The History and Evolution of the Southeastern Conference for Public Administration

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The Southeastern Conference for Public Administration (SECoPA) began in 1969 in the wake of reapportionment and desegregation. The founders of SECoPA sought to promote the emergence of a new South, one that would be both dynamic and inclusive, by promoting the practice and study of public administration throughout the region. In the decades since, SECoPA has continued to host annual conferences serving the region. Through coding and analysis of annual conference programs, and using the lens of new institutionalism, this article explores SECoPA's history and fidelity to its founding mission. The annual conferences have been responsive to concerns of public administration scholars in the region, but drastic declines in practitioner participation mirror broader trends in the profession.

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In just three years in the 1960s, three actions of the federal government removed the straitjacket the South had imposed upon itself. When southerner Lyndon Johnson signed the Civil Rights Act of 1964 and the Voting Rights Act of 1965, legal segregation in the South was abolished. Segregation had been, in essence, a self-imposed straitjacket. Its legalized racism had inhibited the South's economic development and political maturation for more than a century. Southern states had also allowed their rural areas to dominate their legislatures. In 1962, the U.S. Supreme Court ruled Tennessee's malapportioned legislature to be unconstitutional in Baker vs. Carr (369 US 186). The reapportionment of southern states that followed greatly increased representation of urban communities in state legislatures. Rapid changes followed throughout the South.

Academics from public administration faculties at southern universities were aware of the new dynamism emerging in the region. They strongly believed that quality public administration, devoted to equal treatment for all, would be essential for creating a new South. Conversations among them, within states, and at national conferences led to efforts to establish a regional conference that would assist practitioners in governments throughout the South during this period of transition. Starting with its 1969 inaugural conference in Florida, the Southeastern Conference for Public Administration (SECoPA) began serving as a key venue for sharing and

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disseminating information about public administration throughout the region and beyond. It has continued to host its annual meetings ever since.

After a decade of increasingly formal existence, SECoPA incorporated itself as a nonprofit organization in 1978. It incorporated in Florida, but it has no formal headquarters there or in any other state. As with any active organization, SECoPA's strategies, focus, and structures have evolved over time—intentionally and unintentionally. This article explores this process of evolution through analysis of annual SECoPA conference programs. We first identified changes in participant composition and topics of presentations over time. We then reflected on the changes within the context of other historical changes at SECoPA and in the field of public administration. We conclude by examining how SECoPA has addressed its founding purpose—that is, helping public administrators promote quality government, economic development, and equity in resolving social problems.

History of SECoPA

Two prior articles in the *Southern Review of Public Administration* laid out the history of SECoPA (Duffey & Pugliese, 1977; Pugliese & Duffey, 1982), as did remarks at SECoPA's 1992 meeting (Teasley, 1992). To avoid excessive duplication, this article will provide just enough history of the organization to introduce it to an audience unfamiliar with these earlier articles and remarks. We owe a debt of gratitude to these authors, all three of whom were early leaders in SECoPA, for chronicling the organization's early years.

SECoPA began in 1969 with its first regional conference hosted in Florida. This was just before the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) altered its constitution to create regions of the nation from which some of ASPA's council members were to be elected (Duffey & Pugliese, 1977). During its first decade of existence, SECoPA took a form characterized by Duffey and Pugliese (1977) as a "loose" network, with activity centered on the annual conferences. The fledgling conference made two critical choices in 1972: establishing a seed fund to help chapters host conferences and rejecting an offer by national ASPA to sponsor the meetings (ibid). SECoPA's founders were ASPA members. SECoPA has worked closely from its inception with ASPA chapters in the South and its membership is comprised of southern ASPA members, but SECoPA operates independently of ASPA.

In 1978, SECoPA formally incorporated as a nonprofit organization in the state of Florida (Pugliese & Duffey, 1982). All members of ASPA chapters in the southeastern region were considered members of SECoPA. Florida's chapters played strong roles in the organization's early years, initially accounting for half of SECoPA's membership (though quotas limited their representation on SECoPA's board) (Duffey & Pugliese, 1977). In 1979, SECoPA adopted its first set of bylaws (Pugliese & Duffey, 1982).

Throughout its history, SECoPA has primarily focused on the annual meeting. An early SECoPA leader asserted that staging the annual conference is SECoPA's primary mission (Teasley, 1992). SECoPA financially supported the start-up of a new academic journal called the *Southern Review of Public Administration* (SRPA), which began in 1978 and became the *Public Administration Quarterly* in 1984. SECoPA is very different from ASPA, and it has steadfastly retained its legal independence from ASPA (Teasley, 1992). ASPA operates continuously with a full-time paid staff. SECoPA has chosen to remain a fully volunteer organization with no paid staff members. Initially the annual conferences lacked formal controls that might restrain decisions by host chapters and committees (Teasley, 1992). Host chapters now enter into formal agreements with the SECoPA board. As early as the 1970s, SECoPA had become the largest, best organized, and best attended region in ASPA with a tradition of annual meetings almost always making money; the only exception to that success was when a hurricane interrupted its conference in Pensacola (Teasley, 1992).

The founders of SECoPA had several goals in mind for the conference. They simultaneously sought to advance the quality of public administration scholarship and the practice of our field in the South. Its founders wanted SECoPA to be an inexpensive conference in order to attract practitioners and enable students to attend and participate. It remains one of the least-expensive professional conferences in the field. The founders believed that both scholarship and enlightened practice would promote economic and social development in the region. Consequently, efforts were made to encourage practitioners to attend and to share insights from their practice. At the time of SECoPA's founding, ASPA chapters had far greater numbers of in-service members than they do presently. The findings of this study help to highlight the difficulties that now exist in attracting substantial numbers of practitioners to ASPA-related conferences.

