

# Is the Teaching of Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations Dead or Alive in U.S. Public Administration?

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## ABSTRACT

Despite widespread perceptions of a decline in teaching about federalism and/or intergovernmental relations in U.S. public administration and public affairs programs, this study finds that more than half of all such programs offer courses on these subjects. Such courses are more prevalent in public administration than in political science; interest in teaching such courses is higher in public administration than in political science; and such courses are viewed as valuable by department colleagues in both disciplines. The top four topics covered in such courses are intergovernmental administration, federal-state-local relations, policy issues, and fiscal matters. Moreover, the rise of popular terms such as *collaborative*, *networked*, and *multilevel governance* has not displaced *federal*, *federalism*, and *intergovernmental relations* in course titles.

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## KEYWORDS

Federalism, intergovernmental relations, networked governance, teaching

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The “question of the relation of the states to the federal government,” wrote Woodrow Wilson (1908, p. 173) “is the cardinal question of our constitutional system.” This is even truer today because virtually all public policy is intergovernmental. The federal government operates 1,099 grant programs for state and local governments (Dilger, 2014) through which it disbursed about \$628 billion in 2015 (U.S. Office of Management and Budget, 2015), and the federal government provides about 30% of states’ general revenue (Pew Charitable Trusts, 2015). State and local governments also are

governed by numerous federal rules, regulations, mandates, preemptions, and court rulings. The ubiquity of intergovernmental relations (IGR) in the U.S. federal system suggests that IGR should be a prominent feature of public affairs education.

Many scholars have commented on the importance of the extent and content of graduate and undergraduate intergovernmental relations courses (Box, 1995; Schechter, 1984; Stenberg & Walker, 1969). Stenberg and Walker’s (1969) observation is as relevant today as it was almost

half a century ago. In their view, and for a number of good reasons, intergovernmental relations

deserve far more attention than they are currently receiving. Not the least of these reasons is the crucial role of higher educational institutions as training grounds for future public servants. Moreover, students and instructors cannot really come to grips with the roots of the urban crisis, the plight of rural America, and the pathology of racial discord if the intergovernmental dimensions of these critical public policy questions are ignored in the classroom (p. 167).

This study examines results of a spring 2014 survey of U.S. members of the Section on Intergovernmental Administration and Management (SIAM) of the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) and of U.S. department/program chairs/heads in the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) about the teaching of courses on intergovernmental relations and/or federalism. This research also compares the results for public administration with results of a similar 2013 survey of U.S. political scientists (Kincaid & Cole, 2014). A key finding is that the teaching of federalism and IGR is more prevalent in public administration than in political science, although courses in public administration vary considerably by such characteristics as size of enrollment, region where such courses are offered, and whether such courses are given in a public or private institution. There also is debate over whether the term *intergovernmental relations* should be superseded by new terms such as *networked*, *collaborative*, or *multilevel governance*.

### FEDERALISM AND PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION

Federalism and public administration have been intertwined since the founding of the republic. The word *administration* is used 82 times in *The Federalist*. The word *administer* appears 11 times, *administered* 17 times, *administering* 4 times, and *administrations* 10 times. Alexander Hamilton accounts for 61% of the uses of these words. One overriding concern of the authors

of *The Federalist* was to establish an “efficient and well administered” (Cooke, 1961, p. 22) general government able to command the respect of the citizenry and the world. Such administration, they argued, was impossible under the Articles of Confederation.

*The Federalist* recognized the importance and independence of the country’s state and local administrations, which, by 1787, had had 11 years to transition from colonial administration. The general government created by the Articles of Confederation was too weak and limited to undertake administrative decolonization. This government was “desitute,” contended Hamilton, and unable to execute its measures “without the intervention of the particular [i.e., state] administrations” (Cooke, 1961, p. 97). Consequently, the general government established by the U.S. Constitution would have to construct administration on an unprecedented foundation; namely, a continental-size republic that would be neither wholly national nor wholly confederal. Because the government established by the Constitution was granted concurrent authority with the states to legislate for individuals, Hamilton especially emphasized the importance of federal-state cooperation in public administration and “reciprocal forbearance” (Cooke, 1961, p. 227) by federal and state authorities (Kincaid, 2014; Ostrom, 1989). “The national Legislature,” Hamilton contended, also could “make use of the *system of each State within that State*” (Cooke, 1961, p. 226, emphasis in original).

