

1-12-2013

# The Role of Comparative Analysis in Borderlands Studies

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## Recommended Citation

Brenner, Christine, "The Role of Comparative Analysis in Borderlands Studies" (2013). *Public Policy and Public Affairs Faculty Publication Series*. Paper 47.

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EastBordNet

**COST Action IS0803  
Working Paper**

**The Role of Comparative Analysis in Borderlands  
Studies**

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This paper was first presented at: **Relocating Borders: a comparative approach  
Second EastBordNet Conference**

WG or WS Name: **Borders**

On: **January 12, 2013**

Location: **Humboldt University, Berlin, Germany**

Keywords: **comparative public administration, borders**

Disciplines: **Public administration; political science**

## **Abstract**

The paper explores the question, “What global core competencies can public administration glean from the field of borderlands studies?” Borderlands studies have traditionally focused on the geographic area on or near the frontier demarcation between nation states. Borderlands also function as buffering or mediating zones where often markedly different countries develop complex networked administrative systems to permit the passage of peoples and products across territorial boundaries. In this way borderlands often shape the administrative and policy decisions made in the centers of national power. This paper employs content analysis to review ten years of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2011 – 2001) to determine the primary thematic, geographic, and methodological focus of borderlands scholars and their applicability to comparative public administration.

**Key words:** comparative public administration, borderlands studies, global

## **Introduction**

The Association for Borderlands Studies (ABS) is the premiere scholarly association focusing exclusively on border issues. Its early emphasis was on the US-Mexico borderlands; however, today the association has membership throughout the globe. As an association it celebrates multidisciplinary approaches to border research. Geopolitically contested spaces are analyzed by political scientists and geographers. Natural resource management is examined from both a public policy and a scientific dimension. The movement of peoples across borders and the integration of migrants into new communities concerns sociologists and public administrators. The history, language(s), literature and art of the borderlands are also an important aspect of

scholars' prismatic lens. This paper analyzes ten years of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2001 – 2011) to determine the primary thematic, geographic, and methodological focus of borderlands scholars. It also explores the way the study of borderlands has shifted during that time span. The paper builds on earlier work by Pisani (2009), whose retrospective analysis included a 20-year time span (1988-2008), and places primary emphasis borderlands study in the first decade of the new millennium.

The paper then explores the question, “What global core competencies can public administration glean from the field of borderlands studies?” Borderlands studies have traditionally focused on the geographic area on or near the frontier demarcation between nation states. Borderlands also function as buffering or mediating zones where often markedly different countries develop complex networked administrative systems to permit the passage of peoples and products across territorial boundaries. In this way borderlands often shape the administrative and policy decisions made in the centers of national power. This paper employs content analysis to review ten years of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* (2011 – 2001) to determine the primary thematic, geographic, and methodological focus of borderlands scholars and their applicability to comparative public administration. Global administrative policies centered on immigration, human rights, environmental management, trade, and national security can all be informed by through the lens of borderlands studies. Pragmatic administrative solutions often emerge organically in border regions based on the intense patterns of interaction grounded in face-to-face relationships. Ethical administrative competencies, which recognize and value the importance of new networks and systems of border interactions, can directly impact the effectiveness and efficiency of public service delivery in transnational areas and help subnational governments frame settlement policies.

Borderlands studies and comparative public administration form a natural scholarly nexus. Brunet-Jailly (2009) identifies areas which are currently underdeveloped in borderlands studies. These include the recognition of growing interdisciplinary scholarship that is growing in the social sciences and humanities surrounding border studies, and the extension of comparative border study to regions beyond Europe and North America.

Comparative public administration as a recognized field of study developed in the post-World War II period and was formally accepted within the academy in 1953 with the establishment of an ad hoc subcommittee of the American Society for Public Administration. Early work by Riggs (1964) and Heady (1966) laid the groundwork for empirical, nomothetic, and ecological studies that would follow. Comparative methodologies were critical to the development of administrative theory, in order to move beyond the lens of colonialism and the hegemonic influence of American administration in transitional and developing countries (Heady 2001). Wildavsky's (1986) classic work on a comparative theory for public budgeting introduced the concept of functional, or sectorial, comparative approaches in areas like health and education. The advent of international nongovernmental organizations like the World Bank, the International Monetary Fund, and the Inter-American Development Bank pushed for international comparative performance data often as a pre-condition for loans critical to developing countries. The multiple intersections of national governments and international governmental organizations have added another layer of complexity in the 21<sup>st</sup> century (Knill 2001; Mahon & McBride 2009). Comparative administration, like the study of borders, has expanded for beyond the North American and European context to include emerging world powers like Brazil, China, and India as well as Egypt, Saudi Arabia, Pakistan, and other

countries in the global south (e.g. *International Review of Administrative Sciences*, December 2010 issue on Africa).

