

# Educating Local Government Managers for the Twenty-First Century: A Preface to the Symposium

Raymond Cox  
*University of Akron*

Gerald T. Gabris  
*Northern Illinois University*

Mark M. Levin  
*City of Maryland Heights, Missouri*  
*University of Missouri-St. Louis*

## INTRODUCTION

Public Administration has grown and evolved as an academic discipline much as the practice of local government management has evolved over the past 100 years. Like local government, Public Administration must grapple with questions of organizational performance, responses to the external environment, and the development of new forms of service delivery. Understanding public management as an academic discipline requires understanding public management as a practice. The symposium in this issue of the *Journal of Public Affairs Education (JPAAE)* and prefaced here looks at how the management of public organizations is connected to and influenced by the experience of local government managers, and how Master's of Public Administration (MPA) programs are responding to the challenges of preparing the next generation of city managers.

Since the 1950s the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) has identified the MPA as the appropriate academic preparation for those pursuing a career in city management. The partnership between NASPAA and ICMA goes back to the mid-1980s, when an ICMA-NASPAA Joint Task Force was formed to maintain communications on matters of mutual interest. In 1989, guidelines for a specialization in local government management within an MPA degree were prepared in consultation with ICMA's Academic Affairs Committee (renamed the Advisory Board on Graduate Education in 2001). Other products of this partnership have included the posting of an "Adjunct's Corner" and a monthly electronic publication by ICMA, both of which focus

on teaching local government management; a session in each of the last 7 years at the ICMA Conference for city managers who want to learn more about being instructors; the recruitment of city managers to serve as accreditation site visitors; and the publication by ICMA of a “Managers as Teachers” handbook (Banovetz, Levin, McDowell, & Cox, 2007).

The task and challenge before us is twofold. First, how do we gauge whether today’s MPA programs are likely to provide a sufficient supply of properly trained graduates to meet the demand for tomorrow’s city managers? Second, how do we capture the changes taking place in the workplace so that the curricula offered by MPA programs to their students better prepare them for their increasingly complex administrative roles in the future? This is the central ongoing task of the joint efforts of ICMA’s Advisory Board on Graduate Education and NASPAA’s Local Government Management Education (LGME) Committee—to explore how new practices and new skills that have evolved in local government management can inform the MPA curricula.

To help frame this symposium, we begin with a brief overview of public management from a local government perspective. This overview is to help the reader better understand the symposium articles, as they examine the local government management education component of the MPA.

#### LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT IN THE UNITED STATES

Local government is the most dynamic, innovative, and organizationally diverse level of government in the United States. It employs more persons (U.S. Census Bureau, 2008), is the provider of more direct services, and is the most likely point of contact between government and citizens. Citizens depend on the effectiveness and quality of local government to make their lives safer, healthier, and more livable.

The nature and context of local government have changed over the decades, mirroring changes in American society. The twentieth century was a time during which the demands placed upon governments and the expectations of citizens rose dramatically. Never has there been a time when the need for professional and effective government has been more apparent than the present. As the role and scope of the public service have become even more diverse and complex in the twenty-first century, there has been a parallel need for city managers to ramp up their capacity to better analyze the issues, have a vision of what a community can be, manage innovatively, and facilitate and support the policy-making process of elected officials within a democratic context.

Updating the role of the MPA in local government management education must begin by exploring what public management and its practice mean. Only then can the components and characteristics of that management education be reformulated accordingly. This symposium places public management education in a context that permits us to define a general approach to the education of

future public executives by considering the values that underlie our concept of governance. Toward that end, Cox (2000) notes that public management education must reflect three critical elements:

1. The political and ethical foundations of “publicness”,
2. The practice of management in public organizations, and
3. The knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to accomplish the tasks of public management.

#### *“Public” Management*

Publicness must be learned as an a priori value. Lynn (1987) stresses that public sector managers work in an environment noted more for the constraints and limitations on action than for innovation and creativity.

