
Divergences and convergences in public affairs education and research

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Abstract: Public affairs and administration is a young discipline that has experienced considerable growth in a short time. Once viewed as a sub-field of political science, the discipline now embraces most of the social sciences and has established a distinct identity in academia. In this paper, the history of public administration is reviewed briefly, with consideration of the emergence of public affairs as a senior field of study. Changes in the characteristics of public affairs programmes at the graduate level are discussed with an emphasis on continuities and discontinuities in core areas of study. Finally, characteristics of the top programmes in public affairs are examined and the future direction for new or established programmes aspiring to improve their standing are discussed.

Keywords: convergences; divergences; education; faculty specialisations; programmes; public affairs.

Reference to this paper should be made as follows: Adams, K. (2006) 'Divergences and convergences in public affairs education and research', *Int. J. Public Policy*, Vol. 1, No. 4, pp.355–366.

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1 Introduction

Public administration and public affairs are relatively young fields, attracting large numbers of faculty and students who are interested in studying the operations of governmental and quasi-governmental institutions. As with all new successful academic disciplines, growth and maturation processes take place involving a search for identity and status in the university community and, more generally, in societal opinion. Within this developmental context, it is useful to 'take stock' periodically of the field, putting in perspective past events, highlighting current circumstances and speculating about future trends. Such introspection, if not overdone, is valuable in terms of advancing common understanding and vision that facilitate continued development.

2 Brief history of public administration

Public administration is a modern addition to the canon of academic disciplines, whose formative intellectual roots are squarely lodged in political science. Impetus, both within and without the discipline of political science, for a specialty called 'public administration' can be traced to various developments around the turn of the 20th century during the progressive era. At this time, harsh criticism was being hurled against endemic government corruption, which was tied to the political patronage system and notions of a professional workforce evolved as antidote to the problem. Several municipal reform movements took hold in large cities, most notably New York and Chicago, and universities were encouraged to provide training for a new breed of public service professional (Ingraham and Zuck, 1996). Later, the federal government saw tremendous expansion under President Roosevelt's 'New Deal'. Opportunities for universities to provide training mushroomed, and the US Civil Service Commission established mechanisms designed to encourage college graduates to enter federal service. As a result of these developments, courses on public administration and public affairs increasingly were being taught at universities, especially in departments of political science.

The institutional heritage of public administration dates back around seven decades. The first significant event was establishment of the Public Administration Clearing House (PACH) in the 1930s, which was intended to provide a national network for a burgeoning number of public administration organisations (Bergrud, 2004). Shortly thereafter, at the 1939 American Political Science Association Conference, a professional and educational society, named the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), was established, helping to solidify further a professional identity. Given that the purpose of ASPA, in part, was to 'support and sustain connections among different public administration organisations', PACH served as secretariat to ASPA, and the two organisations shared the same address in Chicago. In 1941, ASPA created a scholarly journal for communicating ideas about theory, research and practice by establishing *Public Administration Review* (*PAR*). Today, *PAR* remains as the leading journal in public administration, serving both practitioners and academics. In 1964, ASPA relocated to Washington, D.C. and has remained there since. Presently, ASPA has a membership of over 6000 professionals, with 124 local chapters and 20 institutional sections organised around various specialties.

After a forum was established to bring together academics and practitioners interested in public administration, attention turned to education issues. In 1959, ASPA founded a subgroup called the Council on Graduate Education for Public Administration (CGEPA). The group operated informally, with deans and directors of public administration programmes meeting to discuss issues for a few days each year around the ASPA national meeting (Henry, 1995). In 1970, CGEPA evolved into the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), while still remaining a part of ASPA. The purpose of NASPAA was to secure federal funding for graduate education and to establish formal standards for graduate education, with an emphasis on professionalism within the discipline. In 1977, NASPAA completely separated from ASPA, and, in 1986, NASPAA was recognised by the Council on Postsecondary Accreditation as the accrediting body for master's degrees in public administration (MPA). Today, NASPAA has over 250 institutional members.

We now turn to examine the historical development of public administration academic programmes more closely. As we will see, the history of these programmes is characterised by very rapid growth. From a position of relative obscurity, public

administration programmes quickly proliferated throughout the country. The initial period of rapid growth was followed by a period of contraction and then of stabilisation in terms of numbers of both programmes and students. As the enrolment picture quieted down, course offerings began to diversify and different interpretations of the field with regard to subject matter and program elements took hold.