James Madison emphasized the importance of public administration being “republican administration” (Cooke, 1961, p. 83) because, in an extended republic, the people must rely on agents who are only indirectly subject to their control. However, Madison also envisioned a competitive dynamic when he suggested that if “the people should in future become more partial to the federal than to the State governments, the change can only result, from such manifest and irresistible proofs of a better administration, as will overcome all their antecedent propensities” (Cooke, 1961, p. 317) to prefer their state administration. Madison’s

notion of competitive federalism appears to envision a race to the top, not to the bottom. At the same time, Madison warned that the administration of the general government should not become overextended, “because it is only within a certain sphere, that the federal power can, in the nature of things, be advantageously administered” (Cook, 1961, p. 317).

As Mosher (1982) noted, the United States developed public services “entirely different from” those of Europe and “a set of personnel systems, which by the mid-twentieth century were unique in the world” (p. 57), including the fact that even in 1800 about 95% of all federal employees were located outside the nation’s capital. The relationship between federalism and public administration established in the 1780s has been characterized as even more intimate today. “Public administration and the processes of federalism have merged to a nearly indistinguishable point” (Agranoff & McGuire, 2001, p. 671). The continuing relevance of issues raised in *The Federalist* is reflected in the special supplement to the *Public Administration Review* published in 2011 to revise *The Federalist* for the contemporary era (Light, 2011) and an IGR symposium also published in 2011 (Kincaid & Stenberg, 2011). Others have maintained that it is not “feasible to understand how public policy is made and implemented without an informed awareness of the meaning and application of the concepts of” intergovernmental relations and management (Wright, Stenberg, & Cho, 2009, p. 7).

#### **RATIONALE, PREVIOUS RESEARCH, AND HYPOTHESES**

We undertook our survey partly in response to concerns expressed by many intergovernmental relations scholars that the teaching of federalism and IGR in public administration programs, and interest in those subjects, has declined in recent years. Among indicators of possible decline is that ASPA’s annual conference no longer features a theme or track devoted specifically to IGR and/or federalism. Membership in ASPA’s Section on Intergovernmental Administration and Management declined from 577 in 1997 to 216 in 2015 (a 63% drop), although

membership decline has been ASPA-wide (24% over the same period and all sections collectively declining by 45%). SIAM, which was ASPA’s third-largest section in 1997, is now ASPA’s fifth-largest section (J. E. Benton, personal communication, March 2, 2015). Furthermore, the last edition of Wright’s *Understanding Intergovernmental Relations* (1988) appeared 27 years ago, and the last edition of Elazar’s *American Federalism* (1984) appeared 31 years ago, as did the last edition of Glendening and Reeves’s *Pragmatic Federalism* (1984). One survivor has been *American Intergovernmental Relations*, an edited volume by O’Toole and Christensen (2013).

Intergovernmental institutions began to experience significant decline during the 1980s. Congress’s long-standing subcommittees on federalism and intergovernmental relations were abolished, and the Office of Management and Budget disbanded its intergovernmental section. The coup de grâce was the closing of the U.S. Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations in 1996 (Kincaid, 2011; McDowell, 1997). Some private organizations followed suit. In 1984, the Transportation Research Board changed the name of its Intergovernmental Relations committee to Metropolitan Policy, Planning, and Processes. In 2005, the American Planning Association changed the name of its Intergovernmental Planning Division to Regional and Intergovernmental Planning (B. D. McDowell, personal communication, March 13, 2015).

References to federalism and IGR have declined sharply in the *Public Administration Review* since the 1971–1980 decade (Wright et al., 2009) and have been almost totally eclipsed by references to collaborative and networked governance. Collaborative public management emphasizes intersectoral connections or networks among governmental actors and private nonprofit and for-profit actors engaged in public services (Agranoff, 2007; O’Leary, Gerard, & Bingham, 2006; O’Leary & Vij, 2012). Collaboration with nongovernmental entities has been a feature of intergovernmental relations since the beginning of the republic. Elazar

(1970) sought to capture this collaboration in the concept of the civil community; namely, a local system “composed of a variety of political institutions, ranging from formal governments (state and federal agencies as well as local) through the public nongovernmental institutions and the local party system which serve local ends, to include the organized interest groups which take a continuing role in shaping those ends” (p. 4).

At the same time, there has been the rise of the concept of multilevel governance, which emphasizes the diffusion of decision making across multiple levels of government from local to global (Marks, 1996; Marks, Hooghe, & Blank, 1996; Piattoni, 2009). This conceptual rival to intergovernmental relations was formulated as a descriptor of governance in the European Union, where the term *intergovernmental relations* referred traditionally to “international” relations between member states (Levrat, 2015). The concept of multilevel governance has achieved some prominence in public administration and political science.

In our survey, therefore, we expect to find a paucity of offerings of federalism/IGR courses, although, without data on actual course offerings over time, measurement of decline is subjective. Our measure is to ask about respondents’ perceptions of decline through the following question: In general, do you feel that the teaching of courses on American federalism and/or intergovernmental relations in U.S. colleges and universities has decreased or increased over the past 25 years?

