Binghamton University
The Open Repository @ Binghamton (The ORB)

Public Administration Faculty Scholarship

Public Administration

4-18-2018

Expanding the Classroom: Investigating Local Government Practitioners' Use of Academic Resources

Willow S. Jacobson
University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill

Kristina T. Lambright
Binghamton University--SUNY, klambrig@binghamton.edu

Follow this and additional works at: https://orb.binghamton.edu/public_admin_fac

Part of the Public Administration Commons

Expanding the Classroom: Investigating Local Government Practitioners' Use of Academic Resources

Abstract: Drawing on Boyer's scholarship of teaching, we propose that public affairs education could be conceptualized as not just including the education of current students but also the education of public affairs practitioners throughout their careers. To explore knowledge diffusion from academics to public affairs practitioners, we conducted 40 phone interviews with county human resources (HR) directors in New York and North Carolina and examined the extent to which this population directly used academic resources. There was moderate use of academic resources from higher education institutions across the sample, with many North Carolina HR directors consulting publications and personnel from one university that has tailored services for local government officials in that state. Several HR directors currently not using academic resources indicated they were willing to use them. At the same time, many respondents were unsure what academic resources were available or when they would be helpful.

Introduction

The articles published in the *Journal of Public Affairs Education* typically focus on the education of current students in public affairs programs. However, public affairs education can be conceptualized as more comprehensive than this to include the education of public affairs practitioners throughout their careers. In his seminal book *Scholarship Reconsidered,* Boyer (1990) argues the concept of scholarship should be broadened to encompass the scholarship of teaching which focuses on sharing knowledge with others. Building on Boyer, public affairs education could be expanded beyond the walls of the traditional classroom with public affairs academics sharing their knowledge with practitioners. Examples of efforts by public affairs programs to forge stronger relationships between academics and practitioners include the growth of executive education programs (Posner, 2009) and the widespread use of service learning (Bushouse & Morrison, 2001; Campbell & Lambright, 2011; Carrizales & Bennett, 2013; Gazley, Bennett, & Littlepage, 2013; Imperial, Perry & Katula, 2007; Stout, 2013).

Despite efforts such as these, several public affairs scholars have expressed concerns about a growing disconnect between academics and practitioners (for examples see Box, 1992; Lambright, 2010; Posner, 2009; Streib, Slotkin, & Rivera, 2001). While scholars have speculated about the implications of the problem and proposed a variety of solutions (Bushouse et al., 2011; Lambright, 2010; Posner, 2009; Van Slyke, 2011), there has been surprisingly little empirical investigation on the extent to which public affairs practitioners use academic resources. Without understanding the problem's scope and causes, it is difficult to identify effective solutions. This article responds to this gap in the literature by empirically examining use of academic resources by local government practitioners. Our research specifically focuses on the information that county human resources (HR) directors use, investigating the extent this

population directly uses academic resources and its level of interest in using these resources in the future. We define academic resources broadly as the personnel who work for higher education institutions and the written materials they produce; our definition includes academic resources from any discipline, not just those from public affairs programs. We focus on HR directors because HR is a key function in local government as well as a core course in many public affairs programs, making these practitioners a natural audience with whom public affairs academics would want to share their knowledge.

We begin by discussing past scholarship on knowledge diffusion from academics to public affairs practitioners. Next, we present our methods and key findings. Finally, we explore the implications of our research and propose strategies to expand public affairs education to better serve practitioners throughout their careers.

Knowledge Diffusion from Academics to Public Affairs Practitioners

Historically, there was a strong connection between public affairs academics and practitioners. The birth of public administration in the United States was closely tied to the Progressive Movement (Shields, 2003). During this time period, several universities created programs providing technical assistance to state and local governments to improve their efficiency and effectiveness (Whorton, Gibson, & Dunn, 1986). In addition, early leaders in the field such as Luther Gulick, Charles Merriam, and Leonard White were boundary-spanning "pracademics," individuals with significant career achievements in both public service and the academy (Bushouse et al., 2011; Posner, 2009). Their experiences as practitioners shaped their scholarly writings (Bolton & Stolcis, 2003). However, as public affairs has matured as a field, many scholars have voiced dismay over a perceived lack of knowledge diffusion from academics to public affairs practitioners (Box, 1992; Bushouse et al., 2011; Lambright, 2010; Posner, 2009;

Streib, Slotkin, & Rivera, 2001). Reasons for this lack of knowledge diffusion include barriers inhibiting career mobility between the two sectors (Posner, 2009), pressure to publish in academic journals and books inherent in the tenure and promotion process (Lambright, 2010; Posner, 2009; Van Slyke 2010), and the complex research methods and technical writing style used by academics (Box, 1992; Lambright, 2010).

