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## Supply management in American public administration: Towards an academic discipline?

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### ABSTRACT

This article examines the development of supply management in the U.S. to assess its progress towards academic disciplinary status. A comparison of the fields of business administration and public administration indicates that supply management is more developed in the former than in the latter, which inhibits its disciplinary status. Various reasons for this uneven development in the two fields are explored. The paper argues that a paradigm shift must occur for public supply management, which will re-orient it around the concept of the public interest. This will require public supply professionals to participate strategically in public policy-making in order to ascertain and promote the public interest. A policy framework is used to illustrate this re-orientation and to suggest directions for further research.

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### 1. Introduction

This paper addresses the theme of the 18th Annual IPSERA Conference, *Supply Management—Towards an Academic Discipline?* Posed thus as an interrogative, the theme suggests that supply management has not yet achieved academic disciplinary status. It further suggests inquiry along at least two lines. First, normative inquiry would investigate value-laden questions such as whether supply management ought to be moved in that direction. Second, empirical inquiry would investigate topics such as the extent to which and ways in which supply management is moving toward or away from disciplinary status, the forces that either impede or enable such movement, and the extent to which these forces are amenable to intervention.

#### 1.1. Purpose and method

In this paper, we focus on the latter line of inquiry. We assess the development of supply management in the United States in order to judge its progress towards and prospects for achieving academic disciplinary status. Specifically, we compare the disciplinary manifestations of supply management in the U.S. in two interdisciplinary academic fields—business administration (BA) and public administration (PA). Our analysis documents and compares the disciplinary evidence of supply management in BA and PA in four major areas: university curricula, textbooks,

scholarly journals and other disciplinary activities (e.g., scholarly societies, research centers). The methodology here is very simple, consisting mainly of supply management content reviews in samples of each of these areas.

This comparison of the evidence of academic disciplinary activities between the two fields indicates that supply management is far more developed in BA than in PA in the U.S. We then investigate potential reasons for this condition. Here we rely on scholars who have analyzed the development of supply management and of American PA. Their writings provide insights into those characteristics of supply management and PA which have made them less compatible, in a disciplinary sense, than supply management and BA.

Finally, we turn our focus to developing prescriptions for enhancing the study of supply management in American PA. Relying on scholars from public procurement, PA, and the policy sciences, we synthesize their concepts and conclusions around (1) the idea of the public interest and (2) a policy framework. If adopted widely in PA, these may promote supply management's advance toward academic disciplinary status.

To summarize, our approach is exploratory, conceptual, and directed mainly toward developing hypotheses to guide further research on the disciplinary status and direction of supply management, particularly as they pertain to its problematic status in American PA.

#### 1.2. Assumptions, limitations, and scope

For the sake of convenience, we adopt several terminology conventions. We have already introduced the first convention,

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namely, using BA and PA to refer to the respective interdisciplinary academic fields. We use lower case words when referring to the operations, functions, and practice of business and public administration. Additionally, from this point forward, we use BA and PA to refer to those fields as they are evidenced in the U.S. Where discussion of those fields in an international or global context arises, we note that context specifically.

The second convention involves the terms *discipline* and *field* for which scholars have not established agreed-upon definitions and distinctions. In this paper, we use discipline to mean a branch of knowledge with formal educational and research programs and faculties at the university level, as well as scholarly societies, and peer-reviewed journals. We use the term fields to refer to areas of study that are made up of disciplines.

Third, we intentionally avoid bringing the notion of *professional status* in our analysis. The IPSERA conference theme emphasizes *academic discipline* rather than *profession*. While the two obviously share some features (e.g., the idea of specialized knowledge), they are different in significant ways (see for example Etzioni, 1969; Jackson, 1970; Friedson, 1986). Addressing the question of supply management's status as a profession would entail substantially different analysis than the question of its status as an academic discipline. Where appropriate, however, we do mention supply management professional activities (e.g., scholarly societies) in both BA and PA when those activities are relevant to disciplinary status.