Our survey also asks about course offerings on comparative federalism/IGR because, as ASPA’s president suggested in 2008, public administration faces an inevitably global future as globalization increasingly blurs traditional boundaries between domestic and foreign public administration (White, 2008). Globalization and public administration have received considerable attention in recent years (e.g., Abonyi & Van Slyke, 2010; Farazmand, 1999; Farazmand & Pinkowski, 2006; Gulrajani & Moloney,

2012). Furthermore, now that about 95% of democracies have some type of elected subnational government (World Bank, 1999, p. 107), intergovernmental relations have become a common feature of nonfederal as well as federal governance. In addition, comparative federalism is a developed field (e.g., Burgess, 2006; Hueglin & Fenna, 2006; Kincaid & Tarr, 2005; Watts, 2008), and the literature on comparative intergovernmental relations has been developing as well (e.g., Agranoff, 2007; Bolleyer, 2006, 2009; Poirier, Saunders, & Kincaid, 2015). Based on the results of a 2013 survey of political scientists (Kincaid & Cole, 2014), however, we do not expect to find a high proportion of public administration departments and programs offering courses on comparative federalism/IGR.

Previous research (Kincaid & Cole, 2014; Lovrich & Taylor, 1978; Stenberg & Walker, 1969) on relevant political science courses found that federalism/IGR courses were offered more often in colleges and universities having large enrollments, in public rather than private institutions, in universities that award master’s and doctoral degrees, and in institutions located in the Southwest, Mountain, and Northeast regions. We expect to find the same patterns in our survey, except that public administration programs do not offer undergraduate courses on federalism/IGR.

We also expect to find more public administration departments and programs offering online federalism/IGR courses than political science departments, in part because public administration programs have more working clientele in the field interested in taking online courses. However, given the high attrition rate for online courses and the need for “an extra dose of motivation to stay on top of... assignments compared to the traditional classroom” (Bart, 2012, p. 2), we do not expect to find that online courses increase student interest in learning about federalism/IGR.

Our survey also replicates a key part of a survey by Box (1995), which identified core concepts taught in public administration federalism/IGR

courses 20 years ago. Box examined 42 syllabi for graduate public administration courses on intergovernmental relations or management. He rank-ordered the amount of coverage given to each of the topics listed on the syllabi and uncovered a “set of core concepts,” which he labeled “Fiscal, Models, History, Vertical, Policy, Change, Politics, and Legal” (Box, 1995, p. 28). We seek to determine the extent to which the topics taught in 1995 are the same as, or different than, those taught today in public administration courses. Although there have been changes in the federal system since 1995, they have not been so fundamental as to lead to an expectation that core concepts have changed significantly, with one exception—intersectoral relations among public, nonprofit, and for-profit institutions. The increased attention in the literature to networked and collaborative governance suggests that intersectoral relations will rank higher in our findings.

Where relevant courses are absent, we asked respondents why their department or program does not offer courses on federalism/IGR. In light of the indicators of diminished interest in federalism/IGR, as well as the aforementioned political science survey (Kincaid & Cole, 2014), we expect that lack of student and faculty interest and perceptions of the declining relevance of federalism would be the predominant reasons for the omission of course offerings. Correspondingly, we expect respondents to report low levels of student interest in federalism/IGR courses and a perception that their colleagues do not regard such courses as being very important.

In light of the findings of Wright, Stenberg, and Cho (2009) on terminology, we expect to find many federalism/IGR courses being taught under a course title with words different than *federalism* and/or *intergovernmental relations*. We also expect many respondents to report a preference for the terms *multilevel*, *collaborative*, or *networked governance* over *federalism* and/or *intergovernmental relations*.

Finally, to provide a comparative perspective, we contrast our findings for public admin-

istration teaching with recent findings on the teaching of federalism and IGR courses in U.S. political science (Kincaid & Cole, 2014).

### RESEARCH FOCUS AND METHODOLOGY

Our study focuses on university- and college-level teaching of federalism and IGR-related courses in public administration departments and programs in the United States today, which we also compare to U.S. political science departments.

To these ends, we conducted an online survey in April–May 2014 of 154 faculty members of ASPA’s SIAM and 216 chairs of public administration programs identified through NASPAA. After two reminders, the response rate was 50.3% from SIAM members ( $N = 78$ ) and 46.8% from chairs of NASPAA member programs ( $N = 101$ ).

For political science, we conducted online surveys during March–May 2013 of 762 chairs of U.S. political science departments provided by the American Political Science Association (APSA) and all 319 U.S. faculty members of APSA’s Section on Federalism and Intergovernmental Relations. After follow-up contacts, the response rate was 38.7% from chairs and 48.9% from faculty. In none of the surveys did we detect any regional, institutional size, or type-of-degree bias in responses.