While many have expressed concerns about knowledge diffusion from academics to public affairs practitioners, there is only a small body of empirical research assessing this within the field of public affairs. Furthermore, most of this limited scholarship focuses on academic publications rather than on academic personnel. Research indicates that top journals publish articles on topics important to practitioners. In an analysis of *Public Administration Review* articles published from 1984 to 1998, approximately 30% of articles provided information that could enhance the effectiveness of local governments although there was variation in the coverage of issues relevant to local government managers (Streib, Slotkin, & Rivera, 2001). In a similar study of *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly* articles (Bushouse & Sowa, 2011), roughly three-quarters of articles published from 2000 to 2010 covered topics relevant to nonprofit practitioners, and two-thirds of the articles that focused on issues relevant to practitioners at least attempted to explore the implications of their findings for practice.

Although research suggests journals are publishing articles relevant to practitioners, Landry, Lamari and Amara (2003) report practitioners frequently do not view academic research as useful. Based on their survey of Canadian government officials, more than two-thirds of respondents indicated the research publications they received from universities were either rarely or only sometimes relevant to their job, and more than half of their sample reported the publications never or rarely influenced decisions. Although these findings are disheartening, the

3

study also identifies steps scholars can take to increase the likelihood their work will be utilized by practitioners. Specifically, Landry et al. (2003) report practitioners are more likely to use academic publications when scholars adapt their research to meet practitioner needs and have stronger relationships with the practitioners with whom they are sharing their research. Lomas and Brown (2009) in a study on the use of health research in the policy process reach similar conclusions regarding steps researchers can take to make their work more appealing to practitioners. Albeit dated, there is also limited research suggesting state and local government officials find university services that are specifically targeted to them to be helpful. In a study investigating the use of academic personnel as information resources, local and state government officials were generally satisfied with the training and technical assistance they received from university programs (Whorton et al., 1986).

As evidenced by this literature review, several scholars are concerned there is a lack of knowledge diffusion from academics to public affairs practitioners. Yet, only a handful of studies have empirically investigated this issue. In order to address this gap in the literature, we examined county HR directors' direct use of academic resources. By deepening our understanding about current use of academic resources, public affairs programs will be better positioned to expand public affairs education to include the education of practitioners throughout their careers.

Research Design

We conducted semi-structured phone interviews with 40 county HR directors: 20 from New York and 20 from North Carolina. By examining these two states, we were able to consider how regional differences and variation in the services higher education institutions provide to local governments might influence county HR directors' use of academic resources. North

4

Carolina is home to the School of Government (SOG) at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. According to the SOG website, it is "the largest university-based local government training, advisory, and research organization in the United States," offering courses, seminars and specialized conferences for public officials. There is no comparable system of support for local governments available through higher education institutions in New York.

Respondents were randomly selected from counties with workforces of 500 employees or greater, excluding counties located in New York City. Counties located in New York City were excluded from the sampling frame because the size and function of government in these counties is on a different scale compared to the other counties in New York and North Carolina and could introduce confounding factors into our analysis. We also limited our sampling frame to counties with workforces greater than 500 employees to ensure a county's workforce would be of sufficient size to warrant a need for a county-level HR director. In addition, we wanted to ensure respondents would be involved in policymaking decisions that were sophisticated enough to enable them to answer our interview questions. Our sample represents 41% and 45% of the counties eligible to be included in our study from New York and North Carolina, respectively. While collecting our data, we observed a high level of data saturation. Based on a review of the data conducted after approximately 30 interviews, we found respondents were consistently identifying the same key themes. After completing an additional ten interviews, we reviewed the responses and found no new patterns emerging from the data. At this point, we had achieved the intended coverage of our sampling frame (more than 40% of eligible counties were included from both states) and were confident that we had reached data saturation.

The counties included in our sample had populations ranging from 29,967 to 1,419,369 with a mean of 210,895 and workforce sizes ranging from 500 to 11,735 with a mean of 1,698.

The smallest HR department had 2 employees while the largest had 120 employees; the average HR department had 12 employees. Tables 1 and 2 provide additional information about the counties in our sample.

<Tables 1 and 2 about here.>

At the start of each interview, we guaranteed confidentiality. The average interview lasted 45 minutes. When designing our study, we were interested in the extent to which respondents were regularly using academic resources. We were concerned generic questions about use of academic resources might cause respondents to overstate the extent to which they utilize these resources. To minimize this concern, we first asked respondents about all of the information resources they used (not just academic ones) in three different contexts: in the policymaking process, in the development of management initiatives, and for general information. We asked respondents to think of the most recent policy they had helped to develop or revise as well as a recent HR management initiative and discuss the information resources they consulted in both instances. We also asked respondents to discuss any other circumstances commonly occurring in their jobs in which they used another information resource they had not had an opportunity to discuss. Following the broad discussion on the various information resources they used, the interviewer specifically asked respondents to describe any circumstances they had not discussed yet in which they had used academic journals, papers, or books. We also asked about any circumstances in which they had used university or college personnel as information resources. Our questions were broad and allowed respondents to discuss their use of academic resources from any discipline, not just those from public affairs programs. In the final portion of the interview, we collected basic information about the counties where respondents worked and respondents' professional backgrounds. Tables 3 and 4 summarize respondents'