What makes a paper or an academic study comparative is essentially the same element that makes the work one that can be classified as focusing on borders or borderlands studies. In each case, the primary purpose of the investigation is the comparison or the borders themselves, rather than a subsidiary element or an afterthought (Pollitt 2011). Borderlands studies and comparative public administration examine relationships between nation states and among particular institutions. They also compare whole systems, such as national security or immigration, while at the same time comparing the impact of international institutions on regions, countries, and border areas and their inhabitants (Archer 2001; De Cooker 2005). Management of border regions requires attention to the comparative role of civil servants in different countries (Bekke 1996; Page & Wright 1999) as well as an understanding of how contracted private services supplement or supplant government service delivery.

Aberbach and Rockman (1987: 473) find that a comparative approach as a methodological core of public administration studies “propels us to a level of conceptual self-consciousness and clarity rarely found in non-comparative studies of public administration.” Similarly, we see new insights emerging from comparative borderlands studies as well.<sup>1</sup> The advantage, then, which is gained through the multiple lenses of borderlands studies and

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<sup>1</sup> Although Brunet-Jailley (2009: 11) notes that “To date, however, there is no model available that addresses first, why some borderlands integrate economically but not politically, while others have institutions spanning an international boundary without the pressure of intense economic linkages, and, second, what role local political clout and local culture play in defining and shaping borderlands and boundaries.”

comparative public administration, is not only the discovery of effective (or non-efficacious) practice but also as Jreisat (2011: 834) notes “in contributions that expand options and alternative strategies for improving the performance of public institutions worldwide.”

## **Methodology**

This paper utilizes content analysis of the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* from the first decade of the twenty-first century to understand how the knowledge of borderlands studies can enhance and expand the field of comparative public administration. One hundred and sixty-one articles appeared in the journal during that ten-year time span. They were individually coded over several domains. First, the author queried whether there was substantive content in borderlands studies that could contribute to the scholarship and discussion in the field of public administration. This was accomplished by coding all 161 articles’ primary content as it related to the sections of the American Society of Public Administration (ASPA), following Gulrajani and Moloney (2012).<sup>2</sup> The 27 organized sections in a professional organization like ASPA have developed over time as groups of like-minded members devote their practitioner expertise and scholarly inquiry into particular substantive content areas, such as science and technology, emergency management, and budget and finance.

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<sup>2</sup> Gulrajani and Moloney (2012) omitted the following ASPA sections in their methodology: Chinese Public Administration (geographic limitations); the Conference on Minority Administration (lack of section status); Certified Public Management (applied category); and Section on Historical, Artistic and Reflective Expression (method not topic). I follow this procedure; however, I include the Section on Historical, Artistic and Reflective Expression, because *Borderlands Studies* does include membership and scholarship from the Humanities. Additionally, I exclude Korean Public Administration because like Chinese Public Administration it is a geographically circumscribed group.

The thematic orientation coding of the articles in the database follows the protocol initially established by Van Wart and Cayer (1990) and replicated by over two decades later by Gulrajani and Moloney (2011). Additionally, I add the new topics Gulrajani and Moloney (2011) identified in their research as being particularly important to problems of the developing world, which includes the areas of food policy, post-conflict themes, human rights administration, and studies of authoritarian transitions. Finally, I include the themes of immigration (including migration), national security, and trade, labor and economic development, which are themes that have emerged as universally significant to the developed and developing world, global North and South.

The coding of articles included other domains as well. Chandler, Azevedo and Albernaz's (2010: 836) reflection on the need for "the development of an integrated community of scholars in public affairs" analyzed both the country of origin, which they operationalized as the country of publication, and the diversity of languages present in the references cited section of publications as indications of global diversity in scholarship. I follow their procedure to identify work that moves beyond hegemonic English-language influence in borderlands studies; however, I operationalize country based on the academic home of the author at the time of publication. I recognize that academics are often employed outside of the country of origin; however, this coding scheme allows me to capture the geographic dispersion of borderlands scholars across academia.