All the surveys gauged aspects of teaching courses on federalism and/or IGR in colleges and universities. We were interested in the extent to which undergraduate and graduate courses are offered specifically on federalism and intergovernmental relations; why such courses are not offered; whether such courses are elective or required; levels of enrollment; student interest levels; perceived value of the courses to departments and colleagues; and whether courses are taught online and, if so, their impacts on student interest. We also sought to determine the topics covered in such courses, as well as the average time devoted to each topic and how this may have changed over the past two decades.

**TABLE 1.**  
**Frequency of Public Administration and Political Science Federalism/IGR Courses**

	Percentage offering courses	Percentage not offering courses, but interested in offering	Percentage total (offering or interested in offering)
<b>American</b>			
Public administration (N= 101)	52.5	34.0	86.5
Political science, undergraduate (N= 287)	36.1	40.0	76.1
Political science, graduate (N= 106)	40.0	33.3	73.3
<b>Comparative</b>			
Public administration (N= 101)	11.1	18.0	29.1
Political science, undergraduate (N= 287)	13.8	28.3	42.1
Political science, graduate (N= 106)	16.3	25.9	42.2

**PREVALENCE OF U.S. AND COMPARATIVE FEDERALISM/IGR COURSES**

Table 1 displays the reported frequency of relevant course offerings on U.S. and comparative federalism/IGR. More than half (52.5%) of the public administration respondents reported that their department or program offers American federalism and/or IGR courses. This is considerably more than we expected, given the indicators of decline cited above. Federalism/IGR course offerings in public administration also are markedly more prevalent than in political science, even though the political science offerings are notably higher than the 23% reported in a 1968 survey (Stenberg & Walker, 1969).

Furthermore, 34.0% of public administration respondents reported an interest in offering federalism/IGR courses. This result is within range of the results reported for political science in Table 1. If we combine the percentage of respondents reporting course offerings and the percentage expressing interest in offering such

courses, then the overall level of interest in teaching American federalism/IGR courses is 86.5% for public administration compared to 76.1% for undergraduate political science and 73.3% for graduate political science. These results, therefore, call into question a decline in both the teaching of and interest in U.S. federalism and intergovernmental relations in the field of public administration.

What were the respondents' perceptions of decline? Among public administration respondents (N= 78), more than half (53.3%), compared to 37.9% of political science respondents (N= 156), said they believe that the teaching of American federalism/IGR has decreased over the past 25 years. Another 15.0% in public administration and 17.2% in political science reported no change over the quarter century, while 6.7% in public administration and 5.2% in political science reported an increase. However, 25.0% of respondents in public administration and 39.7% in political science reported "don't



know” on this question. Consequently, the predominant perception, especially among public administration respondents, is that course offerings in American federalism/IGR have declined over the past 25 years. Although sizable proportions of respondents declined to answer this question, far fewer public administration than political science respondents answered “don’t know,” thus producing the higher percentage of public administration respondents reporting decline and suggesting a greater certainty of decline among the public administration respondents.

Our expectation of a paucity of courses on comparative federalism/IGR is confirmed by the survey results. Only 11.1% of public administration departments and programs offer courses on comparative federalism/IGR. By contrast, 16.3% of political science departments reported graduate course offerings in comparative federalism/IGR, and 13.8% reported undergraduate comparative course offerings. Although public administration lags behind political science in teaching comparative federalism/IGR, it does not lag far behind because comparative course offerings are not common in political science either. The teaching of federalism/IGR in the United States, in both political science departments and public administration programs, remains overwhelmingly focused on U.S. federalism/IGR. This is not to say, however, that there is a paucity of comparative course offerings in academic public administration, because departments and programs that offer no comparative federalism/IGR courses might offer other comparative public administration courses.

#### **FACTORS ASSOCIATED WITH OFFERING FEDERALISM/IGR COURSES**

Contrary to our expectations, courses on federalism/IGR in public administration are not offered more often in large rather than small institutions. Institutions having 10,000–20,000 students most often (61.8%) offer such courses, while only 50.0% of schools having more than 30,000 students offer such courses. Because all the federalism/IGR courses in public administration are graduate courses, there are

no differences in offerings with respect to the highest degrees offered by institutions. Federalism/IGR courses are, however, more prevalent in public institutions (66.2%) compared to private institutions (40.7%). Contrary to our expectations, federalism/IGR courses are not least prevalent in the American West, as they are in political science. Instead, in public administration, such courses are least prevalent in the Northeast, followed in ascending order by the West, Midwest, Southwest, and Southeast.