background information, including information about their education. While our sample is a

population with whom public affairs academics would want to share their knowledge, just two

respondents (5% of the sample) had MPA degrees. Most respondents did not have advanced

degrees in any field: only ten respondents (25% of the sample) held a master's degree and one

respondent had a law degree. Nine of the ten respondents with a master's degree had it in a HR

related field such public administration, business administration or HR management.

<Tables 3 and 4 about here.>

All interviews were recorded and transcribed, and data was analyzed using the qualitative

data analysis software QSR NVivo. We developed coding definitions in order to ensure

consistent code usage and used both pattern-matching (Yin, 1994) and memoing (Miles &

Huberman, 1994) in our data analysis. Both researchers independently coded all of the interview

data.[1]

This study's research design enabled us to collect rich qualitative data in two states with

different political cultures, policies, and access to university-based services to examine

practitioner use of academic resources. There are some limitations to the research design. This

study is exploratory as there is little empirical research on the extent to which public affairs

practitioners use academic resources. With 40 interviews, we are not able to provide definitive

answers to our research questions. We hope to achieve analytical generalizability rather than

statistical generalizability. It is also possible that our respondents overstated their use of

academic resources because we both work for universities.[2] However, as discussed previously,

we carefully structured our interview protocol to minimize concerns about social desirability

---

[1] The Kappa statistic which is a measure of interrater coding reliability was .89. A Kappa score of .81 or above is considered to be "almost perfect agreement" (Viera & Garrett, 2005). We evaluated the coding discrepancies, and most were due to variation in the length of text that was coded.
2 None of the respondents noted either author as a primary resource they consulted.

bias. In addition, county HR directors' utilization of information resources in New York and

North Carolina may not be representative of the resources used by other types of public

managers or county HR directors in other states. Finally, this paper focuses on direct diffusion

of academic knowledge to a field that is a core function in public organizations and focus of

considerable PA scholarship. It does not assess the extent to which HR directors were using

practices that originated from academic research but the directors learned about from their

professional networks and resources.

Findings

We begin by providing a broad overview of the various resources HR directors

mentioned when asked about the information they used when developing personnel policies and

management initiatives as well as more generally in their jobs. Next we describe respondents'

current use of academic resources. This section concludes by discussing respondents' interest in

using academic resources in the future.

Overview of the Information Resources Used by HR Directors. When asked to describe

the information resources they consulted when creating a recent HR policy, the most commonly

mentioned resource was personnel and policies from other jurisdictions. Table 5 details the

frequency with which various information resources were used for policy development,

management initiatives, and general information. As Table 5 illustrates, thirty-six respondents

(90%) reported consulting other jurisdictions in the policy development process. When

developing policy, respondents also relied heavily on a range on internal resources. Of the 40

HR directors, 33 (83%) sought input from personnel in other departments, 24 (60%) from county

attorneys or retained council, and 22 (55%) from the county executive or executive staff.

Sixteen HR directors (40%) had a standing personnel committee or had established an internal

committee as part of the policy development process, and fifteen (38%) elicited feedback from the broader county workforce. In addition, 22 respondents (55%) used state and federal agencies as resources. Another key resource was the internet with nineteen directors using it in the policy development process. North Carolina HR directors also often consulted SOG publications and personnel. Twelve directors (60% of the North Carolina sample) reported utilizing SOG publications and/or personnel when developing policy. In contrast, none of the New York or North Carolina HR directors reported using academic resources from other institutions in the policy development process.

Management initiatives are distinct from policies and were defined as programs, practices, or initiatives that the HR department had some discretion in implementing. Examples of management initiatives respondents discussed included wellness programs, training programs, compressed work weeks, employee suggestion programs, and employee recognition programs. The resources HR directors used to develop management initiatives were generally similar to those consulted in policy development. However, HR directors tended to rely more heavily on internal resources rather than on other jurisdictions: 25 HR directors (63%) consulted colleagues in other departments (within their own county), 18 (45%) consulted the county executive or executive staff and 16 (40%) consulted other jurisdictions. When creating management initiatives, sixteen respondents (40%) sought advice from vendors, which was more common than with policy development. HR directors from North Carolina were less likely to report having used the SOG as an information resource when developing management initiatives than when developing policies. Just three had consulted SOG resources when implementing management initiatives. Moreover, only two HR directors in the entire sample reported using publications or personnel from another academic institution to help develop a management

initiative. One of these respondents indicated her county's training officer consulted materials from her graduate studies, including MPA coursework, when helping to develop their management initiative.