An early survey, conducted by Roscoe Martin, reported that 105 institutions nationwide were offering university-level courses in public administration in 1952–1953 (Henry, 1995, as reported in Ingraham and Zuck, 1996). In 68 institutions the courses were offered in political science departments; in 16 institutions the courses were offered in institutes or bureaus; while in only six institutions the courses were offered in clearly identified schools of public administration. At the graduate level, a total of 258 master's degrees and 15 doctoral degrees were awarded in public administration during the same period. These degrees were conferred by a group of 22 institutions that offered graduate degrees (master's and doctoral) (Ingraham and Zuck, 1996).

Almost 20 years later, the first survey by NASPAA, conducted in 1970–71, shows a significantly different picture. The number of institutions offering graduate programmes increased almost sixfold (from 22 to 125), as did the number of masters degree graduates (from 258 to 2130), while the number of doctoral degrees awarded increased more than eightfold (from 15 to 91). More telling, perhaps, were the enrolment figures, which serve as harbingers for future graduations. Overall, there were 7877 master's students and 829 doctoral students throughout the nation.

Four years later, a second NASPAA survey (1974–1975) revealed continued growth at a breakneck pace. While the number of institutions offering graduate degrees had increased only by about 10%, total graduate enrolment and total graduate degrees awarded both increased by well over 100% (Henry, 1995). Also, the institutional context of public administration programmes changed considerably, showing increased administrative sovereignty and professional identity. In 1974–1975, there were 29 independent schools of public affairs or public administration, 24 combined schools of business and public administration, 35 departments or degree-granting institutes of public administration, and 52 other academic departments offering a degree or specialisation in public administration. More recently, Wise (1999) reports that about two-thirds of public affairs/public administration programmes are located outside departments of political science and that this figure has not change much over recent years.

The 1970s represent the peak of expansion for public administration programmes, and this period was followed by retraction and stabilisation. According to Wise (1999), a review of Peterson's guide indicates that the number of public administration programmes across all university levels declined from 325 in 1980 to 244 in 1995, representing a 25% drop. Notwithstanding the decrease in programmes, the picture for graduate education, specifically doctoral education, remained healthy. In 1995, NASPAA identified 57 doctoral programmes with a total enrolment of 2474 students, an enrolment increase of nearly 200% relative to 1970–1971 (Brewer et al., 1998).

Wise (1999) also reports that from 1980 to 1995 the number of programmes in public affairs or public policy, as distinct from public administration, increased by 12%. Thus, while there was a substantial drop in the number of public administration programmes, there is evidence of redirection into public affairs and public policy. This shift suggests a move from an applied, managerial focus to a more broadly conceived societal focus. We now turn to examine this development.

3 What is public affairs?

From inception, public administration has been a broadly conceived and intellectually diverse field of study. For example, early in the development of the field, one scholar remarked that:

“Public administration may be said to be a synthesis. The boundary of the field should not be drawn too narrowly. Its scope must be broad – almost as broad as all of government itself.” (Dimock, 1936, p.12 as quoted in Raadschelders and Douglas, 2003)

It is not surprising, then, that as the field matured, the scope and content of the public administration programmes expanded. Eventually, academic programmes began to use the term ‘public affairs’ to encompass public administration and related areas of study.

Today, the terms public administration and public affairs are used somewhat interchangeably, although one could argue that they are distinct concepts given that the term ‘public affairs’ is broader than the term ‘public administration’. The mix-up arises because public administration programmes are often housed in schools of public affairs. While labouring over precise distinctions between the two terms would not be a productive exercise, it is worth exploring some differences. This is especially true in relation to doctoral education, because doctoral graduates supply the next generation of faculty and they are critical in defining the future directions of the field.

Within public administration, there has always been a tension between the scholar and practitioner models, corresponding to a difference in focus between research and professional training. The Masters in Public Administration (MPA), which is the most universally recognised and most commonly awarded graduate degree in public administration, is a professional practice degree. It is designed to teach advanced work skills to persons who either are employed or plan to be employed in government service. As such, the MPA is considered a terminal degree in that it is not designed to prepare students for more advanced academic study, such as at the doctoral level.