Consistent with expectations, public administration departments and programs offer online federalism courses more often than political science departments. Such courses are offered by 29.8% of public administration departments and programs compared to 16.5% of political science departments. Conversely, such courses are not offered by 70.2% departments and programs in public administration and 83.5% in political science.

Overwhelmingly, respondents in public administration (82.4%) and political science (69.2%) said that online courses have no impact on student interest in federalism/IGR. Only 17.6% of public administration respondents and 15.4% of political science respondents believed that student interest is increased by online courses. Interestingly, while 15.4% of political science respondents reported that online courses decrease student interest in federalism/IGR, no public administration respondent said this.

#### **COURSE CHARACTERISTICS, STUDENT INTEREST, AND DEPARTMENT VALUE**

We asked respondents who teach federalism/IGR courses about the characteristics of their courses, the level of student interest, and the extent to which their department or program colleagues value these courses in the curriculum.

As shown in Table 2, in the field of public administration, the federalism/IGR courses are offered overwhelmingly in public administration departments or programs. Only 15.4% are reported to be offered in political science departments. In political science, only 34.3%

**TABLE 2.**  
Course Characteristics, Student Interest, and Department Value

	<b>% Public admini- stration (N = 78)</b>	<b>% Political science graduate (N = 35)</b>	<b>% Political science undergraduate (N = 60)</b>
<b>Department</b>			
Political science	15.4	34.3	84.6
Public administration	76.9	20.0	5.8
All others	7.7	45.7	9.6
<b>Words in course title</b>			
Federalism or IGR	71.8	75.0	63.3
Multilevel governance/government	7.9	6.8	5.4
Other	20.3	18.2	31.3
<b>Required or elective</b>			
Required	20.8	22.8	18.0
Elective	79.2	77.1	82.0
<b>Course frequency</b>			
Once a year	49.1	57.1	41.7
Twice a year	13.2	11.4	6.3
Three or more times/year	1.9	2.9	10.4
Not every year	35.8	28.6	41.7
<b>Average enrollment</b>			
5 or fewer	1.9	3.0	2.2
6-10	18.9	33.3	8.7
11-15	43.4	18.2	8.7
16-20	15.1	33.3	21.7
21-30	15.1	6.1	32.6
31-40	1.9	3.0	6.5
41 and above	3.8	19.6	19.6
<b>Student interest level</b>			
Very interested	9.4	32.3	12.8
Somewhat interested	71.7	54.8	66.7
Not very interested	18.9	12.9	20.5
<b>Value to department</b>			
Very valuable	32.1	25.0	10.8
Somewhat valuable	64.2	62.5	73.0
Not very valuable	3.8	12.5	13.5
Not valuable at all	—	—	2.7



of federalism/IGR courses are offered in a political science department; many more such courses are offered in public administration and other departments, such as public affairs and public policy. In both public administration and political science, federalism/IGR courses are overwhelmingly elective and taught only once a year or not every year. The most common enrollment range in public administration federalism/IGR courses is 11–15 students, followed by 6–10 students. On average, political science federalism/IGR courses have larger enrollments than their public administration counterparts.

Regarding student interest, the predominant response in public administration (71.7%) and in political science (66.7% undergraduate, 54.8% graduate) is that students are somewhat interested in federalism/IGR courses. Only 9.4% of public administration respondents reported that students are very interested, compared to 32.3% of political science respondents who teach a graduate-level federalism/IGR course. Only 18.9% of public administration respondents reported that students are not very interested.

However, 32.1% of public administration respondents said that their colleagues regard federalism/IGR courses as very valuable to their department or program, while another 64.2% reported that such courses are viewed as somewhat valuable to their department. Thus, federalism/IGR courses are more often perceived as being of value to departments and programs in public administration than in political science.

Contrary to our expectations, though, 71.8% of the public administration respondents reported that the title of their federalism/IGR course contains the words *federal*, *federalism*, and/or *intergovernmental relations*. Consequently, there has not been a shift in the titles of federalism/IGR courses comparable to the shift in terminology found over recent decades in the *Public Administration Review* (Wright et al., 2009). From these data, however, we cannot determine whether course titles reflect terminological preferences or institutional inertia arising from hurdles often encountered in renaming a course.