When asked what resources they used in general, not tied to policy development or a specific management initiative, the most commonly identified general information resources were state and federal agencies and professional associations: thirteen HR directors (33%) used state and federal agencies and fourteen (35%) used professional associations. Respondents consulted a variety of professional associations, ranging from local associations of HR professionals to national associations such as the Society for Human Resource Management and the International Personnel Management Association. Some respondents reported reading publications from these associations such as HR Magazine to stay informed while others indicated they used local associations for networking and sharing general information. While only two respondents mentioned consulting books either when developing policy or management initiatives, five people reported using books as a general means to stay informed. Three HR directors reported consulting SOG personnel and publications more generally in their jobs, and no one mentioned using resources from other academic institutions.

Use of Academic Resources. After generally asking HR directors about the information resources they used in their jobs, we asked specific questions about the different types of academic resources they may have used but had not discussed previously in the interview. When considering the use of academic resources in any context, eighteen county HR directors from North Carolina (90% of the North Carolina sample) indicated they had used either publications and/or personnel from the SOG. This includes responses to questions about resources for policy development, management initiatives, and general information as well as to direct questions

10

about use of academic publications or personnel. Directors from both states were less likely to

report utilizing academic resources from other academic institutions.

Table 6 summarizes by state HR directors' use of academic resources for any reason. As

illustrated by Table 6, fifteen North Carolina HR directors (75% of the North Carolina sample)

reported using SOG publications. The resources referenced were specifically targeted at

practitioners and tailored to the needs of this population. Ten respondents from the entire sample

(25%) reported using written materials from other academic institutions: five were from New

York and five were from North Carolina. Nine of the ten respondents reported reading academic

papers. Three used books, including one respondent who specifically noted consulting old

textbooks from her graduate program.   Just one respondent reported using academic journals as

an information resource, and even this director reported that she did not currently use academic

journals as much as when she first became HR director:

> Initially when I took this position 3 years ago, I probably relied more heavily on those
> [academic journals] than I do now due to connectivity issues. I don't have access to
> easily do that. There was a time when I could leave and go to the library and do that kind
> of research. Unfortunately, due to budget cuts we've lost a person so I'm more limited in
> what I can do.

  Finally, one respondent reported referring to one university's website for information on labor

relations.

<Table 6 about here.>

Many respondents who were using written materials from academic institutions other

than the SOG did not appear to be deliberately seeking information from academic sources. Five

of these respondents reported they only used academic papers when they were identified as part

of a larger internet search. As described by one respondent:

> I may Google and say HR leave form and see what comes up. I was trying to get
> interview questions one time and I did a search and ended up with great questions from a

thesis on interviewing and they had samples. I will do a search to see what comes my way.

Despite the fact few HR directors used written materials from academic institutions other than the SOG, four who did found these materials to be helpful. For instance, one respondent commented:

> I never thought about it [going to an academic site] as a first point of reference. The reality is once there the information is invaluable I think. More research has gone into it. I'm glad we are having this conversation because it will make me think to use that as a resource and maybe I will think of using that first whereas before it was an afterthought.

Another six respondents (15%) specifically reported reading papers and books published by professional associations such as the Society for Human Resource Management and the International Personnel Management Association. According to one of these respondents, "a lot of these [professional] associations have libraries that you can tap into and look for publications, articles, research material on specific topics, a lot you can do online so that's useful to us." While some of these professional associations' publications are written by practitioners or consultants, academics also write publications produced by these organizations. Although the authors of the specific material being used by our respondents are not known, these HR directors may be reading "academic" publications too. Similar to the individuals using academic papers identified as part of a larger internet search, these six respondents were not actively seeking academic resources but were happy to use papers and books if these resources could help them in their jobs. In addition, there were several respondents who made generic references to using resources from professional associations. However, since they were not clear as to the specific resources they were using, we did not include them in this category. Thus, we may be understating respondents' use of "academic" resources from professional associations.

In line with responses regarding the use of written materials, the academic personnel who HR directors in North Carolina consulted most frequently were those from the SOG. Twelve respondents from North Carolina (60% of the North Carolina sample) indicated they used SOG personnel as information resources, particularly on legal-related issues. Eleven of the twelve reported consulting specific personnel while the remaining respondent had attended a training provided by the school. Seventeen HR directors (43%) had consulted personnel who worked for academic institutions other than the SOG: eight of these respondents were from New York and nine of these respondents were from North Carolina. None of the academic institutions respondents reported consulting was mentioned in more than one interview. Moreover, in all but one interview each institution either was located within the respondent's county or in close proximity to it. Five of the seventeen respondents indicated they contacted the institution because either they or someone they knew had a personal connection to the college. For example, one respondent reported:

> Professor W was in the School of Business. At College X, I had him when I was in school down there. When I came to work with County Z sixteen years ago, it was obvious that there were compensation studies that needed to be done. I did not have the manpower or resources to get that done in house. I knew Professor W had done work in that area. I called him up. He had done a lot more work than I realized. He ended up performing those studies for me, job description work. I stay in contact with him.