Theory and Methods

To trace the evolution of SECoPA since its incorporation, we coded and analyzed presentations at the annual conferences from 1979 through 2015. SECoPA archives contain no conference programs prior to 1979. Due to unavailability of paper or electronic programs from the years 1995, 1998, 2005, or the years before 1979, these years were excluded from our analysis. We coded conference programs for each of the 34 years for which they were available. The information captured provides details about individual participants in each panel session, including their professional background (academic or practitioner according to their declared affiliation; those without an affiliation were conservatively assumed to be practitioners) and the main topics addressed in their individual paper or the broader panel. Unlike a previous study of national ASPA (Rubin, 2000), we did not attempt to capture the gender of presenters, as we would have had to make too many assumptions based on presenter first names to feel comfortable with coding accuracy. In examining participant roles, we also differed from Hildreth and Woodrum's (2009) more recent examination of the Association for Budgeting and Financial Management's (ABFM) annual conferences. We attempted to code different roles for conveners/chairs, paper presenters, and discussants, but we found some conference programs labeled these roles differently. As a result, we elected to treat all participants the same, as simply participants, in analyzing and reporting results. We were unable to secure similar information about the number of attendees, their backgrounds, or whether any participants were students. For the 27 conference programs that included information on SECoPA's board, we also captured the academic/practitioner breakdown of members.

This coding took an inductive approach, with initial codes being developed to cover topics addressed in the presentations and panels. We then collapsed the codes into a briefer set of topic codes that align with major subfields of public administration and related disciplines. The topics were recoded to fit this set. For panels or papers with multiple topics, up to three codes were captured. We coded conveners and discussants according to the panel's topic; further, we coded authors of individual papers with the paper's topic (if it differed from that of the broader panel). This approach was intended to capture most topics addressed in presentations, but it came with a downside in that some panels and presentations covering two or three topics were counted multiple times. This created the potential for some bias, likely increasing the share of presentations for less frequent topics at the expense of more common topics. One of the authors of this study has attended more than 90% of SECoPA conferences (beginning in 1970) and is a former officer of the organization. All three authors developed the coding approach, and one author conducted the final round of coding to ensure consistency.

We also conducted a series of interviews, informal conversations, and presentations to serve as member checks on the validity of our findings and to gain insights otherwise unattainable in the conference programs. The first eight interviews/conversations and the first two presentations were held shortly after we completed our first full draft. They were mostly conducted with long-running leaders at SECoPA. Initially, we just used this feedback to check

our confidence in the findings, but at the suggestion of a peer reviewer we incorporated responses from these interviews and conducted three additional interviews with current or recent leaders of SECoPA to ensure that we had a broadly representative group of participants (see Table 1 for interviewee demographics). The perspectives and board initiatives identified by these respondents quickly reached sampling saturation due to participants' common histories of serving as leaders in their local ASPA chapters, on SECoPA's board, and in ASPA. We used these interview responses to add detail and nuance to the analysis rather than as a source for our findings. As we did not initially obtain permission to use respondent names, we have not linked individual respondents to their comments.

Shifts in membership and conference content are to be expected amongst any professional organization. For SECoPA, there has been a marked reduction in practitioner participation, as well as some shifts in the topics addressed in presentations and discussions (see Chart 1 in the next section). Such changes can be influenced by multiple factors. In striving to make sense of our findings, we have found it useful to utilize a new institutionalism theoretical framework. New institutionalism's isomorphic forces concepts (DiMaggio & Powell, 1983) provided us a useful lens for understanding how different forms of influence may have shaped the topics and composition of SECoPA's annual meetings. Three forms of these forces encourage similarity between organizations, with coercive isomorphism emerging from pressures brought by powerful external actors to adopt their values or goals; mimetic isomorphism occurring through the emulation of successful peers; and normative isomorphism appearing through the adoption of broader professional or societal norms. These forces generally lead individuals and their organizations to incorporate ideas from elsewhere and can explain shifts that mirror those occurring in professions, other associations, and society more broadly. Divergences between SECoPA and these other entities and ideas could be expected to occur when the divergent ideas are central to the organization's identity and help establish its legitimacy.

Coercive isomorphism can occur in many forms. For example, official actions by ASPA to include or exclude a state from ASPA's region that includes southeastern states could affect SECoPA. Federal and state policy changes that alter the practice of public administration, such as mandates to privatize activities, would be expected to have resultant impacts on conference topics. Government actions, such as reducing practitioner travel funding, might be expected to diminish participation. On the other hand, changes in government policies could encourage practitioners to interact with academics to solve new problems.

Mimetic isomorphism has not only happened over time but has been encouraged for public administration academics. A quantitatively trained Herbert Simon (1947) wanted to enhance the prestige of public administration on campuses by emulating the natural sciences. On the other hand, a political theory trained Dwight Waldo (1948) sought to enhance the prestige of public administration programs on campuses by emulating departments of philosophy. SECoPA members belong to numerous professional associations, including not just ASPA and other regional associations, but also various subfield or competing associations in public administration (e.g., the Association for Public Policy Analysis and Management and the Public Management Research Association for academics; the International City Management Association and the National Institute of Governmental Purchasing for practitioners). SECoPA members also attend other disciplinary conferences (e.g., the Academy of Management and American Political Science Association). But where SECoPA members identify opportunities unaddressed by these other venues and incorporate them into SECoPA meetings, this can be possibly viewed as intentionally rejecting mimetic pressures.