As public administration programmes sought to increase their standing in the academic community, research and graduate education, especially at the doctoral level, were emphasised as important status credentials. At the doctoral level, two models were developed: the Doctor of Public Administration (DPA) and the Doctor of Philosophy (PhD). The DPA was conceived of as an extension of the MPA, meaning it is intended to serve as a practitioner doctorate in public administration (Meek and Johnson, 1998; Sherwood, 1996). The non-traditional DPA never caught on, and today there are only a handful of such programmes in the country. In contrast, the PhD was developed as a traditional research-oriented degree. In designing these programmes, faculty looked to the field’s roots in political science and other social sciences for curriculum, especially when it came to theory and research methodology. Given the emphasis on social science in doctoral education, these programmes began to see themselves more broadly as working in the area of ‘public affairs’ rather than ‘public administration’. Today, ‘public administration’ at the doctoral level is offered either as a specialty in public affairs or as a sub-field of political science or management (Raadschelders and Douglas, 2003). Thus, an emphasis on research and graduate education led to a broadening of public administration that eventually transformed into public affairs.

Although the field of public affairs subsumes that of public administration, the contours of public affairs are much wider than that. For a definition of ‘public affairs’, we

can turn to the 1977 NASPAA constitution (Ingraham and Zuck, 1996). According to this document, the field of 'public affairs and administration' includes public administration, public policy and public management as considered across levels of government (e.g. national, state, local), operations of government (e.g. budgeting, personnel management, planning), sectors of public affairs (e.g. criminal justice affairs, economic affairs, environmental affairs), arenas of public policy making (e.g. legislature, judiciary, executive), and public sector organisations (e.g. non-profit organisations). The definition of public affairs proffered by NASPAA is wide-ranging and shows that the field has substantial intellectual breadth. The overlap with other disciplines is considerable.

4 Characteristics of public affairs programmes

One way to clarify the field of public affairs is to move from the conceptual to the operational; that is, by looking at public affairs' doctoral education in terms of specific characteristics of the programmes, we can get a more realistic and tangible depiction of the field. The best source of information on programmes throughout the nation comes from a survey of 56 NASPAA affiliated graduate programmes of public administration and public affairs conducted by Brewer and his colleagues in 1995 (Forrester, 1996). In this survey, questions were asked about a variety of graduate programme characteristics, including curriculum and research centres. In addition, information on programme specialisations, journals and publications, and completed dissertations is available from other sources.

In their survey, Brewer and colleagues asked about substantive concentrations that graduate programmes offered. The findings indicate that the top five specialisations were public policy (85%), general public administration (62%), public finance (55%), organisational theory and behaviour (52%), and management (52%). It is possible to look at changes in doctoral specialisations since Brewer's 1995 survey, given that the NASPAA website lists specialisations for 62 doctoral programmes in public affairs. Although the two data sets are not directly comparable, differences identified through the comparison should be indicative of changes that have taken place. The data indicate that presently the top four specialisations are non-profit (57%), policy (48%), general public management (40%), and budget and finance (36%). Environmental affairs, health affairs and urban affairs are tied for fifth place at 32%. On the one hand, the findings suggest continuity in terms of the importance of broad areas, such as policy, administration, and finance. On the other hand, the findings point to rapidly developing areas, such as non-profit organisations, and sector specific areas, such as health, that have come to the fore. Finally, the findings show that some areas, such as organisation theory and behaviour and management have receded in prominence, perhaps owing to competition from business and management schools.

Brewer and colleagues (Brewer et al., 1998) also investigated the interdisciplinary nature of programmes by asking about courses taken in other departments and fields. They found that students primarily took courses in economics, business, sociology and political science. However, students also took courses in education, statistics, engineering, geography, planning, psychology, medicine, law, criminal justice and social work. In view of this diversity, they acknowledge the benefits of interdisciplinary inquiry, but they also question the intellectual coherence of the field. Brewer and colleagues also inquired

about research centres affiliated with public administration programmes. After reviewing the responses, they concluded that there was little continuity across institutes and centres, suggesting that these institutional arrangements were created opportunistically.

Wise (1999, p.150) reports on a study conducted by Forrester (1996) in which the institutional affiliations of authors publishing in public administration journals was examined. The research showed that only 20% of the items in these journals were published by scholars in public administration, public affairs, or public policy. Practitioners contributed 16%, economists and management scholars contributed 10% each and sociologists contributed 8%. The author concluded that the field of public affairs is very diverse and interdisciplinary.