The most common reason HR directors had consulted personnel from other academic institutions was for training purposes with thirteen respondents (33%) having done this. As one of these respondents explained, "it's [working with local colleges is] a way we can train our staff, and we don't have expertise on every topic." Nine of the thirteen respondents used community colleges for training, two used four year colleges, and the remaining two used both community colleges and four year colleges. In some cases, counties encouraged employees to attend regular courses being offered at local colleges. In other cases, local colleges designed

13

courses to meet specific county training needs and offered the courses to county employees only.

For instance, one respondent described the following partnership his county had developed with

a local community college:

> I contacted him [someone I knew at the College Y] and told him what we were looking for [in a management training]. He said we could work it out. They put together a course, talked about the outline and what we would like to see in that and it worked out well.

The trainings most frequently focused on supervisory and leadership skills. Other training topics

mentioned by the HR directors included succession planning, computer skills, and time

management. Providing ongoing opportunities for professional development for county staff

was important to this group of respondents as illustrated in the following comment:

> The County manager and myself are very big on continuing education and life-long learning. In order to encourage that, I have brought in a number of people from the community college or from the local four year school Z to talk at the department head staff meeting about the services we can offer to employees.

> Another common reason HR directors had consulted personnel from other academic

institutions was for expertise related to county HR initiatives. Seven (18%) reported seeking

advice on current initiatives. The topics of the projects varied. As just one example, a

respondent reported using a faculty member from a local college to help collect citizen input

prior to the implementation of an HR customer service initiative:

> We used one of their professors who is a citizen of City A to help us do some information gathering when we started this customer service initiative. One of the things we wanted to do upfront was how could we improve customer service without knowing what they thought of us. One of the professors who lives in City A agreed to assist us in facilitating some citizen meetings we had over a period of several evenings and we left the meetings up to him. We intentionally stayed away from the meetings. We wanted it to be a meeting where people could talk about their experiences in interacting with county government agencies.

In contrast to the academic institutions respondents approached for training purposes, most

respondents were consulting local four year colleges for their expertise on policy and

management issues. Five of the seven sought the expertise of personnel who worked for local four year colleges while just two respondents contacted community colleges.

Eight HR directors (20%) also indicated interns from local colleges occasionally worked for their counties: seven of these eight HR directors were from North Carolina. In many cases, the interns were working in other county departments, and the HR department was only handling the paperwork related to the internships. Four of these respondents specifically highlighted the importance of designing internships that were both beneficial for student interns as well as the county. For instance, one commented: "It helps us [the county] too as well as them [the student interns]." While the counties were not using personnel from academic institutions as information resources, their willingness to use students may represent a first step in creating relationships with these academic institutions. These relationships have the potential to evolve over time and result in the county consulting academic personnel for their assistance on HR-related initiatives as well.

To assess HR directors' overall direct use of academic resources, we looked at the use of academic publications and personnel together. Respondents received a point for using written materials from any academic institution (including the SOG) and a point for consulting personnel from any academic institution (including the SOG). We did not give respondents a point for using interns since in many cases the HR department's contact with the intern was limited to handling the internship paperwork for other county departments. The average overall use score was a 1.18, suggesting moderate direct use of academic resources. However, there was considerable variation between the two state score averages: the average scores for New York and North Carolina were .70 and 1.65, respectively. In North Carolina, fourteen respondents

(70%) used academic publications and personnel while just two New York HR directors (10%) used both types of resources.

We were curious if there were any patterns between use of academic resources and the characteristics of respondents or the counties for which they worked. For instance, might HR departments with larger staffs have more time to gather information resources and be more likely to use academic resources? As another example, perhaps respondents with more years of education and exposure to the array of resources universities offer would be more likely to use academic resources. We examined the relationship between academic use and a wide range of respondent and jurisdictional characteristics including the form of county government, county government workforce size, HR department size, the role of the HR department in the county's strategic planning process, respondent education, respondent private sector experience, respondent certifications, respondent involvement in professional associations, and respondent attendance of conferences. However, we found no discernable patterns between any of these characteristics and the extent to which respondents used academic resources. Given the focus of our paper, the finding about the lack of pattern between academic use and respondent education was of particular interest. We also specifically examined the usage patterns of the two respondents with MPA degrees. To our surprise, neither of these respondents reported using any academic resources.