The skills, knowledge, and understanding of these constraints serve as the foundation for the “enterprise” of public management and, as such, must serve as the foundation of public management education. These personal, organizational, and political constraints are the “real world” of the public manager. It is the ability to effectively function within the interplay of these constraints that often separates the successful manager from the unsuccessful manager, particularly at the local level.

#### *The Profession of Local Government*

Professional city management is an extraordinary artifact of the behavior of twentieth-century public sector organization. It can be argued that such management represents a major innovation in how we shape a job within the public sector to mitigate the problems associated with corruption and political patronage. Most public sector professions reflect an evolved “profession” with a narrowly defined range of duties and responsibilities within traditional civil service systems. City management has never been a “profession” in this sense. The position of city manager is one of the few truly general management executive roles within our public sector, where an appointed rather than an elected official serves as the chief administrative officer.

The duties and responsibilities of the city manager are defined and constrained by the structural, economic, social, and cultural differences among local governments. Day-to-day practices of managers vary widely. Furthermore, the changing needs of communities means that emphasized leadership skills have varied over time (i.e., public works in the early years, public finance in the Depression, growth management in the 1980s, and both civic engagement and fiscal prudence in the present day).

In part because the manager is a professional generalist, many of the standard methods for judging professional proficiency are missing. To evaluate the performance and practice of a profession that serves as the chief executive

officer of an organization, strict adherence to a commonly accepted ethics code is required. Though most professions establish ethical standards, the adoption of a Code of Ethics in 1924 by ICMA became the only universally accepted basis for judging performance and practice of the organization's members. The *integrity* of the city manager was and remains fundamental to understanding the occupation. Without the code, there is no common ethical expectation to which ICMA members are expected to conform.

Success as a city manager now depends upon skills and relationships unlike those envisioned decades ago. Transitioning from the hired gun technical expert to professional chief executive, to be successful this "new" manager needs the skills of leadership. The skills and competencies implied by the distinction among administration, management, and leadership are certainly not mutually exclusive, but the emphasis and application have changed.

#### *New Management, New Competencies*

John Gardner (1988) suggests that today's leaders must have the capacity to perform four functions: Agreement building, networking, exercising nonjurisdictional power, and institution building. Leaders must widen the discourse.

The successful leader creates an organizational culture that will permit the organization to navigate through a complex web of issues, perspectives, perceptions, and ideologies. In 1991, ICMA members expanded upon the Gardner functions by adopting the following practices as essential to effective local government management:

1. Staff effectiveness,
2. Policy facilitation,
3. Functional and operational expertise and planning,
4. Citizen service,
5. Performance measurement/management and quality assurance,
6. Initiative, risk taking, vision, creativity, and innovation,
7. Technological literacy,
8. Democratic advocacy and citizen participation,
9. Diversity,
10. Budgeting,
11. Financial analysis,
12. Human resources management,
13. Strategic planning,
14. Advocacy and interpersonal communication,
15. Presentation skills,
16. Media relations,
17. Integrity, and

18. Personal development (“Practices for Effective Local Government Management,” n.d.).

For most of the last two decades, the *Guidelines for Local Government Management* was accepted as relevant to the education of future city managers. City managers agreed that those 1989 guidelines from NASPAA were sufficient to construct an MPA program that sought to prepare students for careers in local government. However, the Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation (COPRA) completed a significant restructuring and revision of the accreditation standards. These long-standing guidelines were no longer deemed adequate as guiding competencies. As happened in the mid-1980s, when the formal accreditation process began, a working group drawn from members of ICMA and NASPAA was formed to recommend competencies for inclusion within the standard on Mission-Specific Competencies. The final recommendation of this group was reviewed by the LGME Committee and formally presented to COPRA during the annual meeting of NASPAA in 2009. Those recommendations are listed in their entirety below.