Finally, normative isomorphism would shape SECoPA's annual meetings through the individuals leading it at a given point in time and through broader societal shifts. For example, the Association of Government Accountants (AGA) has been actively promoting norms of transparency and a long-range stewardship approach to financial reporting.

Table 1. Interviewee Characteristics

Characteristic	n
Practitioner	3
Academic	8
Male	8
Female	3
Current SECoPA Board Member or Officer	5
Former SECoPA Board Member or Officer	5[a]
ASPA Board Member or Officer 2[a]	

[a]one interviewee fits two roles.

SECoPA members who belong to the AGA might be expected to promote those topics. SECoPA extends considerable freedom in influencing program content to each conference's hosting committee, so the professional backgrounds of those hosting each conference could also be expected to shape the choice of participants and topics. Shifts in societal norms have clearly influenced SECoPA. Such shifts motivated its founding, causing it to emphasize such topics as managing diversity. SECoPA was intentionally founded to alter the shape of governmental institutions in the South—not mimic what had gone before.

Evolution of SECoPA

SECoPA's first seven annual meetings involved a relatively small number of participants, but between 1976 and 2007 the annual meetings generally tended to attract between 100 and 200 annual participants (see Table 2). Since 2008 the number of participants on the program increased to range between 250 and 500. SECoPA held these meetings throughout the South, though almost a third were held in Florida.

Over time, SECoPA has experienced a dramatic change in participant composition. Though even the earliest conferences in this analysis saw the majority of participants coming from academic backgrounds, conferences in the early 1980s saw practitioners comprising around 40% of panel participants (see Chart 1). The mid- to late-1980s saw this drop to around 30%, which continued declining (albeit with some significant fluctuations) to average around 20% throughout most of the 1990s. This pattern continued and worsened (from the perspective of SECoPA's original intent) in the 2000s, dropping to around 10% by the middle of the decade. It has not improved since and, in 2014, reached a low of 5%. A significant proportion of SECoPA panels have incorporated a practitioner or two, often as convener or discussant, and have continued to do so even in the face of declining practitioner involvement (see Chart 2). Instead, the conferences have seen significant declines in panels engaging multiple practitioners, with practitioner only- or dominated-panels all but extinct in the past 15 years.

Board member composition has not followed the same trend as conference participants (see Chart 3). When incorporated in 1978, the board was evenly divided between members from academic and practitioner backgrounds, though in most subsequent years far more scholars have served on the board. After a brief span in the 1990s when there were no practitioners on the board, members from practice have since been regular contributors to it. This is in part due to deliberate efforts by SECoPA's leadership to recruit practitioners to serve. For the years we could observe board data, almost a quarter of directors were practitioners. This is a significantly higher rate than recent conference participants.

The relative independence of SECoPA planning committees has influenced their selection of topics over time. The programs of many professional conferences are decided in a centralized manner. SECoPA, on the other hand, has extended considerable influence about programs to the ASPA chapters that sponsor each annual conference. For example, the 1988 conference

Table 2. Conference Locations and Size by Year

Year	Location	n	Year	Location	n
1969	Tampa, FL	26[a]	1995	Savannah, GA	Unknown[c]
1970	Atlanta, GA	54[a]	1996	Miami, FL	196
1971	Hollywood, FL	103[a]	1997	Knoxville, TN	240
1972	Atlanta, GA	36[a]	1998	Delayed	0[d]
1973	Nashville, TN	78[a]	1999	Pensacola, FL	185
1974	Orlando, FL	92[a]	2000	Greensboro, NC	166
1975	Williamsburg, VA	80[a]	2001	Baton Rouge, LA	120
1976	Miami Beach, FL	145[a]	2002	Columbia, SC	194
1977	Knoxville, TN	151[b]	2003	Savannah, GA	116
1978	Charleston, SC	145[b]	2004	Charlotte, NC	161
1979	Montgomery, AL	146	2005	Little Rock, AR	Unknown[c]
1980	Orlando, FL	146	2006	Athens, GA	147
1981	Jackson, MS	164	2007	Nashville, TN	151
1982	Louisville, KY	270	2008	Orlando, FL	495
1983	Tallahassee, FL	135	2009	Louisville, KY	258
1984	Memphis, TN	75	2010	Wilmington, NC	445
1985	Charleston, SC	128	2011	New Orleans, LA	299
1986	Pensacola, FL	122	2012	Coral Springs, FL	271
1987	New Orleans, LA	154	2013	Charlotte, NC	265
1988	Birmingham, AL	192	2014	Atlanta, GA	356
1989	Jackson, MS	263	2015	Charleston, SC	348
1990	Clearwater Beach, FL	281			
1991	Charlotte, NC	151			
1992	Montgomery, AL	169			
1993	Cocoa Beach, FL	192			
1994	Lexington, KY	112			

[a]From Duffey & Pugliese, 1977.
[b]From Pugliese & Duffey, 1982.
[c]Conference program unavailable.
[d]Conference cancelled due to hurricane.

in Birmingham, Alabama, reflected the scholarly interests of its program chair, Mary Guy, who is a noted scholar of diversity issues, by incorporating more papers and presentations on topics related to gender and racial diversity than any other conference. This flexibility results in some interesting variations in relative emphasis on topics from year-to-year. But there are some clear longitudinal trends (see Tables 3, 4, and 5). Some are troubling and others encouraging.