Interest in Using Written Materials and Personnel from Academic Institutions in the Future. Although many HR directors, almost all from New York, had not used written materials or personnel from academic institutions in the past, several of these respondents indicated that they would be open to using them in the future: six of the fifteen who had not read any academic publications would be willing to read them, and twelve of the thirteen who had not had any

contact with academic personnel would consider working with them. Reflecting the sentiments

of many, one respondent commented: "If I thought there was someone with information that

would be helpful to us, I wouldn't think twice about reaching out to them." The most common

reason for not using these resources was uncertainty about what resources were available and/or

how to access them with ten respondents (25%) citing this concern. As one HR director

explained:

> I'm not sure how to even get to the point to know which book you needed to get to obtain
> an answer. That's the nice thing about a Google search. It gives you a whole bunch of
> things. Sometimes it's not exactly what you thought you were looking for and you end
> up finding the information.

Eight respondents (20%) also indicated they did not use academic publications or personnel

because they were satisfied with their existing resources and did not believe they needed any

additional information. As an example, one HR director commented:

> First of all, we've got everything already. And I mean each person involved in the
> development of these things are people who have college degrees, advanced college
> degrees. I don't think if we're planning to do something we're going to go and seek out a
> book or paper. We're going to be dealing with the practical realities of the situations that
> we have in front of us.

Discussion and Conclusion

Drawing on Boyer's scholarship of teaching (1990), we propose that public affairs

education could be conceptualized as not just including the education of current students but also

the education of public affairs practitioners throughout their careers. We are hopeful that this

study can generate more discussion about the reach of public affairs education as there is little

empirical research on the extent to which public affairs practitioners use academic resources. To

explore knowledge diffusion from academics to public affairs practitioners, we examined the

extent to which county HR directors in New York and North Carolina directly use academic

resources. When asked about the different information resources they use in policymaking, in

the development of management initiatives and for general information, our respondents typically did not report using academic publications or personnel. One exception was the widespread use of SOG resources by North Carolina HR directors in the policymaking process: 60% of these directors reported consulting SOG publications and/or personnel when making policy decisions. Instead of academic publications or personnel, key resources for HR directors in both states included other jurisdictions, colleagues in other departments within their county, state and federal agencies, and the internet.

When specifically asked about their use of academic resources, a higher percentage of respondents indicated they had utilized academic resources in some way as part of their job. Among the North Carolina sample, use of SOG resources was commonplace with 90% indicating they had consulted SOG publications and/or personnel. In both states, use of academic resources from institutions other than the SOG was more limited: 25% of the full sample had utilized written materials from academic institutions other than the SOG, and 43% had consulted personnel from other academic institutions. Overall, there was moderate direct use of academic resources across our entire sample although there was a large difference between the two states: North Carolina HR directors on average had used more than twice as many types of academic resources as New York HR directors. This difference is primarily due to North Carolina HR directors' use of SOG publications and personnel.

We also examined whether use of academic resources was related to either respondent or jurisdictional characteristics. But, we did not find any patterns. Our qualitative data suggests a possible explanation for this null finding. When discussing their use of academic resources from institutions other than the SOG, comments made by many respondents suggest they may have used these resources because it was convenient. Several reported accessing academic

18

publications as part of general internet searches rather than deliberately seeking them out. In

addition, respondents often opted to use academic personnel because of pre-existing

relationships. SOG resources were also convenient to access. For example, the School

distributes materials to this population through listservs. There is no reason to expect the

respondent or jurisdictional characteristics we examined would influence how convenient it is for

respondents to use academic resources.

Taken as a whole, our research suggests there is only a moderate amount of knowledge

diffusion from academics to public affairs practitioners, validating concerns raised by several

scholars (Box, 1992; Lambright, 2010; Posner, 2009; Streib et al., 2001). At the same time, our

findings provide hope that there could greater diffusion in the future as many of the respondents

who had not used written materials or personnel from academic institutions in the past were

receptive to using them. Drawing on our research, there are several strategies public affairs

academics could use to facilitate greater knowledge sharing with practitioners. First, similar to

past empirical research (Landry et al., 2003; Lomas & Brown, 2009), we find HR directors were

more likely to use academic resources tailored to meet their needs. In addition to writing

traditional academic research, the SOG faculty and research staff produce many publications

targeted at local government officials. Moreover, when HR directors in our sample contacted

personnel from academic institutions, they were typically seeking specific information relevant

to current county HR policies, initiatives or practices rather than general knowledge. Second,

not only do academic resources need to be tailored to practitioners' needs, they also need to be

easily accessible. The most common reason why respondents indicated they did not use

academic resources was they were unsure what resources were available and/or how to access

them. Further underscoring the importance of ensuring resources are easily accessible, the one

respondent who had read academic journals in the past reported no longer reading them as much because it was difficult for her to access them without going to a library. Finally, like Landry et al. (2003) and Lomas and Brown (2009), our results highlight why building relationships between academics and practitioners matters. In the interviews in which HR directors reported consulting academic personnel from an institution other than the SOG, several respondents indicated they contacted the academic institution because either they or someone they knew had a personal connection to the college, including one respondent who had continued to stay in touch with one of his professors.