Graduates of the program will be able to demonstrate the application of their knowledge and understanding of the following:

1. The ethics of local government management, emphasizing the role of the professional chief executive,
2. The roles and relationships among key local and other government elected and appointed officials,
3. The purposes of and processes for communicating with and engaging citizens in local governance,
4. The management of local government core services and functions,
5. The management of local government financial resources, and
6. The management of local government human resources.

Discussions leading up to the creation of the joint ICMA/NASPAA study group generated lively debate, within both the Advisory Board and the LGME Committee, regarding the role and the place of city management preparation within the expanded understanding of public affairs education. This symposium is one result of that dialogue.

#### RENEWING THE PARTNERSHIP

The role of the local government manager is decidedly more complex now than in its formative years. The contemporary local government manager is still concerned with potholes and sewer systems, but today the position of city manager also includes responsibilities for supervising and managing coworkers, engaging and responding to citizens, and interacting with elected officials in a

way that has required the profession to “push beyond old horizons” in order to “discover new worlds of service.” The city management profession continually reexamines the practices, skills, knowledge, and abilities needed to implement new programs and services. The academy must also engage in a similar exercise to rethink and reconceptualize its pedagogical agenda for teaching aspiring city managers if it wants to keep ahead of a rapidly shifting curve. If, as the authors in this symposium assert, the skills and abilities that local government managers need to be successful in the political and economic environment of the coming decades are different from those needed in the past, then the place to begin to define those new skills, approaches, and perspectives is the curricula of the MPAs.

Appropriately, we begin this dialogue with a commentary from a practitioner who has recently completed a fascinating empirical study of these very themes. Scott Lazenby (2010) asks the pertinent question: Are MPA programs doing an adequate job of preparing the next generation of local government managers? He first identifies the “critical competencies” needed by city managers using existing data, supplemented by new data from a Delphi study, and recommendations from a panel of top practitioners and scholars in the field. These competencies are then compared to the content of curricula of MPA programs with a concentration in local government. (The majority of these competencies are similar to those that are important to Federal agency as well as private sector managers.) Lazenby found that MPA programs with a concentration in local government provide good coverage of competencies associated with administration, legal/institutional systems, and technical/analytical skills. He found less coverage of competencies associated with ethics, interpersonal communications, human relations, leadership, group processes, and community building. The problem is that the availability of courses that reflect highly ranked competencies may not match contemporary MPA curricula. For example, statistical analysis is among the lowest ranked competencies that emerged from the meta-analysis of practitioner surveys, and it was not even mentioned by the panel of experts that participated in the Delphi study. Yet some programs with a concentration in local government management still devote significant time to this subject.

Lazenby concludes by emphasizing that, in a professional MPA program intended to prepare individuals for *managing* public organizations, long lists of electives in areas such as regional planning, urban issues, housing, crime, and transportation systems “may be interesting for students, but they will be long forgotten as their future city councils struggle with weighty policy decisions...[such as] using goats instead of herbicides to eliminate blackberry patches” (p. 352).

He avers that many MPA students have only a hazy impression of what local government managers actually do, and, therefore, they are not in a position to accurately weigh the future pedagogical benefits of their courses in the context of providing practical knowledge, skills, and abilities. As current city managers begin

to retire with greater frequency, the next generation will need to be prepared with an MPA curriculum that effectively matches the job content reality.

Noting that many barriers confront those recruited into the local government management profession, not the least of which is the enormous generational change that is unfolding, Svava (2010) assesses trends and views of current MPA students as expressed in surveys and interviews. He comments that the future of the local government management profession and the membership in professional associations are linked to these broad generational changes. Local governments must attract new employees, and associations need members who have a broad commitment to community service. Svava suggests that young professionals are likely to have more fluid careers and, therefore, irregular participation in professional associations or even government. Svava also argues that the next generation may have even less affinity for affiliation with specialized professional associations when compared to affiliation with a local network of professionals from many sectors. The career paths of the next generation are unlikely to follow the traditional trend of a professional who spends his or her entire career within one area of professional management. Instead, the next generation is likely to experiment with working in several public sector career paths. They may go into nonprofit management early in their careers and then attempt to move laterally into the city management profession at a later career point. ICMA must continue to examine its image and attractiveness to young professionals.

