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Municipal Finance Law Since 1971

Machine-Learning Model Tracks Trends in Public Finance Research.

ATLANTA — What are the leading topics in public finance and budgeting, how have they changed, and what future topics should be more closely researched by professionals and practitioners? Can Chen and two of his former doctoral students, Shiyang Xiao at Syracuse University and Boyuan Zhao at Florida International University, used a machine-learning technique — structural topic modeling (STM) — to identify these themes and their dynamics over the past 40 years for an article recently published in the Journal of Public Budgeting & Finance (PB&F).

Using the STM, Chen and his colleagues identified 15 latent topics in the areas of public budgeting, public finance and public financial management from the titles and abstracts of 1,028 articles published in the journal from 1981 to 2020. They compared these topics against those covered by standard exams for Certified Public Finance Officers (CPFO) and found much overlap. However, some topics that were mentioned less often may hint at some underexplored research agendas in PB&F.

Chen, an associate professor of public management and policy in the Andrew Young School of Policy Studies, directs the college's Ph.D. programs in public policy. After presenting this research at the Next Generation Public Finance conference hosted by Georgia State University, he received helpful feedback and comments he gratefully acknowledges. In the Q&A that follows, Chen reveals more about the journal, the findings and his motivation for conducting the study with his colleagues.

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by Can Chen

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