One limitation of our analysis is that it is impossible to know the extent to which some of the non-university sources consulted by our respondents draw on academic publications and personnel. For example, as discussed previously, academic personnel often write publications for professional associations. Additionally, consultants sometimes utilize academic scholarship. Furthermore, some ideas HR managers use have their origins in academic research even if the HR managers themselves learned of them through conversations with colleagues or reading articles in professional journals. Taken together, this suggests there may be considerable indirect diffusion of academic knowledge to the field even if there is only a moderate amount of direct diffusion as our results suggest.

Building on this exploratory research, future studies should examine the topics addressed in this study for a larger sample in more than just two states and for other types of public managers such as finance or information technology professionals. Scholars also should examine use of academic publications and personnel by some of the non-university sources our respondents consulted to better understand indirect diffusion of academic knowledge. There are a number of additional questions researchers interested in an expanded approach to public affairs

education may want to explore that go beyond the topics covered in this study. For example, what are the best means for public affairs academics to disseminate their work to practitioners? How are relationships between academics and practitioners built? Do service learning projects, executive education programs, or student internships help forge these relationships? What factors predict practitioner use of academic resources? How does the tenure and promotion process impact faculty willingness to engage in the activities recommended in this article?

We recognize that expanding public affairs education to include the education of practitioners throughout their careers may not be right for every public affairs program. Some programs may wish to or only have the capacity to focus on current students but as a field moving in this general direction could increase the impact of academics. An expanded approach could give public affairs faculty a chance to influence professionals with whom they otherwise would not have contact such as those who do not have public affairs degrees. As detailed in our methodology section, just 5% of our sample held MPA degrees. While it is difficult to know how representative our sample is given its small size, the fact few respondents had MPAs suggests that there may be considerable opportunity for public affairs programs to increase their impact by broadening the population they serve. Hopefully expanding public affairs education would not just benefit practitioners but also academics. Ideally, it could enrich scholarship and teaching, giving academics a more thorough understanding of the context in which practitioners operate and the complexity of the challenges they face.

Reference List

Bolton, M.J., & Stolcis, G. (2003). Ties that do not bind: Musings on the specious relevance of academic research. *Public Administration Review, 63,* 626-630.

Box, R.C. (1992). An examination of the debate over research in public administration. *Public Administration Review, 52,* 62-69.

Boyer, E.L. (1990). *Scholarship reconsidered: Priorities of the professoriate.* Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press.

Bushouse, B., Jacobson, W.S., Lambright, K.T., Llorens, J., Morse, R.S., & Poocharoen, O. (2011). Crossing the divide: Building bridges between public administration practitioners and scholars. *Journal of Public Administration Research and Theory, 21(suppl 1),* i99-i112.

Bushouse, B., & Morrison, S. (2001). Applying service learning in Master of Public Affairs Programs. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 7,* 9-17.

Bushouse, B.K, & Sowa, J.E. (2011). Producing knowledge for practice: Assessing NVSQ 2000-2010. *Nonprofit and Voluntary Sector Quarterly,* 41, 497-513.

Campbell, D.A., & Lambright, K.T. (2011). How valuable are capstone projects for community organizations? Lessons from a program assessment. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 17,* 61-87.

Carrizales, T., & Bennett, L.V. (2013). A public service education: A review of undergraduate programs with a community and service focus. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 19,* 309-323.

Gazley, B., Bennett, T.A., & Littlepage, L. (2013). Achieving the partnership principle in experiential learning: The nonprofit perspective. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 19,* 559-579.

Imperial, M. Perry, J.L., & Katula, M. (2007). Effective service learning in public affairs: Lessons from the literature. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 13,* 243-264.

Lambright, K.T. (2010). The challenge of remaining relevant. In R. O'Leary, D.M. VanSlyke, & S. Kim (Eds.), *The future of public administration, public management and public service around the world: The Minnowbrook perspective* (pp. 255-260). Washington , DC: Georgetown University Press.

Landry, R., Lamari, M., & Amara, N. (2003). The extent and determinants of the utilization of university research in government agencies. *Public Administration Review, 63*, 192-205.

Lomas, J. & Brown, A.D. (2009). Research and advice giving: A functional view of evidence-informed policy advice in a Canadian ministry of health. *The Milbank Quarterly, 87,*

903-926.

Posner, Paul L. (2009). The pracademic: An agenda for re-engaging practitioners and academics. *Public Budgeting and Finance, 29*, 12-26.

Shields, P.M. (2003). The community of inquiry: Classical pragmatism and public administration. *Administration & Society, 35,* 510-538.

Stout, M. (2013). Delivering an MPA emphasis in local governance and community development through service learning and action research. Journal of Public Affairs Education *19,* 217-238.