In view of these studies of the characteristics of graduate programmes in public affairs and administration, one would have to agree that, 'the evidence suggests a sprawling, interdisciplinary field' (Adams and White, 1995, p.123). Today, as interdisciplinary scholarship and research is being encouraged in Universities throughout the USA, there is a tendency to view interdisciplinary training as a positive feature of an academic programme. Indeed, interdisciplinary programmes have much to be commended. However, one must also consider the potential disadvantages of interdisciplinary programmes at the graduate level. At least two disadvantages have been identified. First, as Brewer and colleagues (Brewer et al., 1998) see it, most doctoral curricula present public affairs as an intellectual 'holding company' or as an 'organising theme of study', rather than as a 'coherent academic discipline'. Consequently, doctoral education is fragmented, thereby contributing to a 'prolonged identity crisis' in public affairs and administration. Secondly, given that doctoral education in public affairs and administration lacks coherent intellectual focus, it is not surprising that systematic review of doctoral dissertations reveals that a majority 'lacked a theoretical framework, were methodologically unsound, and tended to address questions of trivial interest to the field.' (Adams and White, 1995, p.68; McCurdy and Cleary, 1984) The implication is that new scholars with doctoral degrees in public affairs probably will not contribute much to the knowledge base of the field over the course of their careers.

4.1 The 'top 10' programmes

In an attempt to develop a more up-to-date of picture of doctoral education and research in public affairs and administration, we examined the top ten programmes as identified by US News and World Report. Although these rankings have been criticised as methodologically unsound and as being too heavily based on reputation (Perry, 1995; Ventriss, 1995), the rankings do identify programmes that are highly regarded by scholars working in the field. As such, these programmes can serve as exemplars for those trying to understand the best that the field has to offer. These programmes also can serve as examples of success for programmes that are trying to improve. The top 10 programmes in rank order, according to the US News and World Report survey (2005), are Syracuse University, Harvard University, Indiana University, University of Georgia, Princeton University, University of California – Berkeley, University of Southern California, Carnegie Mellon University, University of Michigan – Ann Arbor and American University. Information on these programmes was gathered from their websites.¹ Specifically, information was collected on the types of programmes offered, the definition of public affairs conveyed in the programme description, the number of faculty and their specialisations, and the number of research centres and their characteristics.

Firstly, we examine descriptive information on the programmes in terms of degrees offered and definition of public affairs. All of the programmes in the top 10 offer a PhD degree, although the area of study varies with the most common designations being public affairs, public administration and public policy. It should be noted that among the programmes ranked 11–20, about half do not offer a PhD in public affairs, public administration or public policy. In terms of a definition of ‘public affairs’, none of the top 10 programmes offers a clear and distinct definition. Perhaps, there is a sentiment that a specific definition of public affairs is not needed, because it is assumed the definition is self-evident to those who visit the website or because the definition can be inferred from other web materials, such as the curriculum and course offerings. One way to infer a definition of public affairs from the curriculum is to look at the programme specialisations. Many of the programmes offer specialised degrees, and, from this perspective, there appears to be heavy emphasis on ‘policy’. Finally, roughly half of the schools explicitly emphasise an interdisciplinary or multidisciplinary approach.

Next, the number of faculty was examined. In assembling this information, the focus was on full-time, tenured or tenure earning faculty whose primary appointment is with a doctoral program in public affairs or administration. Thus, part-time faculty, lecturers, adjunct and emeritus faculty are not included. If the programme provided a separate list of doctoral faculty, we used that list; otherwise we used a list of graduate faculty, or failing that, a list of all faculty. Faculty who were members of the school or college but in departments other than the public affairs or administration programme were not included. The data indicate that there is a considerable variation in numbers of faculty across programmes. The number of faculty per programme is Syracuse 34, Harvard 23, Indiana 40, Georgia 15, Princeton 60, Berkeley 19, USC 38, Carnegie Mellon 54, Michigan 31 and American 11. Thus, the number of faculty range from a high of 60 (Princeton) to a low of 11 (American), with an average of 32.5 faculty per programme. Clearly, large numbers of faculty are needed to staff a top ranked programme in a broad and diverse discipline.