Explicit coding regarding geographic location of borders is important to comparative public administration as well as borderlands studies. I designate general geographic continental location following the United Nations statistics division's geoscheme in addition to each individual country code.



I account for geographic analytic complexity by coding whether the individual articles focus on borders within a single country (e.g. See Gamez and Angeles 2010, “Borders within: Tourism growth, migration and regional polarization in Baja California Sur (Mexico)”), a single international border such as the making of the Namibia-Zambia borderland (Zeller 2010), or multiple international border areas (e.g. See Coplan 2010, First meets third: Analyzing inequality along the U.S.-Mexico and South Africa-Lesotho borders.).

I follow the traditions of major public administration scholars using content analysis of journal articles in my characterizing the theoretical analytic lenses (Sigleman 1976; Van Wart and Cayer 1990; and Gulrajani and Moloney 2012). Borderlands articles were therefore coded based on whether the author’s approach was largely descriptive, whether it included thesis assertion, or if the analysis included hypothesis or model testing. Additionally, the methods authors employ in their research is designated as either essay-based; empirical however non-quantitative, which are primarily narrow empirical case studies (Gulrajani and Moloney 2012); or quantitative.

## **Findings and Discussion**

Transdisciplinarity allows researchers in one field to speak and interact with another in a way that often produces new knowledge and integrated understandings (Flinterman et al 2001). Comparative public administration, as it is defining itself in the new millennium, is moving beyond the multidisciplinary orientation of the twentieth century when political science’s international relations perspectives and traditional American hegemonic and European postcolonial approaches informed a more globalizing approach to public administration. As Jreisat (2011: 837-8) notes “globalization requires new administrative knowledge and skills, and

comparative public administration has been attempting to expand and broaden administrative knowledge in response to the needs and demands of modern society.”

Borderlands studies interdisciplinarity is evident from the founding of the field and its early intellectual incursions examining life, trade, laws, culture, and other aspects of the United States- Mexico border. Today borderlands scholars stand with comparative public administrations scholars seeking to unravel the densely packed and intricate relationships among peoples, trade and governments in border areas, yet how fully cognizant is the one group academics of the other? The findings from this modest research may help expand options for scholars regardless of their academic self-identification as they seek to integrate social science, humanities, and natural science, move beyond narrow discipline-based silos, and develop a comparatively-informed approach to improving global understanding and governance.

### **Overlapping themes**

Mapping the interest areas of the organized sections of ASPA onto the 21<sup>st</sup> century scholarship on borderlands as recognized through the premiere journal, *Journal of Borderlands Studies* indicates there are major areas of research overlap. (See Table 1.) Thematic content analysis revealed 214 comparative public administration themes were present in the 10-year time span. Border crossing and the movement of people and goods is the dominant theme of one quarter of the articles, which focus on trade, labor, and economic development. The strong presence of humanities scholarship is evident in borderlands studies where one of every five articles published displays historic, artistic, or reflective expression.

*Insert Table 1 here.*

Time-honored public administration themes that align with ministry or cabinet-level administrative positions are also evident in borderlands scholarship. Most notably they include environment and natural resources (7.5% of articles reviewed), intergovernmental management (6.5%), democracy and social justice (4.2%), health and human services (3.7%), and transport policy and administration (2.8%). Absent from the borderlands scholarship is discussion of what many consider core competencies in public administration including personnel, budget and finance, ethics, and performance management. Does this silence of borderlands scholars on areas of centrality to public administration scholars mark their work irrelevant to mainstream PA? I find rather that borderlands scholars present nuanced understanding of emerging millennial concerns, which public administrators are increasingly confronting.

Pragmatic solutions developed in borderlands often presage or lay the groundwork for changes in national and international policies. Frontline bureaucrats (Lipsky 1978) working in border regions wrestle daily with the implementation of national laws that sometimes confound border realities. Borderlands scholars provide practical insight into important areas like national security, immigration, post-conflict administration, food policy, and human rights administration, all critical 21<sup>st</sup> century concerns. These insights can inform comparative public administration as it seeks to learn from best practices and find reasonable, realistic solutions to administrative dilemmas.