Financial management and human resources were consistently emphasized throughout the 1980s and 1990s, but this emphasis has decreased since the turn of the century. In the early 1980s, personal computers were first introduced into offices on a massive scale. SECoPA's presenters reflected this for a couple of years (1983 and 1984), but technology has never been a principal topic since. Law and criminal justice was substantially emphasized during the 1980s and early 1990s before receding. Early SECoPA leaders with backgrounds in criminal justice, like Jeff Duffey, influenced the relative frequency of the topic. As these leaders were replaced by younger members who were more attuned to other topics, a decline in law and criminal justice occurred.

Other topics, e.g., nonprofit management, international/comparative administration, and defense/emergency management, appeared infrequently until the late 1990s or early 2000s, when all three saw increasing attention. Defense and emergency management topics spiked in response to global events—notably 9/11, the wars in Afghanistan and Iraq, and hurricanes

Chart 1. Percent of Participants from Academic and Practitioner Backgrounds
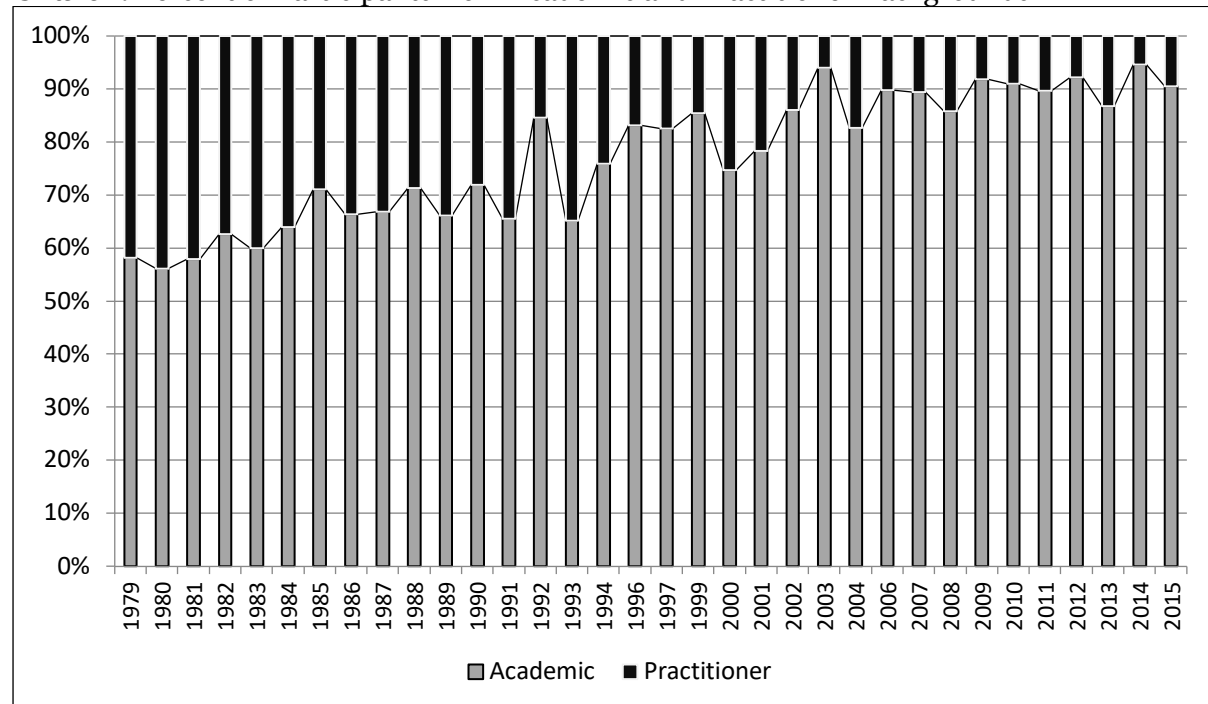
Chart 2. Percent of Panels Based on Academic and Practitioner Composition
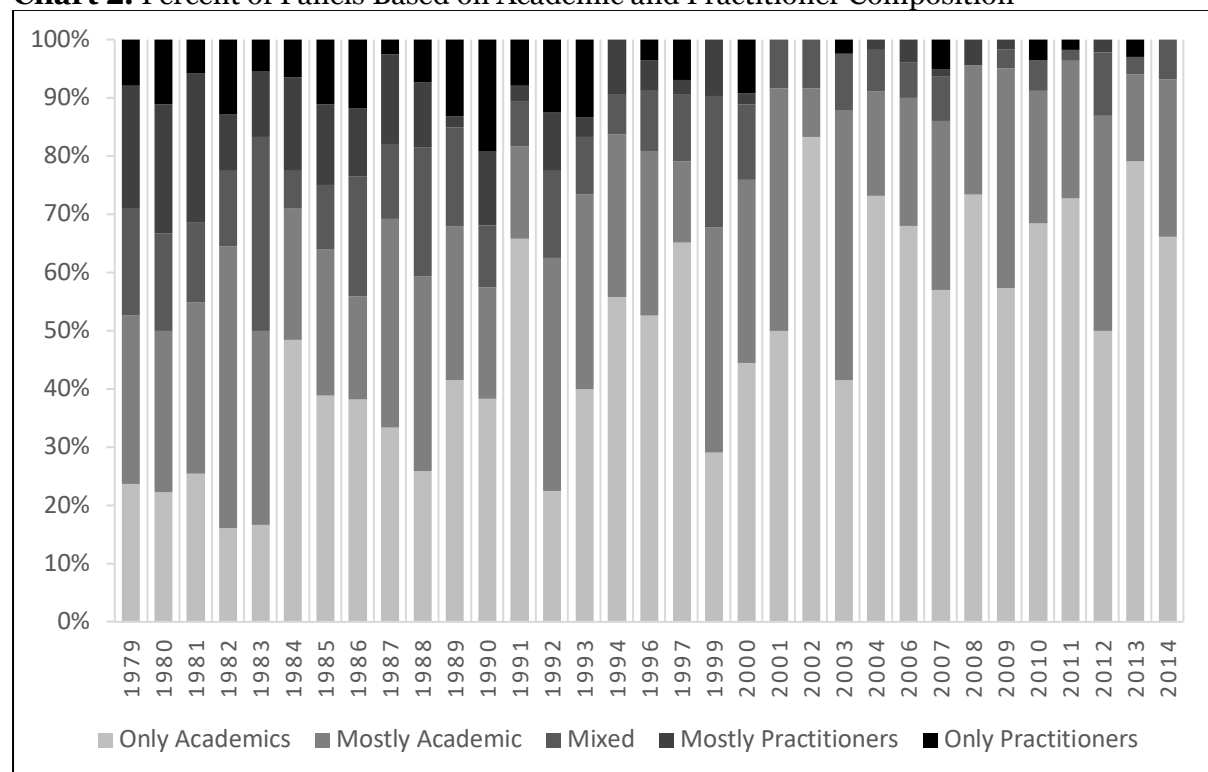
Note: 'Only Academics' denotes panels without any practitioner participants; 'Mostly Academics' denotes panels with at least one practitioner but at least twice as many academic participants; 'Mixed' denotes panels with relatively balanced composition; 'Mostly Practitioners' denotes panels with at least one academic but at least twice as many practitioner participants; 'Only Practitioners' denotes panels without any academic participants.

