This textbook shows Public Administration students how to use qualitative and quantitative research techniques, enabling them to select the most appropriate research methods in decision making. From their teaching experience, the authors identify the wariness that most students have toward an imposing research methods course. In this textbook, they make great efforts to craft exciting and rewarding teaching materials. They try to convince the students that developing skills to understand how something works is nearly always intellectually compelling and thus generally pretty enjoyable.

The authors of the book have rich experience in teaching and research in Public Affairs. Warren S. Eller is an Associate Professor in the Department of Public Management at John Jay College of Criminal Justice, CUNY. Brian J. Gerber is an Associate Professor and Director of the Emergency Management and Homeland Security program at Arizona State University. Scott E. Robinson is the Bellman Chair of Public Service and Professor of Political Science in the Department of Political Science at the University of Oklahoma. Their research covers diverse areas such as vulnerable populations, emergencies and disasters, policy change, budgetary politics, and collaboration between nonprofit and government organizations. This diverse expertise is reflected in the cross-field case studies in the book.

This textbook is thematically arranged with five sections. The five sections, each starts with a short essay, provide previews of each section’s content and, more importantly, guide the reader through how the concepts and techniques covered relate to real-world use and application. Section I addresses what the research enterprise is all about. It introduces the basics of getting started on a research or evaluation project, including setting up an approach to tackling a research problem. Section II explains the essential operation elements of running a research or evaluation problem: how to set up a research design, the basics of measuring social phenomena, the basics of drawing a sample from a population of interest, how to gather data in field research efforts, how to approach interviewing subject matter experts, and so on. Section III moves towards the basics of actually working with the collected data: how to code the data, test hypotheses, and draw inferences about the findings. While section III introduces the logic of descriptive and inferential statistics, section IV provides a further introduction to advanced quantitative analytic techniques, including OLS regression and other widely-used tools for applied decision making, such as benefit-cost analysis. Section V closes the text by providing an overview of critical issues in managing projects and pulling all the information together in executing an applied project.

Interestingly, in this book, research methodologies are presented through a series of real-life case studies. The five core cases are National Helping Hands, Dewey Independent School District, Grover’s Corner Department of Transportation, Amity Department of Homeland Security, and Springfield Housing Department. Each chapter applies two cases among the five, exploring situations where a public sector
manager can use research to answer specific questions demonstrating how that research can inform future policy. The cases are consistently illustrated over the sections and chapters from the start to the end of the text. The final chapter recalls and summarizes the five cases while identifying key elements in different phases of the research process. The case studies show how research methods benefit in the real world and provide hands-on exercises for students to practice knowledge in the text.

Each chapter’s structure benefits both students and lecturers who use the book as a textbook for their methodology course. Each chapter starts with learning objectives that orient learners with the focus and goals of the chapter. Discussion questions, class exercises in each chapter provide students with a range of additional tools to apply research principles to practical situations. Vocabulary and review questions at the end of each chapter provide an excellent opportunity for students to review the overall content. Index at the end of the book is a convenient tool for students to locate the concepts and detailed text whenever needed quickly. Moreover, the instructors would benefit from the online materials accompanying the textbook. The eResources package contains suggested course plans and sample syllabi, PowerPoint lecture slides, and student support materials to illustrate the application of critical concepts and analytic techniques.

Compared with the first edition, the authors note that the second edition adds a new chapter on the section of applied quantitative analyses. It offers coverage on three applied decision tools: benefit-cost analysis, forecasting, and gap analysis. Though these are widely-used and valuable analytic techniques for decision making across different types of organizations, very few methodology books have introduced them to students.

One limitation of the book is the entry-level coverage of statistical analysis software. Examples of model results are shown in Microsoft Excel. On one side, Excel is the most popular tool in day-to-day practice in the public field. On the other side, this textbook could not provide advanced knowledge in analytical methods. This book does not cover current widely used analysis software in public administration research and other social sciences, such as STATA, SPSS, R, and Python.

In general, it is an inspiring and practical methodology textbook. It can serve well as a core text or supplementary reading material for an undergraduate or graduate level methodology course. Public administration practitioners who are pursuing their Public Administration degrees may find the book closely linked to their daily work. Students who aim to start their professional careers in the public sector would appreciate the real-life cases about the function of research methods in decision-making as well. However, it may not fulfill the need of students who are interested in developing advanced statistical analysis skills for their future study and research.

ABOUT THE AUTHOR

Hanjin Mao is a doctoral student in the School of Public Affairs and Administration at Rutgers University – Newark. Her research interests include nonprofit management, nonprofit finance, philanthropy, public and nonprofit education.