The findings also suggest areas where borderlands scholars might team with comparative public administration scholars to address issues of importance to the governmental and nongovernmental organizations who provide funding for many global initiatives. Emergency and crisis management as well as performance management seem ripe for this type of collaboration. Ethics, growing global recognition of sexual orientation policies and their implementation,

attention to fiscal and budgetary concerns as the world tries to move beyond the Great Recession, and the size and capability of government are all areas worthy of transdisciplinary research attention.

## **Geography of Borderlands Studies**

### **Dispersion of Scholars**

There is an inherent geographic orientation in borderlands scholarship. It is reflected not only in the geophysical spaces, which border scholars focus their research on, but also in the geographic dispersion of borderlands scholars themselves. It is not surprising that the academic homes of the 239 authors published in the *Journal of Borderlands Studies* from 2001 to 2011 are overwhelmingly (56.5 %) from North America, as shown in Table 2. The journal is the official publication of the Association for Borderlands Studies, which was founded 37 years ago on the United States-Mexico border. Additionally, the executive secretariat for the organization has been located in Canada for the past six years, and the organizational leadership is primarily representative of North American and European scholars. I note that while North American scholarship is still dominant, the North American scholarship of the first decade of the new millennium is 15.7 percentage points less than Pisano's (2009) 20-year retrospective (72.2%), indicating the increasing geographic diversity of border scholars.

*Insert Table 2 here.*

European border scholars represent slightly more than one third (36%) of the published authors. Table 3 indicates the academic scholar's top university home countries. It is also important to note that during the past decade journal publications were not dominated by

individual scholars. Only 13 of the 239 authors had multiple publications with no one author having more than five publications. So while the historical roots of the organization still hold primacy, the multiplicity and variety of authors is clearly present in the publication.

*Insert Table 3 here.*

Recent efforts by the editors of the journal have resulted in several dossier issues, which have focused on under-researched geographic areas such as Africa, sub-Arctic Europe, and the Mercosur trade area in South America. These are important developments when we consider the relatively concentrated focus of geographic borderlands research. Table 4 shows that even with these editorial outreach efforts, there is a hegemonic influence of theoretical constructs which focus on the global North during the first decade of the 21<sup>st</sup> century.

*Insert Table 4 here.*

Comparative public administration is wrestling with similar issues. Jun (2000: 285), in introducing a symposium issue of *Administrative Theory and Praxis*, reminded comparative public administration scholars "...be cautious about applying Western-based theory or testing hypotheses and be reflexively aware of the inherent limits of positivistic research." Yet, in the face of increasing globalizations major comparative scholars (Jreisat 2005; Kettl 2000; Stone 2008) have called for moving beyond national foci to transform governance and embrace new modes of transnational public administration.

## **Diffusion of Scholarship**

Borderlands scholarship is somewhat less concentrated than the academic homes of the authors. Table 4 illustrates the geographic diffusion of the border areas which are discussed in early millennial publications. One-third of the world's nations (n = 65) were subject to scrutiny in borderlands scholarship. Under-represented areas of study include South American (6%), Africa (10%), Asia (3%), the Middle East (3%) and Oceania (0%). Borderlands scholars may benefit from the knowledge generated by public administration scholars many of whom are members of recognized national professional organizations, such as the Chinese, Korean, Indian, and Australian Societies of Public Administration.

## **Complexity of Border Scholarship**

Welch and Wong (1998: 43) called for development of a theoretical model that is “adaptable to comparisons across multiple national contexts such that the theoretical and practitioners gaps are addressed.” Borderlands scholarship can contribute to that call through the various types of borders research it conducts. The vast majority of publications focus on a single border region (n = 125); comparative analyses of multiple borders was present in 14 percent of the publications (n = 21).

Another measure of the depth and complexity of borderlands scholarship is reflected in scholars' access to and use of literature not produced in their native language. Here borderlands scholars shine as 61 percent (n = 94) of the journal articles' references cited scholarship that was in multiple languages. Chandler et al's (2010) analysis of public administration literature lamented the parochialism of Anglophone literature and echoed Santos' (2001) call for more

south-south engagement.<sup>3</sup> As comparative public administration scholars engage with borderlands scholarship they may benefit from access to the knowledge synthesized and produced from this broader global literature.