Finally, for the purpose of this article, we will use the term *supply management* as defined by the Institute for Supply Management, ISM): the "identification, acquisition, access, positioning, management of resources and related capabilities the organization needs or potentially needs to attain its strategic objectives" (Carter and Choi, 2008, p. 2). According to ISM, components of supply management include "disposition/investment recovery, distribution, inventory control, logistics, manufacturing supervision, materials management, packaging, product/service development, purchasing/procurement, quality, receiving, strategic sourcing, transportation/traffic/shipping and warehousing" (Carter and Choi, 2008, p. 2). Other terms used in reference to the management of supplies and services include *procurement*, *contracting*, *acquisition*, *purchasing*, *outsourcing*, and *buying*. Our purposes in this paper do not require that we enforce rigorous definitions for or distinctions for these terms; thus we refer simply to supply management throughout most of the paper.

## 2. Supply management in BA

This section and the next will discuss supply management as an emerging discipline within the interdisciplinary fields of BA and PA. As mentioned above, there are a number of criteria – university curricula, academic textbooks, scholarly journals, other disciplinary activities – upon which disciplinary status may be judged. We will use these criteria to examine first BA, and then PA.

### 2.1. Supply management in BA: university curricula

The Association to Advance Collegiate Schools of Business (AACSB) is considered the premier professional accrediting agency for business schools. Although the AACSB does not mandate any required curricula in its accreditation standards, the accreditation standards identify supply management as a topic typically found in general management degree programs. Specifically, the standards identify topics related to "creation of value through the integrated production and distribution of goods, services, and information (from acquisition of materials through production to distribution of products, services, and information)" (AACSB, 2008).

A review of the top 10 graduate business schools in the U.S. (as reported in the *U.S. News and World Report* (2008) annual rankings of U.S. universities) reflects that eight of 10 Master of Business Administration (MBA) programs offered in those schools include a core course in production/operations management (P/OM). We highlight the P/OM course simply because the standard P/OM course covers many supply management-related areas such as purchasing, outsourcing, supply chain management, forecasting, inventory management, logistics management, and production scheduling, to name just a few.

A review of the top 10 graduate business schools also shows that over half of the top 10 graduate MBA programs included electives that provided additional education in supply management. These electives included Coordinating and Managing Supply Chains, Global Value Chain Strategies, Negotiations, Retail Supply Chain Management, Supply Chain Design, Contracting, Inventory Management, and Supply Chain Management and Information Technology.

Finally, in addition to the MBA core and elective courses discussed above, we also see a significant number of formal degree programs with concentrations in supply management areas. The website for ISM identifies over one hundred bachelor degree programs and over one hundred master degree programs with concentrations in supply management. Also listed on the ISM website are certificate programs as well as a handful of doctorate degree programs in supply management areas (ISM, 2008).

### 2.2. Supply management in BA: textbooks, journals, and other disciplinary activities

Supply management-related topics are also well represented in survey courses in business administration and related textbooks. A review of the typical "Introduction to Business" textbook, which provides survey coverage of business administration topics, shows a consistent coverage of supply management concepts including purchasing, outsourcing, materials management and supply chain management. These topics are usually covered in the chapter on P/OM (see Ferrell et al., 2009; Jones, 2007; Nickels et al., 2010; Bovee et al., 2007).

We also see the continued publication of specialty textbooks in the field of supply management. These textbooks support the elective courses previously discussed and include titles such as *Supply Management* (Burt et al., 2010), *Purchasing and Supply Management* (Leenders and Fearon, 1997), *Supply Chain Management* (Fawcett et al., 2007), and *World Class Contracting* (Garrett, 2007).

There are several scholarly journals in the area of supply management. The ISM's *Journal of Supply Chain Management* reflects the current state of refereed journals in this area. Others related to supply management include *Journal of Purchasing and Supply Management*, *International Journal of Physical Distribution and Logistics*, *International Journal of Logistics Management*, *Production and Operations Management Journal*, *Journal of Product Innovation Management*, *Industrial Marketing Management*, and *Journal of Contract Management*.

In addition to the scholarly journals, there are learned societies related to supply management, for example, the Operations Management division of the Academy of Management, the Production and Operations Management Society, and its College of Supply Chain Management.

Professional associations support supply management and related fields as well. ISM was founded in 1915 and is the largest supply management association in the world as well as one of the most respected. Its mission is to lead the supply management profession through its standards of excellence, research, promotional activities, and education (ISM, 2008). Other associations

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