Chart 3. Count of Board Members from Academic and Practitioner Backgrounds
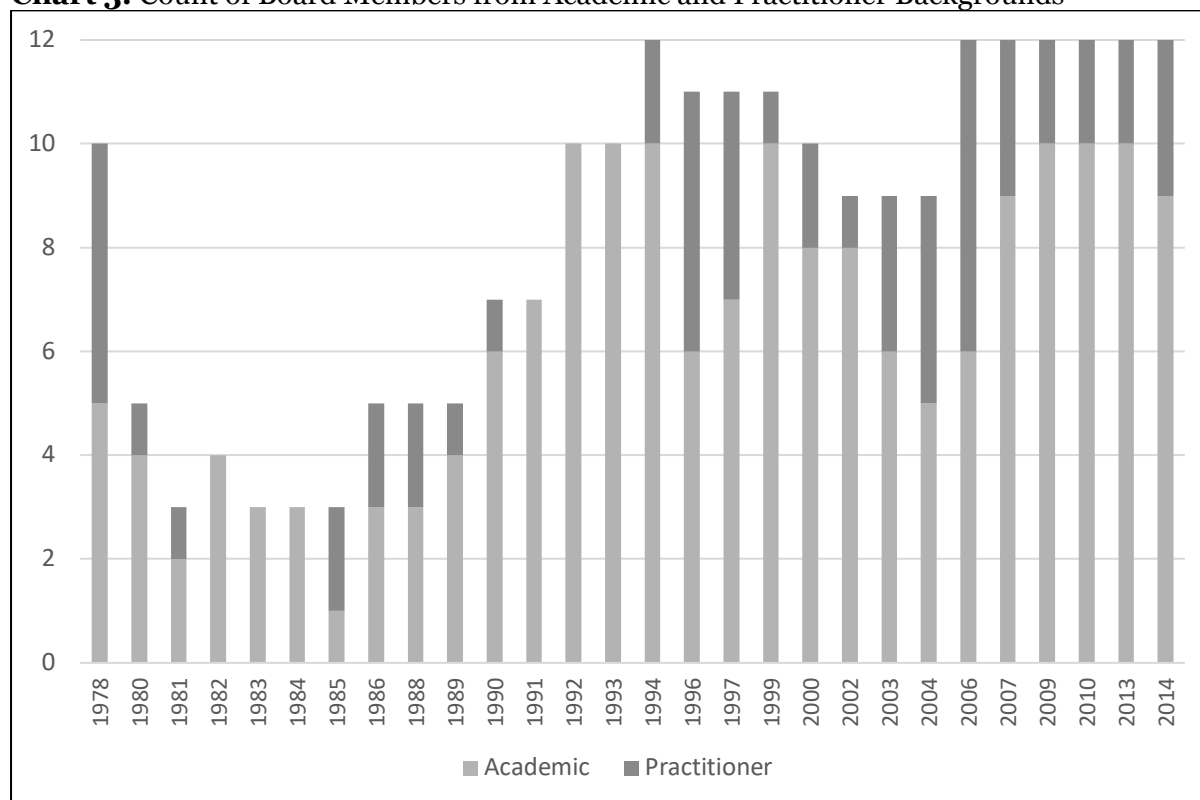
Katrina and Sandy. Papers and presentations related to collective safety are now repeatedly evident at SECoPA meetings.

In 2001, SECoPA leaders formally decided to encourage the international exchange of information in public administration. In that year, they created an award to be given annually to a practitioner or scholar who has fostered the exchange of information internationally in our field. The award is named in honor of Dr. Peter Boorsma, a scholar and political leader in the Netherlands. SECoPA has also experienced a gradual increase in internationally focused panels and presentations. SECoPA's "internationalization" reflects two influential trends that strengthened in the 1990s and 2000s: the pressures of globalization on public administration education (Devereux & Durning, 2001; Kettl, 2001) and the broader internationalization of faculty in higher education (Marvasti, 2005). (In 2015, half of the applicants for a broadly defined Assistant Professor position in the Askew School of Public Administration and Policy of the Florida State University were doctoral graduates of American universities who were born in other countries.) A half century ago, in the decades immediately following the United States' emergence from World War II as a major global power, there was much interest in the United States about comparative public administration and international development. That interest waned, but judging from SECoPA presenters, it now seems to be on the upswing again.