### **Methodological Orientation of Borderlands Scholarship**

The relative youth of borderlands studies as an academic field is evident in the heavy reliance on descriptive essays (61%). Theory development, which characterizes many of the new millennial writings, is by its nature a dialogue surrounding the dialectics of borders and borderlands. Pisani's (2009) twenty-year analysis of the journal found that 47 percent of articles were either conceptual or descriptive. The increased emphasis on descriptive work, which also includes thesis assertion and/or hypotheses or model testing, may indicate a maturing of the field of borderlands studies.

Twenty-first century borderlands scholarship continues to develop case studies, which provide important insights into global borderlands. These case studies usually include empirical data as a way of telling the story of a particular border or border region. Approximately one fifth of the articles (21%) of the past decade include this type of empirical non-quantitative exploration of borders. The remaining 18 percent of the articles represented empirical quantitative analysis of borderlands issues.

### **Future directions: Advancing transdisciplinarity**

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<sup>3</sup> See also Chandler, G.G. 2006. Linguistic Diglossia and Parochialism in American Public Administration: The missing half of Guerreiro Ramos' *Redução Sociológica*. *Administrative Theory and Praxis* 28 (4): 540-561.

An important first step in advancing transdisciplinary among borderlands scholars and scholars of comparative public administration would involve structuring purposeful research teams to tackle border, border administration, and borderlands concerns. Such teams might be either geographically or functionally based, depending on the research issues the members which to address.

Secondly, engaging practitioners as co-producers of knowledge is important to this research. Appointed ministers and commissioners, managers, and street-level bureaucrats offer a different perspectives of administrative policies, which they are charged with implementing. “Bringing actors together in projects does not automatically lead to joint knowledge production, in the sense of co-producing knowledge which actors would not have developed in isolation.” (Hegger et al, 2012:3). Rather, it requires valuing practitioners as individuals who are intimately familiar with administrative implementation with all its successes, fallibilities, and spillover effects. This also implies engaging in an interactive social process with public administrators rather than one-off interviews that are primarily academically driven. (E.g. van den Hove 2007).

Joint applications for research project funding, or subcontracting with administrative agencies may allow the critical research needed for 21<sup>st</sup> century comparative administrative and borders issues to move forward. The role of governmental and international NGO funding may influence early forays into this research nexus. Private sector funding may also be possible; however, the cautionary of funding sources shaping the research questions is especially prudent in this regard. Large private sector actors are focused on border security and facilitating trade across borders. Such shifting of responsibilities to private companies moves risk management to the private sector and takes policies like migration and border control and transforms them into technical issues (Caperini and Marenin 2006).



Interorganizational sharing of information through conferences, roundtables, e-connectivity represents another way for new knowledge production to be shared globally. Smart phones in particular offer promise for delivery of knowledge via existing formats like webinars and YouTube and other electronic technology yet to be developed. Pushing the edges of our scholarly associations to include panels and thematic publications that are transdisciplinary in nature will stretch our internal boundaries and offer rich opportunities for intellectual growth. The Proverb “As iron sharpens iron, so one man sharpens another (27:19),” seems particularly apt as we explore 21<sup>st</sup> century opportunities for the nexus of ideas between borderlands and comparative public administration scholarship.