A second aspect of the recruitment of the next generation of managers is whether MPA programs are producing enough qualified graduates who have a clear interest in working for local government (defined as municipalities and counties) as their primary careers. One of the topics that continue to animate the Advisory Board meetings at recent annual national ICMA conferences (2004-2009) is that the perceived lack of supply is reaching critical levels in some regions of the country. In this symposium, Davis, Gabris, and Nelson (2010) explore whether or not a genuine gap exists in the supply and demand relationship between MPA graduates and local governments, and, therefore, whether it is incumbent upon such organizations as NASPAA to develop strategies for actively addressing this alleged supply deficiency.

Davis, Gabris, and Nelson argue that the “gap” in supply of new local government managers may not be as severe as some local officials assert. They conclude that supply shortages can be explained by such variables as geographic location, levels of compensation, associational attractiveness, regional MPA program linkages, succession planning or the lack thereof, and public image. Importantly, they argue that the best protection both the suppliers and the employers have in optimizing their self-interest is through frequent communication and the establishment of reciprocating network linkages. It is in the self-interest of both MPA programs and local governments to develop continuing and complementary relationships, where the needs of both parties

are mutually satisfied. Subsequent articles in this symposium expand on how suppliers and employers can design mutually beneficial programs to address supply issues.

Reflecting on the changes taking place in the work environment of city managers, two articles address the development of university-based, not-for-credit programs to expand the services offered by MPA programs and the new means of delivering those services. The first of these articles addresses one of the basic concerns of Public Administration: The formal and informal linkages between the political sphere and the sphere of administration. Local government managers are at the center of this intersection and serve as vital links, seemingly on a daily basis. Rather than ignore this critical relationship, Lachapelle and Shanahan (2010) detail the development, delivery, and impact of a structured curriculum used for local government board training in Montana. That training addresses four areas: (1) Foundations of governance (such as relevant statutes including state constitutional provisions on the right to participate and right to know, and good governance principles); (2) effective meeting techniques, with a focus on procedural methods such as Robert's Rules of Order; (3) conflict management; and (4) leadership and team-building skills.

Lachapelle and Shanahan present five outcomes from their evaluation of this program. First, there is a great, unmet need to provide a coordinated training program to educate citizens on their roles, responsibilities, and best practices related to local government boards. Second, there is currently a lack of training material specific to citizen board governance. Third, the implementation of a coordinated training program can have measurable and considerable positive impacts. Fourth, there is a need to expand this current curriculum and develop more comprehensive materials for specific boards and in other contexts. Last, there is a need to create mechanisms for educators to network with other educators and share similar training materials.

In the second of these articles, Thomson (2010) takes a broader view of the phenomena described by Lachapelle and Shanahan. In Thomson's case, he explores the role universities play in providing training programs in the area of leadership development. The lure of such programs is great. The benefits may be quite tangible. But he found numerous challenges to capitalizing on this opportunity. Some of these, such as finding a balance between core academic programs and specialized programs, and overcoming the ivory tower image among elected officials, are uniquely problems of universities. Importantly for Thomson, the most critical challenge is to assess a university's capacity to provide training, including its ability to provide base financial support as an incentive to encourage faculty participation, to integrate research into courses, to utilize nontraditional formats for delivering training, to continually assess the political and policy environment for relevant training topics, and to exert leadership to ensure long-term sustainability during the challenges of program start-up. The

important lesson is not in the list of challenges. Rather, Thomson implies that the problem may be one of reach as much as one of capacity. Not every program can provide the kind of training and development programs Thomson describes. How much can be done is the real question.