### EXTENT OF COVERAGE OF COURSE TOPICS

Many of the topics included in our 2014 survey are the same as those examined by Box (1995). Figure 1 presents in rank order the proportionate amount of time given to each topic in public administration courses on federalism/IGR compared to graduate political science courses.<sup>1</sup>

Not surprisingly, IGR administration receives the most attention in public administration courses. We included this topic, although it is not one of Box's ranked topics, nor is interstate relations. All the other topics in Figure 1 are modeled after Box's topics. Fiscal matters rank 1st in Box's study but 4th in our findings. Theories of federalism/IGR drop from 2nd place in Box to 10th in our survey and historical matters from 3rd to 8th. However, vertical issues, which tie for 3rd rank in Box, are 2nd in our ranking; and policy issues, which tie for 4th rank in Box, are 3rd in our ranking. Political issues tie with legal matters for 5th place in Box; in our results, they are 5th and 9th, respectively. Interlocal issues occupy 6th place in both studies. Three of the 4 bottom-ranked topics in Figure 1 also rank at the bottom of Box's study. Interstate relations were not ranked in Box's study.

In summary, theoretical, legal, and historical topics dropped in ranking compared to Box's study, and interlocal relations rose in the ranking; all other topics, except for intergovernmental administration and interstate relations, which are not in Box's ranking, are generally in the same order as those found on course syllabi in 1995. Contrary to our expectations, therefore, intersectoral relations in our survey did not rise from Box's bottom ranking.

### REASONS FOR THE ABSENCE OF FEDERALISM/IGR COURSES

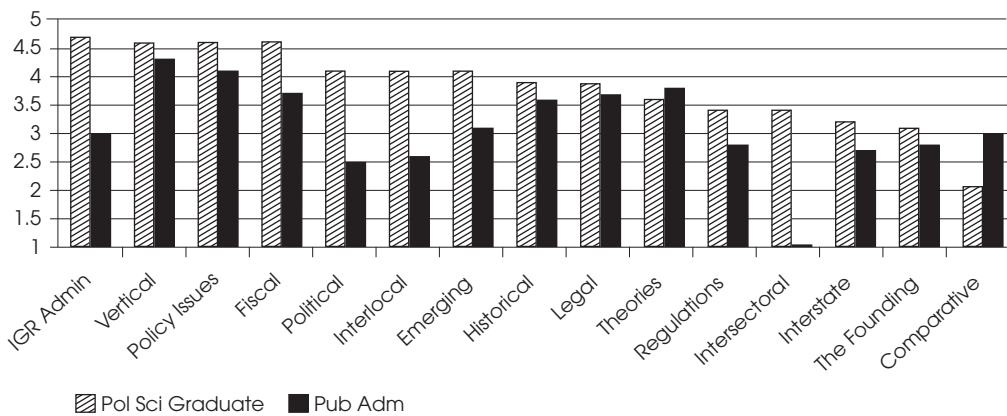
Contrary to our expectations, the two major reasons for not offering federalism/IGR courses are scarce resources (26.7%) and "issues of federalism covered in other courses" (26.7%). The next most important reason is "other courses more important to students' degree plans." Few public administration respondents reported "lack of qualified or interested faculty" and

“low student interest” (18.8% combined), and even fewer (5.9%) reported “declining relevance of federalism” as reasons for not offering federalism/IGR courses.

These public administration results are quite different from those for political science, where the factor cited most often for not offering federalism/IGR courses is “lack of qualified or interested faculty” followed by “other courses more important to students’ degree plans,” low student interest, and scarce resources.

The results for public administration sharply belie the perception among federalism/IGR scholars of a decline of interest in federalism/IGR. Lack of interest is much more prevalent in political science. We do not have survey data that might help explain this difference between the two disciplines, but we suspect it is due to the integral importance of federalism/IGR for public administration, as noted at the outset of this article. Intergovernmental relations especially are a daily fact of life for scholars and practitioners of public administration in the

**FIGURE 1.**  
Topics Ranked by Time of Class Coverage



*Note:* Respondents were asked to estimate the approximate amount of time devoted to each topic during a semester. The scale ranges from 1 to 10, where 1 represents 0%, 2 represents about 5%, 3 represents about 10%, and so forth. Respondents were not required to total their responses to 100%. The bar heights above, which represent proportionate amount of class time, range from slightly more than 5% to more than 15%. The topic “Inter-Sectoral” was not asked in the political science survey. Each topic was presented to respondents as follows:

- IGR Administration/Management (collaboration, networking, administration, etc.)
- Vertical/IGR (relationships between local, state, and federal, including executive federalism)
- Policy issues (policy types and specific policy areas)
- Fiscal (grants, revenue, expenditures, equalization, etc.)
- Political Issues and Actors (interest groups, actors, interactions)
- Interlocal (inter-local relations, regional cooperation, etc.)
- Emerging (projections of trends, reforms, and developments)
- Historical Development (change since 1789)
- Legal/Constitutional Issues (court cases and laws affecting IGR and state powers)
- Theories (normative/philosophical)
- Regulatory (preemptions, mandates, conditional grants, federal rules)
- Inter-Sectoral (for-profits, not for profits, universities, etc.)
- Interstate/Interprovincial (nationwide and regional cooperation, competition, conflict, uniformity)
- The Founding (Framers’ philosophy, The Federalist, Anti-Federalists)
- Comparative (cross-national and international comparisons)