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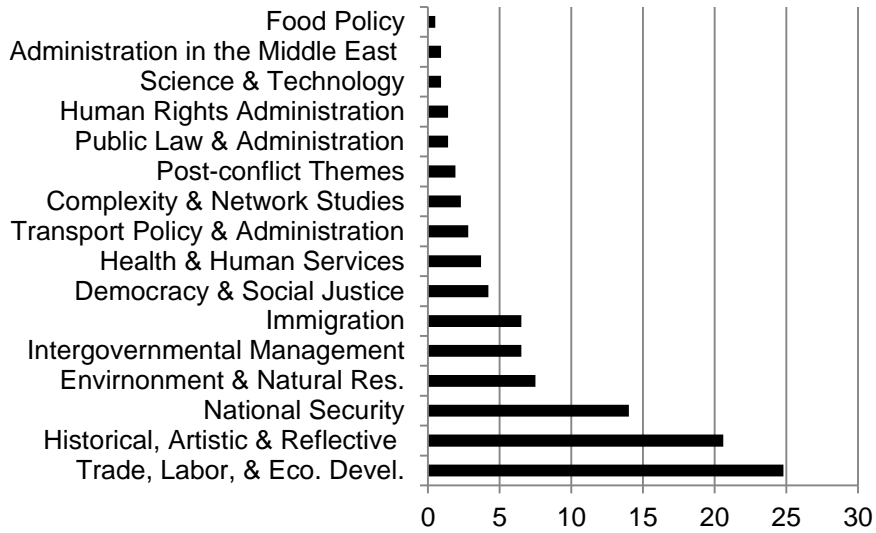
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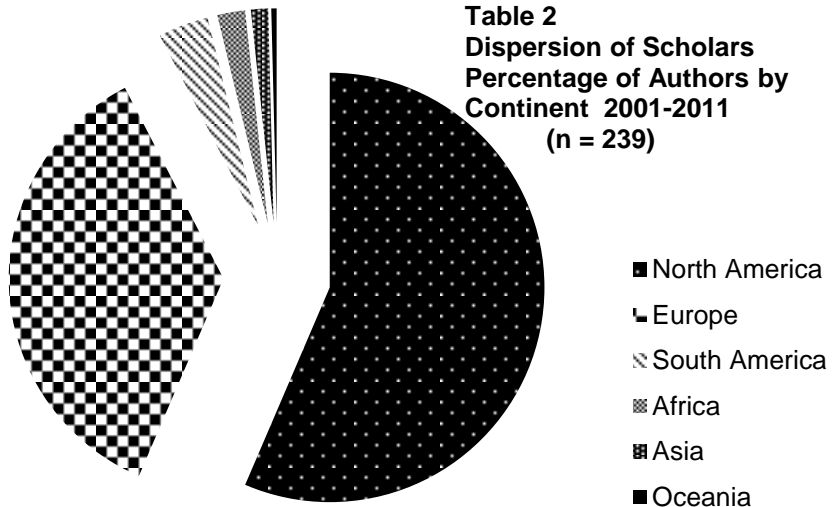
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**Table 1**  
**Percentage of public administration themes in the**  
**Journal of Borderlands Studies articles, 2001-2011**  
**(N = 214)**



Source: Author's own calculations.

**Table 2**  
**Dispersion of Scholars**  
**Percentage of Authors by**  
**Continent 2001-2011**  
**(n = 239)**



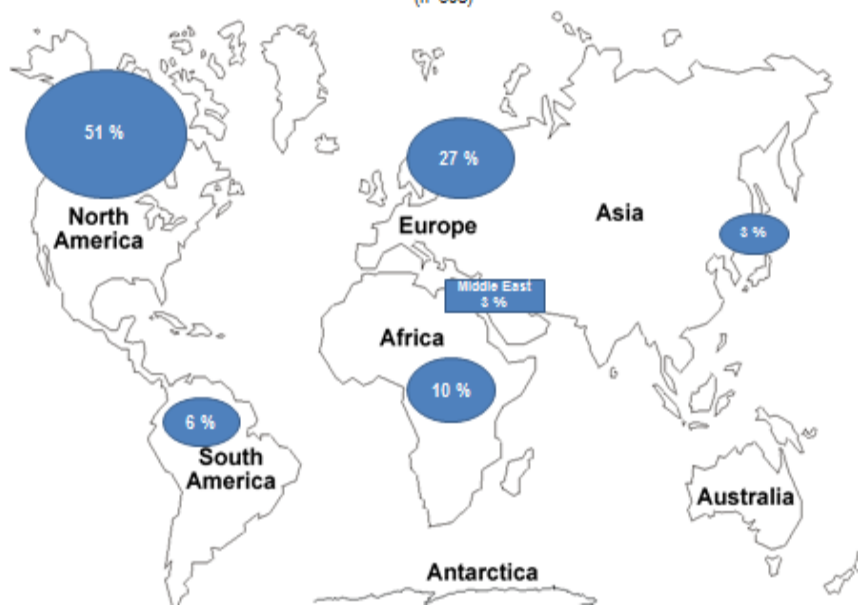
Source: Author's own calculations.

**Table 3**  
**Top University Academic Homes by**  
**Country 2001-2011 (n=239)**

<b>Authors' University Academic Home Countries</b>	<b>Number of Authors Published</b>
USA	101
Canada	20
Mexico	14
Netherlands	13
Germany	13
Denmark	10
Finland	6
Greece	6

Source: Author's own calculations.

**Table 4**  
**Geographic Diffusion of Scholarship:**  
**Percentage scholarship by region 2001-11**  
(n=308)



Source: Author's own calculations.