What do our MPA students *learn*? While our core curricula may meet the expectations of accreditation, they may not reflect the knowledge, skills, and abilities needed to meet the challenges of modern intergovernmental relationships. Offering a perspective that broadens the skills perspective offered by Lazenby (2010), the authors Dougherty and Miller (2010) argue that curricula and current issues may not always be in congruence. Their challenge to us is to recognize that the focus of the core curriculum on internal concerns of management, leadership, and analysis provides little information or guidance for local government managers to develop regional perspectives. Furthermore, there may also be a lack of lessons and practical understandings of the skills (political and managerial) necessary to implement multijurisdictional agreements that balance the needs of the community and the region of which it is a part. We should not be surprised that this lack of information has translated into underutilization of regional or multi-municipal alternatives within local government. Managers see more benefit in internal service delivery options than in regional delivery options. Dougherty and Miller suggest these managers do not have the skills or policy knowledge necessary to help their communities reap those potential benefits. Therefore, they conclude that MPA programs need to make a more concerted effort to incorporate into their curriculum regional courses that provide insight into the skills and abilities needed by managers to operate effectively within these higher order networks. Local managers need to learn how to engage in a regional dialogue with multiple jurisdictions to better provide for today's services.

Aaron and Watson (2010) describe an innovative strategy for MPA programs to meet the growing demand for talent in local government management. They describe alternatives to the traditional on-campus classroom format that can allow for more user-friendly course delivery mechanisms for potential local government management students. They assert that the MPA in City Hall program addresses the developmental needs of potential leaders by providing students with a broader understanding of their municipal enterprise and with a network of relationships within and beyond their immediate local city government. The program allows local municipalities to develop their own leadership, rather than having to look externally as existing staff retires.

Their assessment is that the City Hall program is bringing a unique win-win opportunity to all participants. The university benefits by creating a new pipeline for students and contributes in an innovative way to the development of leadership in local communities. The program also provides valuable information regarding city issues and challenges for MPA program administrators to consider

when reviewing and revising program curriculum. By designing an MPA program that can be offered directly in City Hall, the program is able to reach a larger and more diverse population of students in a context that should mitigate, at least partly, the concern about whether there will be a sufficient number of qualified local government administrators in the pipeline.

Another strategy for engaging practitioners in the education of MPA students is the use of adjunct faculty. There is a number of models for this approach. In the final article, Wheeland and Palus (2010) describe and assess how the Villanova University Master of Public Administration program involves practitioners in local government management education. These authors present student and faculty views on the effectiveness and quality of the program's one-credit courses taught by local government managers and on the program's three-credit course on effective city management, taught by three managers as a team. Wheeland and Palus also review the contributions of municipal internships to students' education and career trajectories. Finally, they explain the curriculum featured in Villanova's graduate certificate program in city management and stress the advantage of offering the certificate to pre-master's and post-master's degree students, as well as to students specializing in city management in their MPA program. Data from a 2009 survey of program directors from NASPAA member schools indicate that this combination of practices is unique. The authors offer this model as one way for full-time faculty to partner with local government professionals to help recruit and educate the next generation of city and county managers.

#### CONCLUSION

With NASPAA's adoption of new criteria for accrediting MPA programs, and the voluntary standards for local government management education, programs seeking re-accreditation must rethink how they prepare practitioners. The academy must continually address the needs of the market and the fiscal demands created by shrinking university budgets. We must find new ways of blending academic research and theory with evolving professional practice. In short, public administration must do what it has done since its earliest foundations: Prepare administrative generalists capable of managing our public institutions skillfully, competently, and ethically. We also need to do so in a way that best meets the evolving and changing needs of our public sector employers. This symposium shows how creative and thoughtful analyses of theory and practice can be generated when academics and practitioners take the time to collaborate in ways that make each better.