Nonprofit management began to be emphasized in many public administration programs in the 1990s. SECoPA's presentations on nonprofit management followed suit, but with a mild lag effect. Some graduate courses and programs in nonprofit management date to the 1980s; Moreover, during the 1990s the numbers of nonprofit programs grew rapidly. About half of them were tied to MPA or MPP programs (Mirabella & Wish, 2001; Wish & Mirabella, 1998; Young, 1999). Academic activity in nonprofit management primarily began in the northeast and midwest (Wish & Mirabella, 1998). It was only in the mid-1990s that nonprofit management became a continuing topic of interest in the South. Activity in SECoPA mirrors that pattern. Growth of these programs slowed but continued into the 2000s, with the topics

Table 3. Percent of Presentations by Policy Field

Year	Defense and Emergency Management	Education	Environment and Energy	Health	Law and Criminal Justice	Planning and Economic Development	Social Policy and Human Services	Technology
1979	**9%**	3%	2%	7%	**8%**	4%	**7%**	1%
1980	1%	2%	2%	0%	**16%**	**12%**	**5%**	1%
1981	0%	0%	0%	0%	**16%**	0%	**8%**	0%
1982	2%	0%	**5%**	1%	**12%**	2%	0%	2%
1983	2%	2%	3%	2%	**12%**	3%	**5%**	**5%**
1984	1%	**6%**	0%	1%	1%	2%	1%	**12%**
1985	0%	0%	1%	**12%**	3%	**9%**	**8%**	2%
1986	3%	3%	0%	0%	3%	3%	3%	**5%**
1987	1%	0%	**6%**	**9%**	4%	**6%**	3%	1%
1988	0%	2%	**5%**	2%	**8%**	1%	3%	0%
1989	2%	2%	4%	3%	**6%**	4%	2%	2%
1990	3%	3%	**6%**	4%	**9%**	**11%**	2%	**5%**
1991	3%	0%	**7%**	2%	**10%**	2%	2%	1%
1992	4%	0%	**7%**	**8%**	**5%**	**7%**	2%	2%
1993	4%	2%	**5%**	**6%**	4%	**8%**	**5%**	3%
1994	1%	3%	4%	**7%**	2%	**6%**	1%	4%
1996	1%	1%	2%	4%	3%	**8%**	4%	**7%**
1997	2%	2%	4%	4%	**5%**	**7%**	**5%**	**6%**
1999	1%	**5%**	**6%**	4%	3%	3%	**9%**	2%
2000	2%	4%	1%	4%	**6%**	**11%**	3%	0%
2001	1%	3%	3%	**7%**	2%	**7%**	2%	3%
2002	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%	4%
2003	3%	4%	**5%**	**5%**	1%	**5%**	4%	4%
2004	4%	1%	**5%**	**5%**	3%	4%	3%	3%
2006	3%	3%	2%	4%	**5%**	**8%**	**5%**	**6%**
2007	4%	**6%**	2%	**6%**	**5%**	**9%**	3%	2%
2008	**7%**	2%	4%	4%	3%	**10%**	2%	**5%**
2009	3%	1%	1%	**8%**	2%	**8%**	**5%**	3%
2010	4%	4%	4%	2%	2%	**9%**	3%	3%
2011	**8%**	**5%**	**5%**	**5%**	4%	**6%**	1%	3%
2012	**5%**	3%	3%	2%	4%	**7%**	1%	1%
2013	4%	**6%**	**5%**	**7%**	4%	**7%**	3%	3%
2014	3%	**5%**	**5%**	**6%**	4%	**6%**	**6%**	4%
2015	3%	**5%**	3%	**5%**	3%	**6%**	4%	1%

Note: Bold text denotes 5% of more of all presentations. Underlined bold text denotes 10% or more of all presentations.