Next, we looked at the substantive specialisations listed for faculty. Since faculty typically list more than one specialisation, the total number of entries exceeds the 325 faculty across the 10 programmes. We began by transcribing the specialisations as described in the faculty biographies. We then combined specialisations into broader categories, based on similarity of subject area.

What are the top specialisations of faculty in leading doctoral programmes of public affairs and administration? Table 1 indicates that international affairs (n=73) is the leading specialisation. More than one in five faculty indicate that they specialise in international issues. The next most common specialisations are social policy (n=56) and economics (n=50), which are roughly tied in popularity. Just over one in seven faculty identify with each of these specialisations. Finishing the list of top specialisations is a group of eight that are fairly close in popularity. These specialisations are environmental affairs (n=35), personnel/public management (n=34), budgeting/finance (n=32), health policy/affairs (n=30), urban studies (n=30), public policy (n=28), governance (n=25) and information technology (n=25). It is interesting to note that the most common specialisations involved broad-based approaches to problems and issues. Sector-specific approaches, for example, are not common. Perhaps this observation explains why separate programmes and departments focusing on various sectors, such as health, criminal justice and environment, have prospered.

Table 1 Faculty specialisations for the 'top 10' programmes in public affairs and public administration

<i>Specialty</i>	<i>Number of faculties</i>
International issues	73
Social policy	56
Economics	50
Environmental affairs	35
Public management	34
Budget/finance	32
Health	30
Urban/metropolitan	30
Public policy	28
Information technology	25
Governance	25
Politics	22
Nonprofit	21
Strategic management	20
Education	17
Law	15
Health	11
Criminal justice	10
Ethics	9
Leadership	9
Public administration	9
Intergovernmental relations	8
Programme evaluation	7
Media	5
National security	5
Cultural affairs	3
Privatisation	3
Sustainable development	3

Note: A faculty member may be represented in more than one specialty. Most faculty listed multiple areas of specialisation. Information technology includes electronic data management and e-government; governance includes democracy and civic engagement; ethics includes human rights; international issues include international affairs, international organisations, international security and terrorism, and comparative administration; non-profit includes philanthropy; strategic management includes strategic planning and management and organisational design and change; social policy includes social welfare and poverty.

Finally, the number and characteristics of research centres or institutes affiliated with the programmes was examined. Research centres were characterised in terms of level,

meaning whether the emphasis is on the international, national, state, or local arena, and focus, meaning whether the emphasis is on policy issues, practice or service delivery issues or education. Again, research centres can fit in more than one category.

Table 2 indicates that all of the programmes have multiple research centres, ranging from a minimum of two to a maximum of 21. The average across all programmes is nine centres, rounded to a whole number. Centres that concentrate on international and national issues are most popular, and equally so, with about the same proportion in each category. Roughly two out of five centres deal with international issues and with national issues. Research centres dealing with state issues are less popular, representing roughly one in four centres, and those addressing local issues are least popular, representing roughly one in ten centres. Turning to examine the focus of the research centres, we find that a majority (58%) focus on policy issues, followed by practice and service delivery issues (43%) and education activities (37%). Many of the research centres stress their interdisciplinary nature. Consistent with this emphasis is the fact that roughly one in five centres is co-sponsored by another school, department or unit outside of public affairs or administration (data not shown in table).

Table 2 Characteristics of research centres affiliated with the ‘top 10’ programmes in public affairs and public administration

<i>Institution</i>	<i>Total</i>	<i>Level</i>				<i>Focus</i>		
		<i>International</i>	<i>National</i>	<i>State/regional</i>	<i>Local</i>	<i>Policy</i>	<i>Practice</i>	<i>Education</i>
Syracuse University	7	3	3	3	3	5	3	2
Harvard University	13	7	7	1	1	9	6	8
Indiana University – Bloomington	8	1	5	5	3	4	5	4
University of Georgia	2	2	0	0	0	2	0	0
Princeton University	21	10	9	1	1	14	8	8
University of California – Berkeley	6	3	2	1	0	4	1	3
University of Southern California	9	2	3	5	0	6	7	1
Carnegie Mellon University	8	4	3	1	0	3	7	2
University of Michigan	5	0	1	4	1	3	1	2
American University	9	3	5	2	2	2	5	7
Total	88	35	38	23	11	52	43	37
Percentage	100%	40%	43%	26%	13%	58%	43%	37%

Note: A research centre may fit in to more than one classification. Thus, the number of centres by level of analysis and focus is greater than the total number of research centres. Also, the percentage of research centres across classification sums to more than 100%.

