Enhancing Spatial Thinking in Public Administration and Policy

BILLY FIELDS
Director, Center for Research, Public Policy, and Training
Assistant Professor, Department of Political Science
Texas State University
Email: wf16@txstate.edu

There is a growing need to expand a spatial analysis framework within fields of public administration and policy. Addressing a wide variety of public policy problems such as urban revitalization, public health, and hazard mitigation increasingly requires pulling together multiple institutions within a place-based framework. Management and policy training for public administration professionals has, however, often failed to build basic competencies in place management and spatial analysis that are increasingly required to address these cross-cutting problems. I briefly examine the emerging opportunities to expand spatial analysis in public administration and policy in two areas: instruction and research.

Applications for Enhanced Spatial Thinking Instruction in Public Administration and Policy

Students of public administration are trained to understand the management implications of public policy decisions. Traditionally, training for public administrators has focused on the budgetary and personnel tools that managers can use to marshal resources to effectively administer public policy. This fairly narrow view of public management is increasingly being expanded to include training that emphasizes the governance challenges of administering public policy in settings where public, private, and non-profit actors work to solve problems. Many of these multi-actor settings focus on the spatial challenges of administering place-based policy (Orszag et al 2009) to improve specific places like cities, counties, or even neighborhoods. While place management concepts are emerging as important areas of concern for public administrators (Mant 2008, Leinberger 2012), traditional programs are struggling with how to incorporate spatial thinking into their undergraduate and graduate programs.

To address this situation, I have begun to build course material that seeks to build spatial thinking directly into the core public administration and policy courses that I teach. Encouraging students to understand that “policy happens some place” starts with building a spatial vocabulary. The first step in this process is to introduce basic images and maps that help to spatialize policy and help students begin to “see” policy concepts and understand the physical manifestations of policy decisions.

Carrying out this initial phase of the spatial analysis approach is fairly straightforward. I assign readings on the key policy concepts as usual. Instead of immediately jumping into a discussion of abstract concepts, I begin with a series of images that help to show physical manifestations of the concepts. I walk the students through the images asking them probing questions about what they see. Students have an almost innate ability to explain what’s
happening in a particular landscape or image. Starting with an example like this can generate discussion and make it easier for students to make the jump to more complicated concepts. After they break down all of the key elements in the image, I then introduce the terminology that helps to define the concepts behind the image. As the semester continues this basic spatial thinking is enhanced with management concepts that stress the need to manage place for improved policy results.

This approach helps to tie core public administration concepts with more spatial fields of urban planning/design and geography. Advancing the teaching components that could help to build spatial awareness into the core of our undergraduate and graduate programs is an important need for our students and one that I’m excited to address through the Spatial Thinking seminar at UCSB.

Works Cited