Table 4. Percent of Presentations by Management Field

Year	Ethics	Financial Management	Human Resources	Networks, Partnerships, and Procurement	Other Management and Policy	Performance and Evaluation	Politics and Participation
1979	**5%**	**11%**	**10%**	4%	**7%**	3%	1%
1980	0%	**16%**	7%	3%	**6%**	**10%**	0%
1981	4%	**12%**	**11%**	0%	**8%**	**14%**	4%
1982	3%	**12%**	**11%**	**9%**	**8%**	**13%**	4%
1983	0%	**13%**	**13%**	**5%**	**6%**	**7%**	1%
1984	0%	**9%**	**14%**	**13%**	**12%**	3%	**7%**
1985	1%	**13%**	3%	**14%**	**5%**	**6%**	**5%**
1986	3%	**11%**	7%	2%	**14%**	**14%**	**5%**
1987	0%	**13%**	**12%**	1%	**15%**	0%	2%
1988	3%	**10%**	**11%**	**6%**	**6%**	**8%**	**6%**
1989	2%	**8%**	**15%**	2%	**14%**	4%	**5%**
1990	4%	**9%**	**6%**	**6%**	**10%**	**5%**	2%
1991	2%	**12%**	**17%**	**5%**	**7%**	**6%**	1%
1992	2%	**8%**	**10%**	1%	**9%**	**8%**	1%
1993	3%	**10%**	**10%**	**5%**	**7%**	**7%**	**10%**
1994	**5%**	**14%**	**5%**	**6%**	**8%**	4%	4%
1996	**5%**	**6%**	**8%**	2%	3%	**6%**	3%
1997	**6%**	**7%**	3%	**6%**	**10%**	4%	2%
1999	4%	**10%**	3%	**7%**	**10%**	**5%**	3%
2000	4%	**8%**	**6%**	2%	**14%**	**7%**	**8%**
2001	**8%**	**9%**	**6%**	3%	3%	**7%**	**5%**
2002	2%	**7%**	**7%**	**5%**	**7%**	4%	**5%**
2003	1%	**8%**	4%	**6%**	**10%**	4%	**12%**
2004	4%	**9%**	**7%**	**9%**	4%	**9%**	**7%**
2006	3%	**9%**	**9%**	**6%**	3%	2%	**5%**
2007	2%	**6%**	**6%**	**9%**	**5%**	**7%**	4%
2008	2%	4%	**5%**	**7%**	**5%**	**5%**	**6%**
2009	1%	**9%**	4%	2%	**6%**	3%	4%
2010	3%	**5%**	**7%**	**8%**	3%	**8%**	**6%**
2011	**5%**	**7%**	**8%**	**6%**	2%	**7%**	4%
2012	4%	**7%**	**7%**	**6%**	3%	**6%**	**7%**
2013	3%	4%	**8%**	**6%**	4%	**6%**	**8%**
2014	3%	**7%**	4%	3%	**5%**	3%	4%
2015	3%	**5%**	**6%**	**6%**	**7%**	4%	**7%**

Note: Bold text denotes 5% of more of all presentations. Underlined bold text denotes 10% or more of all presentations.

Table 5. Percent of Presentations by Geographic and Demographic Focus

Year	Diversity	International	Local and State Administration	Nonprofits	Public Administration, Education, and Research
1979	3%	0%	**7%**	0%	**7%**
1980	3%	1%	**9%**	0%	**9%**
1981	4%	0%	<u>**15%**</u>	1%	1%
1982	**5%**	0%	**9%**	0%	0%
1983	2%	0%	<u>**14%**</u>	3%	1%
1984	**7%**	0%	<u>**10%**</u>	0%	0%
1985	3%	0%	**8%**	0%	**9%**
1986	**5%**	0%	<u>**10%**</u>	0%	<u>**10%**</u>
1987	<u>**10%**</u>	0%	<u>**14%**</u>	0%	1%
1988	<u>**14%**</u>	0%	**8%**	3%	3%
1989	**5%**	0%	<u>**19%**</u>	0%	3%
1990	**5%**	0%	2%	2%	**7%**
1991	2%	2%	<u>**11%**</u>	0%	**8%**
1992	**8%**	0%	<u>**10%**</u>	0%	**8%**
1993	**5%**	0%	2%	1%	3%
1994	**5%**	3%	<u>**13%**</u>	1%	3%
1996	3%	3%	<u>**15%**</u>	**5%**	<u>**11%**</u>
1997	3%	4%	**8%**	2%	**9%**
1999	3%	4%	**6%**	3%	**7%**
2000	3%	0%	4%	**5%**	**6%**
2001	**5%**	3%	<u>**10%**</u>	4%	**8%**
2002	4%	**8%**	<u>**10%**</u>	4%	**5%**
2003	1%	<u>**11%**</u>	**9%**	2%	2%
2004	**5%**	3%	<u>**10%**</u>	4%	4%
2006	3%	**5%**	<u>**10%**</u>	1%	**7%**
2007	2%	3%	<u>**12%**</u>	3%	2%
2008	2%	**5%**	**7%**	3%	**8%**
2009	3%	4%	<u>**15%**</u>	**6%**	<u>**11%**</u>
2010	4%	**5%**	**7%**	**8%**	4%
2011	4%	**6%**	**6%**	**6%**	2%
2012	4%	**7%**	<u>**16%**</u>	4%	4%
2013	**6%**	4%	**7%**	**5%**	1%
2014	**8%**	**9%**	**8%**	4%	3%
2015	**7%**	**5%**	**8%**	**6%**	4%

Note: Bold text denotes 5% of more of all presentations. Underlined bold text denotes 10% or more of all presentations.

becoming more integrated into public administration programs (Mirabella, 2007). Many early nonprofit management classes were taught by adjunct instructors. But when nonprofit-oriented scholars increasingly joined public administration faculties in the South, SECoPA panels began to reflect their engagement.

Actions by the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA) have affected the frequency of panels and papers on public administration education topics at SECoPA conferences. When NASPAA has contemplated and issued changes to its policies and standards, people have sought to share questions and insights about them at SECoPA education-oriented panels. These papers were most frequent during the earliest years of peer review (i.e., the late 1970s and early 1980s). They subsequently spiked when NASPAA revised its standards. NASPAA first published a list of programs in substantial conformity in 1980. NASPAA formalized its accreditation process in 1985 and 1986; further, it revised its standards in 1992 and 2009.

With the exception of local and state administration, there has been much variation in the frequency of other topics. Some topics have emerged with substantial attention for a conference or two at the time but, thereafter, remain below or substantially below 10% of conference participants. During the past two decades, SECoPA's meetings reveal a shift from a few focal topics to diffuse presentations across a wide range of topics. This may speak to the broader trend of SECoPA domination by academia, where individual scholars present on their particular interests rather than forming panels to address topics of broad relevance to practice.