Programmes aspiring to improve their standing may find the characteristics of the top ranked programmes interesting. Two general strategies come to mind. The first is imitation. Programmes can aspire to copy success by duplicating the characteristics of the top-ranked programmes. This strategy would involve considerable investment of faculty resources and research infrastructure to develop a programme having an international and national focus with an emphasis on social policy and economic issues. While this strategy offers a tried and true approach with a comparative yardstick for progress, substantial investment of resources and time probably will be required. An alternative strategy is innovation. That is, developing programmes can look for opportunities in areas that top programmes are only marginally involved in or not involved in at all. For example, programmes could distinguish themselves by concentrating on state-level or local-level issues or by emphasising practice and service delivery over policy. Within this context, programmes might try to develop a niche for which they become well known as leaders in that area. While this strategy has potential for producing results in a quicker time frame with less investment of resources compared to the imitation strategy, it is a riskier approach that is likely to bring more limited recognition. It should be realised, however, that imitation and innovation are not mutually exclusive strategies. The two approaches can be combined so as to capitalise on the advantages of both while reducing the disadvantages.

The public affairs doctoral programme at the University of Central Florida (UCF) is an example of the use of a niche approach to programme development. The programme is in the process of establishing an informatics specialty that first will involve health administration and later will be expanded to other sectors, such as criminal justice and social work. Informatics, which highlights evidence-based processes of decision making, is compatible with a focus on improving practice and service delivery at the state and local levels. This focus on using informatics to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of services and quality of life in the community complements the institution's role as a 'metropolitan university' dedicated to creative partnerships with industry and government in the area.

5 Conclusion

Public affairs and administration is a broad and diverse field, drawing upon many disciplines. Although rooted in political science, the field draws liberally from a wide range of other social sciences in studying governmental and quasi-governmental issues. Initially, public administration programmes were designed to provide work-force training for persons in or entering federal service. The field has since expanded to encompass broader sets of issues under the rubric of public affairs, thus facilitating the establishment of a place next to other university disciplines that emphasise theory, research and the accumulation of scientific knowledge.

Over the past few decades, the number of programmes and students has grown tremendously. Now that growth has subsided, more discussion is focused on identifying the scholarly contours of the discipline. In this developmental context, we find some enduring programme features, such as an emphasis on policy, administration and finance. We also find robust advancement of areas such as non-profit organisations and health that coincide with the stark retreat of areas such as organisational theory and behaviour. In the

intellectual give-and-take that characterises young academic disciplines, questions productively can be asked about the centrality of different subject areas, methods of study and techniques of investigation, with the goal of strengthening programme quality while retaining disciplinary diversity.

Disciplinary introspection naturally leads to consideration of doctoral education, which serves as the intellectual incubator whose offspring stand to become future architects of the field. Since top programmes are seen as exemplars, it is useful to examine their characteristics to discern the qualities of success. Not surprisingly, the top programmes in public affairs and administration are big, sophisticated enterprises, with large numbers of faculty and strong research infrastructures comprised of multiple centres and institutes. The emphasis in these programmes tends to be on international and national affairs, with a concern for policy and economics. Other programmes may want to follow these directions in the hopes of emulating success. Alternatively, programmes may see opportunities in taking a less travelled road. One such opportunity lies in the area of informatics, which uses information technology and statistics to improve the efficiency and effectiveness of resource allocation decisions. Unfamiliar roads may pose navigational challenges that test a programme's management, but novel pathways can lead to rewarding destinations in the end.

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Notes

- ¹ The corresponding websites are www.maxwell.syr.edu, www.ksg.harvard.edu, <http://www.spea.indiana.edu/home/>, <http://www.uga.edu/spia/home/>, <http://www.wws.princeton.edu/>, <http://ist-socrates.berkeley.edu/~gspp/>, <http://www.usc.edu/schools/sppd/>, <http://www.heinz.cmu.edu/>, <http://www.fordschool.umich.edu/>, <http://spa.american.edu/>.