**TABLE 3.**  
Reasons for Not Offering Federalism/IGR Courses

	% Public admini- stration (N = 101)	% Political science graduate (N = 106)	% Political science undergraduate (N = 179)
Lack of qualified/interested faculty	9.9	31.2	40.8
Other courses more important to students' degree plans	17.8	23.7	37.4
Low student interest	8.9	24.7	36.9
Scarce resources	26.7	14.0	31.8
Issues of federalism covered in other courses	26.7	4.3	16.2
Declining relevance of federalism	5.9	3.2	3.4
All other reasons	3.0	10.7	10.6

*Note.* Respondents were permitted to indicate all factors that might apply. Graduate-level responses are shown only for departments offering graduate degrees.

United States. Nonetheless, if we total the percentages of public administration respondents reporting scarce resources, low student interest, “other courses more important to students’ degree plans,” and “lack of qualified or interested faculty,” we find that, in effect, nearly two thirds (63.3%) of public administration respondents give as the principal reason for not offering federalism/IGR courses a judgment that such courses are a low priority.

### TERMINOLOGY PREFERENCES

Because new terminology has come into vogue in recent decades, we asked respondents about their preferred terms.

One term that has become prominent is *multi-level governance* (Marks & Hooghe, 2003). For this term, 10.9% of public administration respondents believed that it is a much better term than *federalism* or *intergovernmental relations*, while 30.9% believed it to be somewhat better (compared to 45.6% of political science respondents, who judged it to be much worse or somewhat worse). *Multilevel governance* was

deemed somewhat worse by 18.2% and much worse by 16.4% of public administration respondents, while another 10.9% said that the terminology makes no difference (12.7% reported no opinion). In short, there is a stronger preference for *multilevel governance* in public administration than in political science.

Among public administration respondents, 17.9% deemed *collaborative* and/or *networked government* or *governance* to be much better than *federalism* or *intergovernmental relations*, and another 30.4% regarded *collaborative* and/or *networked* to be somewhat better terms (compared to 49.5% of political scientists, who viewed the new terms as somewhat or much worse). The terms *collaborative* and/or *networked* were viewed as somewhat worse by 23.2% of public administration respondents and much worse by 8.9% of those respondents (12.5% reported no difference and 7.1% expressed no opinion). Again, therefore, the new terminology of *collaborative* and/or *networked governance* is preferred by public administration scholars more than by political scientists.

## CONCLUSIONS AND REFLECTIONS

Courses on federalism/IGR are reportedly offered in 52.5% of public administration departments and programs; such courses are more robust in public administration than in political science; interest in teaching U.S. federalism/IGR is higher in public administration than in political science; and federalism/IGR courses are viewed as valuable by departmental colleagues. Yet 53.3% of the public administration respondents said that the teaching of federalism/IGR courses has declined over the past 25 years. Although it is possible that such course offerings have in fact declined, the presence of such courses in more than half of public administration departments and programs suggests that perceptions of decline may be exaggerated. The major reasons given for not offering federalism/IGR courses are scarce resources and issues of federalism being covered in other courses, although our survey results also suggest that nonoffering departments and programs deem federalism/IGR to be a low priority.

Course offerings focus overwhelmingly on U.S. federalism/IGR. The teaching of comparative federalism/IGR is anemic. The top four topics covered in public administration courses on U.S. federalism/IGR are, in rank order, intergovernmental administration, vertical federal-state-local relations, policy issues, and fiscal matters. The bottom four topics, from lowest to highest, are comparative matters, the founding of the federal republic, interstate relations, and intersectoral relations.

These findings suggest that the teaching of federalism/IGR is more robust than expected but less robust than warranted by today's reality, wherein virtually all public policy making and administration involve federal, state, and local governments in one way or another. Even the Obama administration's 2015 nuclear deal with Iran contains an IGR element; namely, a preemption of state and local economic sanctions against Iran, the constitutionality of which may be challenged by some state and local officials.

