPAA-member programs based on Annual Survey data. This comparison allows us to establish to what degree there is a phenomenon of isomorphism in public affairs education between countries in Latin America and similar programs in North America. We finish this article exploring the implications of such results, for the quality and appropriateness of education in government affairs in Latin American countries.

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1. Introduction

Although the evolution and current status of public affairs education in the United States is well documented, less clear is how the field has developed in Latin America (Rubaii, 2016). Relationships between United States and Latin American public policies and public management practices have been examined across multiple disciplines, including political science, international relations, development, economics, public policy and public administration. In these contexts, Washington – acting directly and independently or indirectly and via various international organizations such

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as the International Monetary Fund, World Bank, and Inter-American Development Bank – is often portrayed as having considerable influence on practice of public affairs in Latin American countries. Given the evidence of isomorphism in the realm of public policies and public management practices, and a concurrent movement for greater autonomy to develop more tailored responses to public problems, it becomes reasonable to examine to what extent there is evidence of similar pressures or outcomes with respect to public affairs education.

Public affairs education is a more recent trend in Latin America's higher education institutions than in their US counterparts. The last two decades have shown a growing presence of graduate programs in public administration/policy across Latin America. Such programs have grown with important differences and diversity in terms of topics, focus, methods and scope. While a significant number of them have adopted models similar to the MPA/MPP model of the U.S., others show different flavors which may be due to modeling after European programs or something more independent and unique. Thus, it makes sense to inquire whether public affairs (PA) education in Latin America is evolving toward an own perspective or reflects a certain degree of isomorphism. In this way, this article attempts to analyze the patterns and trends that characterize PA education and then compare to analogous programs in the United States with that purpose on mind. In Section 1, we explore the main literature that has aimed to explore the state of PA education at the regional level with attention to the absence of published research focused on Latin America. Then, Section 2 provides a glance of graduate education in public affairs in this region based on our survey data. Section 3 compares Latin American public affairs education to the international reference, particularly to the United States, as a means of examining our question of whether there is emulation in graduate programs in Latin America. In the conclusions section we summarize our findings and discuss implications.

2. Literature review

This research is placed within the broader study of policy transfer/isomorphism vs. independence between developed and developing economies. Although not well-studied with respect to our particular area of interest, namely graduate public affairs education in Latin America, the roots of this research are extensive with respect to the management of public organizations, the design and implementation of public policy, and the education for public affairs more broadly. While some of this literature examines the question of whether public organizations mimic or are forced to copy private business organizations (see, for example, [Frumkin & Galaskiewicz, 2004](#)), the majority of studies examine the extent to which the United States influences other countries, particularly those in the Global South. Notably, [Dabene \(2009\)](#) devotes an entire chapter of his book *The Politics of Regional Integration in Latin America* to institutional isomorphism. Whether the language of these studies uses the ideologically-charged terminology of neoliberalism or a Washington Consensus model, or if they use more the academic references to policy diffusion or policy transfer, similar questions are asked regarding these tensions.

In the realm of higher education policy specifically, studies of higher education quality assurance have examined the extent to which countries have emulated United States standards, processes and institutional arrangements, and how they have tailored their practices to their unique circumstances. For example, [Jarvis \(2014\)](#) documents a coercive institutional isomorphism in the evolution of quality assurance (QA) regime in Hong Kong, whereas [Rubaii and Lima Bandeira \(2016\)](#) identify elements of similarity and difference – in relation to the U.S. model and relative to each other – in the QA systems developed in Colombia and Ecuador.

On the one hand, given the extent to which public policy analysis in the United States is a model for practices elsewhere in the world, it should not come as a surprise U.S. higher education programs in this field will also inform programs elsewhere, particularly in developing countries ([Geva-May & Maslove, 2006](#)). On the other hand, program design and pedagogy are expected, to some extent, to reflect a society's particular history, values and institutions ([Geva-May, Nasi, Turrini, & Scott, 2008](#)).

For the purposes of this literature review we have focused on research that compared the education methods and curricula of regions renowned for their established and long running programs in Public Affairs, such as Europe and the United States, vis-à-vis more recent programs in developing regions like Latin America and Asia, among others. This is a process of transfer of practices and modes of operation that takes place through different channels. The policy transfer literature ([Dolowitz & Marsh, 2000](#)), has illustrated how ideas, institutions and practices travel from one country or region to another. Higher education, then, has been identified as one of the most effective channels through which such concepts and practices are adopted and adapted from country to country ([Stone, 2001](#)). But how does this transfer has occurred in public affairs education itself is a less frequent endeavor in the literature. We aim to fill that gap

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