Thinking in Public about Public Affairs: Rejoinder

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We appreciate the comments from Professor Samuel Workman on our article "Understanding the Field of Public Affairs through the Lens of Ranked Ph.D. Programs in the United States" published in this Yearbook issue (Zuo, Qian and Zhao, 2019). In the spirit of interdisciplinarity that characterizes public affairs research, we adopted a text mining approach and borrowed methods in data science in our efforts to describe the field of public affairs. The majority (two) of the three authors in our initial article (and the current rejoinder) are data scientists who have little research or teaching experience in public affairs. The other author is an urban planning professor, though trained in a public policy school. With this background, we focused primarily on what the data tell us about the field of public affairs but not much on what the results mean for the field. Workman's comment essay complements our analysis by addressing the latter. He aims to send "a plea to the academy to think more broadly about what it means to teach and research in the field of public affairs" (Workman, 2019, p. TBD). Moreover, we share Workman's concern over missed components that could have been considered as part of "public affairs" for data analysis, though we have some different thoughts on what should be included beyond the ranked public affairs Ph.D. programs we have analyzed.

While there were a number of findings in our data analysis, the one highlighted in Professor Workman's essay is the bifurcation and tension between public management and policy analysis in American public affairs schools. At the highest level of our hierarchical cluster dendrogram, American public affairs schools seemed to be divided into more public management oriented on one side and more public policy oriented on the other side. This bifurcation was also reflected in our topical analysis results. We agree with Workman that it is difficult to simultaneously train students or do research in both areas. From a different perspective, though, this bifurcation may meet the heterogenous demand by prospective students interested in different aspects of public services. Those aimed at public manager positions will naturally be more interested in public administration degrees. By contrast, those interested in consulting or policy analyst positions will be more likely to pursue public policy degrees. And even with this bifurcation, most public affairs schools appear to cover

both areas, though not equally. For academic research that has become increasingly specialized, it is almost impossible to address organizational issues and policy problems at the same time, and doing so seems to compromise the depth of analysis on each side. Nevertheless, the bridging work by some "generalists" who have knowledge on both management and policy may be useful in translating research into public policy practice.

As a scholar affiliated with a political science department and a policy-oriented research center, Workman suggests that it would lead to a better understanding of the field of public affairs by adding the work of political science departments and research centers in data analysis. We certainly feel these connections. Here at the University of Iowa, the political science department offers a number of administration- or policy-related courses, and the multidisciplinary faculty and staff affiliated with the university's Public Policy Center conduct applied research that solves various public problems. Workman (2019, p. TBD) argues that part of research and teaching in political science provide "fundamental knowledge" for those who take public manager jobs. While this argument is very reasonable, the same argument can be made for the importance of economics departments to those who take policy analyst jobs. In fact, we have noted in our initial article that a number of other social science departments tackle public problems, such as economics, psychology, political science, and sociology. But we feel that "public affairs," which we narrowly understand as an "independent" and growing field in American universities rather than "all affairs with public interests," can be best described through activities in public affairs schools or programs. Moreover, the "fundamental knowledge" that could be provided in political science is actually not missed in the research activity of highly interdisciplinary public affairs schools. For instance, "political system" is one of the 15 topics we have identified from the publications of public affairs scholars.

Similarly, studying policy-oriented research centers or networks that typically involve research staff from various disciplines does not seem to help understand the unique identity of the public affairs field, if we accept there is such a thing. Additionally, these research centers or networks are often contingent on funding that could come and go within a short period of time, much less sustainable than public affairs schools as academic units. We recognize the broader question behind Workman's comments on what should be considered in this kind of field studies. There is no easy answer to it, especially given our focus on such an interdisciplinary field. The bottom line is that we had a clearly defined boundary, albeit not ideal, based on the ranked Ph.D. programs in public affairs. The immediate next step for us is to include the activities in other public affairs schools which do not have a ranked Ph.D. program.

We welcome more experts' thoughts on the field of public affairs based on our analysis, as Professor Workman has done in his comment essay. In the end, our initial article provided only *one* account of the landscape of public affairs research. It is our hope that public affairs scholars who have better field knowledge than us will dig deeper and/or broader into this topic. For instance, we would love to see new studies on how other disciplines (e.g., political science), research centers, or even

all kinds of funded research may have contributed to the field of public affairs, a research direction suggested by Workman.

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References

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