REFERENCES

- Aaron, K.A., & Watson, D.J. (2010). Bringing the university to city hall: the master of public affairs in city hall. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 16*(3), 475-485.
- Banovetz, J. M., Levin, M. M., McDowell, M., & Cox, R. W., III. (2007). *Managers as teachers: A practitioner's guide to teaching public administration, revised and updated*. Washington, DC: ICMA.
- Cox, R. W., III (2000). Creating a decision architecture. *Global Virtue Ethics Review, 2*(1), 1-31.
- Dougherty, G.W., Jr., & Miller, D.Y. (2010). Municipal managers: Regional champions or agents of parochialism? *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 16*(3), 451-474.
- Gabris, G.T., Davis, T.J., & Nelson, K.L. (2010). Demand versus supply: Assessing the capacity of MPA programs to satisfy the growing need for professional management in local government. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 16*(3), 379-399.
- Gardner, J. (1988). *The changing nature of leadership*. Washington, DC: *Independent Sector*.
- Lachapelle, P.R., & Shanahan, E.A. (2010). The pedagogy of citizen participation in local government: Designing and implementing effective board training programs for municipalities and counties. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 16*(3), 401-419.
- Lazenby, S. (2010). The adequacy of MPA course offerings in preparing the next generation of local government managers. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 16*(3), 337-360.
- Lynn, L. (1987). *Managing public policy*. Boston, MA: Little, Brown, and Co.
- Practices for Effective Local Government Management. (n.d.). Retrieved February 9, 2010, from [http://icma.org/en/university/about/management\\_practices/overview/](http://icma.org/en/university/about/management_practices/overview/)
- Svara, J.H. (2010). The next generation challenge: Finding and incorporating the local (and other) government managers of the future. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 16*(3), 361-377.
- Thomson, D.E. (2010). The evolving role of universities in expanding knowledge among local elected officials. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 16*(3), 421-450.
- U.S. Census Bureau. (2008). *Census of governments counts 16 million state and local employees* (press release October 22, 2008). Washington, DC: U.S. Department of Commerce.
- Wheeland, C.M., & Palus, C.K. (2010). A profile of Villanova University's partnership with local government managers. *Journal of Public Affairs Education, 16*(3), 487-509.
- Practices for Effective Local Government Management. (n.d.). Retrieved February 9, 2010, from [http://icma.org/en/university/about/management\\_practices/overview/](http://icma.org/en/university/about/management_practices/overview/)

Raymond Cox is Professor and Interim Chair of the Department of Public Administration and Urban Studies at the University of Akron. He received his PhD in Public Administration and Policy from Virginia Tech. He is the author of more than 60 academic publications. He served as Chair of ASPA's Sections on Ethics and Public Administration Education and in 2010 became Chair of the Section on Intergovernmental Administration and Management (SIAM). He is the Chair of the Local Government Management Education Committee of NASPAA.

Dr. Gerald T. Gabris is currently Distinguished Teaching Professor in the Division of Public Administration at Northern Illinois University. He has over 25 years of experience working directly with local government as both a researcher and a consultant. He has consulted with over 60 separate local governments and has been responsible for implementing over 100 strategic planning systems in 6 U.S. states. He is the former Director of the Division of Public Administration; he has published over 60 articles and book chapters; and he is the past managing editor of *Public Administration Review*, his field's leading academic journal. He has received many awards for his teaching, and is very proud of his Master Angler award for trophy brook trout, awarded by *In-Fisherman* magazine.

Mark M. Levin is the City Administrator of Maryland Heights, Missouri, a position he has held since 1985. Mark is also an adjunct instructor at the University of Missouri-St. Louis and has taught courses in local government administration and public budgeting for 17 years at four universities in the St. Louis region. Since 2001 he has served as Chair of ICMA's Advisory Board on Graduate Education, and he has received the ICMA's Award for Career Development. Mark received a BS Ed from Miami University and his MPA from Kent State University.