The policy issues that dominate the headlines all have extensive intergovernmental dimensions, as in the continuing refusal of 30 states to establish a health-insurance exchange and 20 states to expand Medicaid under the Affordable Care Act of 2010 (Kaiser Family Foundation, 2015). A major obstacle to congressional authorization of the successor to the No Child Left Behind Act of 2001, which was due to be reauthorized in 2007 but was not reauthorized until the end of 2015, was inter- and intraparty disagreements over the roles of federal, state, and local governments in K–12 education. Such disagreements also underlay Congress's inability to enact a 5-year surface-transportation reauthorization, thus preventing effective long-term state and local planning. Instead, Congress enacted a 4-year reauthorization in late 2015. Recent controversies over campus sexual assaults have highlighted the powerful federal role in governing both public and private higher education, and civil unrest in 2014–2015 over police killings of African Americans brought renewed calls for federal civil-rights intervention and criticisms of the federal government's role in militarizing local police. Congress's refusal to pass the Marketplace Fairness Act to authorize state taxation of all out-of-state mail-order sales cost the states about \$23.3 billion (Brainerd, 2016), while the Internet Tax Freedom Act deprives states of additional revenues. Meanwhile, state legalizations of medical and recreational marijuana have highlighted the states' role as laboratories of democracy. Congress responded in 2014 by prohibiting the U.S. Department of Justice from using appropriated funds to prevent states from implementing their medical marijuana laws.

The debate within academe over terminology does not so much reflect perceptions of a declining relevance of IGR as it does questions about the changing character of IGR. Although most federalism/IGR course titles contain the words *federal*, *federalism*, and/or *intergovernmental relations*, 48.3% of our respondents believe that *networked* or *collaborative governance* are much or somewhat better terms, and 41.8% believe that *multilevel governance* is a much or

somewhat better term. Political scientists are less supportive of the new terminology. However, despite this preference for the new terminology, the topic of intersectoral relations, which covers matters associated with networked and collaborative governance, ranks 12th in terms of amount of time given to 15 topics covered in federalism/IGR courses.

These results for public administration suggest a possible fracturing of the field of federalism and intergovernmental relations by rival concepts that are themselves rivals. All these concepts cannot be explaining the same reality. The new concepts, however, lack the neutrality of the term *intergovernmental relations* because they presuppose realities that might not withstand empirical investigation. The presuppositions of the new concepts might also obstruct empirical investigation because of the confirmation bias built into the terminology. Thus, the adequacy of these concepts as replacements for *intergovernmental relations* poses puzzles.

*Multilevel governance*, for example, presupposes that relations are necessarily ordered vertically and hierarchically among higher and lower levels of government when, instead, relations might be ordered in a nonhierarchical multiareal fashion (Fesler, 1964). *Multilevel governance* also excludes horizontal interstate and interlocal relations, which are important in many federal systems. In turn, not every assembly of actors is a network, and the absence of a network, does not necessarily mean the absence of governance or intergovernmental relations. The term *collaborative governance* presupposes collaboration; yet all governance relations are not collaborative, and the absence of collaboration does not mean the absence of governance, possibly even cooperative governance. The terms *networked* and *collaborative governance* also have strong normative orientations in assuming that good governance is networked or collaborative. Furthermore, nongovernmental actors are fluid. They regularly enter and exit the intergovernmental arena over time, while governmental actors are permanent fixtures of intergovernmental relations.

By contrast, the term *intergovernmental relations* makes no prejudgments about reality or normative presuppositions about good governance. Intergovernmental relations can be collaborative, cooperative, collusive, competitive, coercive, conflictual, and more, and those relations can encompass the good, the bad, and the ugly sides of governance. Furthermore, given the ubiquity of intergovernmental relations due to the fact that virtually all public functions are shared, not divided, federal-state-local responsibilities (Grodzins, 1966), the absence of intergovernmental relations would mean the absence of federalist governance in the U.S. system.

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## NOTE

- 1 We asked survey respondents to estimate the approximate amount of time devoted to each topic during a semester. The scale in Figure 1 ranges from 1 to 10, where 1 represents 0%, 2 represents about 5%, 3 represents about 10%, and so forth. Respondents were not required to total their responses to 100%. The bar heights above, which represent proportionate amount of class time, range from slightly more than 5% to more than 15%. We did not ask about the topic "Intersectoral" in the political science survey. The survey presented each topic to respondents as follows:

IGR Administration/Management (collaboration, networking, administration, etc.)

Vertical/IGR (relationships between local, state, and federal, including executive federalism)

Policy Issues (policy types and specific policy areas)

Fiscal (grants, revenue, expenditures, equalization, etc.)

Political Issues and Actors (interest groups, actors, interactions)

Interlocal (interlocal relations, regional cooperation, etc.)

Emerging (projections of trends, reforms, and developments)

Historical Development  
(change since 1789)

Legal/Constitutional Issues (court cases and laws affecting IGR and state powers)

Theories  
(normative/philosophical)

Regulatory (preemptions, mandates, conditional grants, federal rules)

Intersectoral (for-profits, not-for-profits, universities, etc.)

Interstate/Interprovincial (nationwide and regional cooperation, competition, conflict, uniformity)

The Founding (Framers' philosophy, *The Federalist*, anti-Federalists)

Comparative (cross-national and international comparisons)

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