Streib, G., Slotkin, B.J., & Rivera, M. (2001). Public administration research from a practitioner perspective. *Public Administration Review, 61,* 515-525.

Van Slyke, D.M. (2010). Making public administration scholarship matter. In R. O'Leary, D.M. VanSlyke, & S. Kim (Eds.), *The future of public administration, public management and public service around the world: The Minnowbrook perspective* (pp. 249-254). Washington , DC: Georgetown University Press.

Viera, A.J., & Garrett, J.M. (2005). Understanding interobserver agreement: The kappa statistic. *Family Medicine, 37,* 360-3.

Whorton, J. W., Jr., Gibson, F. K., & Dunn, D. D. (1986). The culture of university public service: A national survey of the perspectives of users and providers. *Public Administration Review, 46,* 38-49.

Table 1: County Size Demographics

Population	Count (%) (n=40)	Workforce size	Count (%) (n=40)
Under 75K	10 (25%)	**500 to 750**	13 (33%)
75K to 124,999	12 (30%)	**750 to 1249**	13 (33%)
125K to 174,999	6 (15%)	**1250 to 1749**	3 (8%)
175K to 224,999	4 (10%)	**1750 to 2249**	3 (8%)
225K and above	8 (20%)	**2,250 and above**	8 (20%)

Table 2: Form of County Government

	Count (%) (n=40)
Board of representatives	1 (3%)
Board of supervisors	1 (3%)
Chief administrative Officer	1 (3%)
County administrator	7 (18%)
County executive	8 (20%)
County manager	22 (55%)

Table 3: Respondent Experience

Years of HR Experience	Count (%) (n=38)	Years in Position	Count (%) (n=39)
Less than 5	3 (8%)	Less than 5	22 (54%)
6 to 10	7 (18%)	6 to 10	11 (28%)
11 to 15	5 (13%)	11 to 15	3 (8%)
16 to 20	6 (16%)	16 to 20	3 (8%)
21 to 30	11 (29%)	21 to 30	1 (3%)
31 and greater	6 (16%)	31 and greater	0 (0%)

Table 4: Respondent Formal and Continuing Education

Highest Degree	Count (%) (n=40)	Certification	Count (%) (n=40)
High school diploma	2 (5%)	No certification	25 (63%)
Associates	1 (3%)	Certification (community college, state, other)	5 (13%)
Bachelors	20 (50%)	SHRM Certification (PHR, SPHR)	10 (25%)
Bachelors, some graduate	6 (15%)		
Graduate degree (JD, MPA, MBA, etc.)	11 (28%)		

	Table 5: Information Resource Use		
Resource	Count (%) Resource Used for Policy Development (n=40)	Count (%) Resource Used for a Management Initiative (n=40)	Count (%) Resource Used for General Information (n=40)
Personnel or Policies from other Jurisdictions	36 (90%)	16 (40%)	4 (10%)
Other Departments within the County	33 (83%)	25 (63%)	1 (3%)
County Attorney or Retained Council	24 (60%)	3 (8%)	7 (18%)
Executive or Executive Staff	22 (55%)	18 (45%)	0 (0%)
State or Federal Agencies	22 (55%)	3 (8%)	13 (33%)
Resources from Professional Associations	20 (50%)	13 (33%)	14 (35%)
Internet	19 (48%)	11 (28%)	2 (5%)
Laws or General Statutes	19 (48%)	2 (5%)	9 (23%)
Listserv	18 (45%)	6 (15%)	2 (5%)
Internal Committee or Working Group	16 (40%)	15 (38%)	1 (3%)
County Employees	15 (38%)	13 (33%)	0 (0%)
SOG Personnel or Publications	12 (30%)	3 (8%)	3 (8%)
Board or Legislature	11 (28%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)
Consultants	9 (23%)	3 (8%)	3 (8%)
Union Personnel or Documents	9 (23%)	6 (15%)	1 (3%)
Vendors	6 (15%)	16 (40%)	6 (15%)
Private Sector Examples	4 (10%)	5 (13%)	1 (3%)
Books	1 (3%)	1 (3%)	5 (13%)
Academic Journals, Papers, or Personnel from Institutions other than SOG	0 (0%)	2 (5%)	0 (0%)

Table 6: Use of Academic Resources By State		
	North Carolina Count (%) (n=20)	New York Count (%) (n=20)
SOG publications	15 (75%)	NA
Written materials from academic institutions other than the SOG:		
Papers	5(25%)	4 (20%
Books	3 (15%)	0 (0%)
Journal articles	1 (5%)	0 (0%)
Websites	0 (0%)	1 (5%)
Publications from professional associations	3 (15%)	3 (15%)
SOG personnel	12 (60%)	NA
Personnel from academic institutions other than the SOG	9 (45%)	8 (40%)
Student interns	7 (35%)	1 (5%)