Discussion

SECoPA's history reveals the ability of a regional, broadly focused professional conference to survive without substantially bureaucratizing itself. SECoPA continues to rely on local ASPA chapters to organize and manage annual conferences. Though this local control is generally viewed positively, SECoPA leaders note that it results in substantial variation that can have an impact on conference strategies. Evolution in conference participants and topics reveal shifts in the organization's identity. Some of those changes are positive. Others indicate challenges the organization needs to address. Our analysis of SECoPA's conference programs over the years reveals that the organization has been true to its original intent, with a couple of notable exceptions.

For the most part, the evolution of topics covered at SECoPA reveals the composition and interests of the region's scholars. The wide array of topics addressed at SECoPA meetings today speak to a potentially broad appeal. On the other hand, declines in presentations on financial management and human resources management suggest that SECoPA's meetings might be neglecting topics that practitioners must deal with daily. Practitioners can choose to attend other conferences, and some of these are primarily attuned to improving the practice of such things as local government management, financial management, information technology, and human resource management. Local, state, and national meetings of professional associations serving such groups as city and county administrators, finance directors, purchasing officials, and human resources management specialists tend to be dominated by practitioners and consultants. Competition from these more specialized conferences is viewed by SECoPA leaders as factoring significantly into declining practitioner involvement. Very few of those conferences have substantial participation by academics in public administration. Unfortunately, university promotion and tenure committees encourage academics to present to other academics, and they tend to discount non-academic presentations.

Public administration is inherently multidisciplinary. Greater efforts to encourage participation from other fields with significant overlap, e.g., criminal justice and social work, could help to make our conferences more interdisciplinary and potentially relevant to both practitioners and scholars. If SECoPA's host chapters and their partnering universities encourage participation from non-ASPA members (practitioners and scholars alike) at SECoPA conferences, it may help to increase their involvement and recruitment to local ASPA

chapters. Interviews revealed some difference of opinion on how much freedom SECoPA has to reach outside ASPA membership, but some flexibility exists.

The growing academic domination of SECoPA, shown in the decreased practitioner involvement in panels, raises troubling issues for the organization. This pattern is not unique to SECoPA, as it exists throughout ASPA. When one of the authors joined ASPA as a practitioner in 1969, ASPA's membership was pushing 17,000. The number of ASPA members today is less than half that. Considering that the number of academic members is greater today than in 1969, the decline in practitioner members is even more startling. Throughout this decline, SECoPA's leadership has taken some efforts to maintain practitioner involvement, including not requiring papers from practitioner presenters and keeping conference costs low, which they view as particularly necessary due to governments cutting back on conference travel. ASPA leadership has similarly paid attention to the challenge and sought ways to reverse the declines, especially in trying to reinvigorate local chapters.

The American Planning Association (APA) provides an insightful contrast with ASPA (and thus SECoPA), as it has been both a predominantly practitioner venue and the main academic conference for urban planners. Its primary journal (*Journal of the American Planning Association)* reveals a similar ability to reach both audiences, while ASPA's (*Public Administration Review*) and SECoPA's journals (*Public Administration Quarterly*) are heavily oriented to academics. Emulating APA's dedication to making conferences and publications relevant and useful to practitioners would be critical for both ASPA and SECoPA to revitalize practitioner involvement. One such means to accomplish this would be to offer continuing education credits for conference panels and even develop a certification requiring them.

An original mission of SECoPA was to help practitioners and scholars to interact and help one another to solve problems. At around 10% practitioner participation, as has been the case since the early 2000s, the conference may now lack a critical mass of people from governments, nonprofits, and for-profits to make it appear relevant and useful to them. Further, panels that include only scholars can easily neglect the practical relevance of the research being shared, allowing for a drift away from SECoPA's original purpose to advance public administration in the southeast. Scholars need to interact with practitioners to learn about problems and hear about best practices to share in their classrooms. To address this challenge, SECoPA can learn from its earlier conferences—adding practitioners to panels as discussants, recruiting practitioner-led panels, and drawing from the local community of government agencies and nonprofit organizations to a greater extent than it has in the last two decades—especially if SECoPA is willing to alter its bylaws to permit greater participation from practitioner nonmembers of ASPA in SECoPA's leadership roles and potentially consider the conference as a recruiting tool.

Sometimes, in guiding institutional change, it helps to recall an institution's origins. An original intent of SECoPA was to focus on the problems of people in the South. From that perspective, the relative paucity of presentations on social policy, ethics, and diversity limits discussions of inequality. The near disappearance of practitioners from the ranks of SECoPA presenters (in 2014 only one in 20 conference presenters were practitioners) likely contributes to the scarcity of these topics. Practitioners deal with these types of problems repeatedly. Clearly, the disappearance of practitioner members from ASPA has deeply affected SECoPA. It has also been our experience that recent applicant pools for faculty positions include relatively few applicants with practitioner experience. So-called "pracademics" were once common among public administration faculties. In the decades immediately following World War II, many public administration scholars, such as Herbert Simon and Dwight Waldo, learned from war-related experiences. In 2015, only one-fourth of the applicants to the broadly defined Assistant Professor position mentioned above at the Florida State University

had any significant practitioner experience (defined as something more than that typically required for an MPA level internship).

Bridging the academic-practitioner gap is an appropriate and needed mission for regional conferences. A major challenge ahead will be rebuilding bridges that have largely disappeared. SECoPA has shown an ability to remain a viable and energetic institution, but it is one with challenges ahead. Addressing social problems and engaging practitioners are clearly challenges that lie ahead for SECoPA and its sister regional conferences.

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