

# The Adequacy of MPA Course Content in Preparing Local Government Managers

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## ABSTRACT

Due to the retirement of the baby boom generation, many individuals, in a relatively short period of time, will need to be trained and educated to step into local government senior leadership positions. The paper examines the question of whether Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs are doing an adequate job of preparing the next generation of local government managers. The critical competencies needed by city managers are identified using existing data, supplemented by new data resulting from a Delphi study using 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 analysis identifies 118 individual competencies important to effective local government management. The majority of these competencies are similar to those that are important to business and Federal agency managers. MPA programs with a concentration in local government provide good coverage of competencies associated with administration, legal/institutional systems, and technical/analytical skills. There is less coverage of competencies associated with ethics, interpersonal communications, human relations, leadership, group processes, and community building.

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As the introductory article in this issue notes, the retiring of the baby boom generation will create high turnover in senior management positions, and an urgent need to prepare individuals to assume these positions. MPA programs will not be the only factor in preparing the next generation of city and county managers, but these programs will play a major role. Both preservice and midcareer individuals will see an increase in opportunities in local government management, and formal education will be important as individuals have less time to learn through experience alone. Are current MPA programs doing an adequate job preparing these individuals?

There are two parts to the answer to this question. First, we must have a clear understanding of the competencies that local government managers need

to be effective. The first sections of this article briefly review the literature on competency in the workplace, specifically the competencies needed by local government managers. Second, we need to examine whether MPA curricula address these competencies. Of course, an additional critical factor is the pedagogical effectiveness of graduate education (i.e., the extent to which individuals gain competence as a result of the material being taught), but that is beyond the scope of this article. A necessary (but not sufficient) condition for imparting skills and knowledge related to a particular competency is that there must be course content that addresses the competency, and the connection between important competencies and MPA curricula content is the focus of this research.

#### COMPETENCY IN THE WORKPLACE

The terms “competence” or “competency” are used in the human resources literature in the study of individual performance appraisal in a work setting. This is relevant to the research discussed here, because local government managers are simply a special case of worker. The literature provides several definitions of the term “competency.” Dick Grote, in *The Complete Guide to Performance Appraisal* (1996), includes skills, abilities, and behaviors in the definition. A widely cited text on professional competency is Spencer and Spencer’s *Competence at Work* (1993). Competence has a direct link to the effectiveness of a professional in his or her work environment. Spencer and Spencer (1993) define competency in the following way:

A competency is an underlying characteristic of an individual that is causally related to criterion-referenced effective and/or superior performance in a job or situation. Underlying characteristic means the competency is a fairly deep and enduring part of a person’s personality and can predict behavior in a wide variety of situations and job tasks. Causally related means that a competency causes or predicts behavior and performance. Criterion-referenced means that the competency actually predicts who does something well or poorly, as measured on a specific criterion or standard (p. 9).

Some aspects of competency—such as motive, traits, and self-concept—are tied to personality and are relatively difficult to develop (at least by the time a person enters the workforce). On the other hand, “knowledge and skill competencies are relatively easy to develop; training is the most cost-effective way to secure these employee abilities” (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, p. 11).

Professional competency thus includes several elements. Some of them (motivations, innate abilities, and traits) are difficult to teach. It is probably more efficient to screen MPA program applicants for these innate traits than to try to instill in them qualities such as personal integrity, a public service ethic,

or the ability to set personal priorities. For example, a personnel director said, “Sure, we can teach a turkey to climb a tree, but it’s easier to hire a squirrel” (Spencer & Spencer, 1993, p. 12). Competencies relating to knowledge and skills are more amenable to imparting or building through a formal education program. But the dividing lines are not fixed: To become competent in anything requires some mix of innate ability, knowledge, and experience.

*What Do We Know About the Competencies Required for Local Government Management?*

*Business management competencies.*

The first U.S. city managers, in the beginning of the twentieth century, were predominantly business managers and engineers (White, 1927), and the early literature emphasizes the competencies their jobs required. The connection between city and business management has probably weakened over the past century with the emergence of public administration as a field that is separate from business administration. There are good reasons to use caution when adapting some private sector practices to local government management, or when trying to run a government like a business. But in trying to identify the competencies that are critical to the chief executive officers (CEOs) of cities and counties, it is helpful to know what the literature tells us about the competencies that are critical to CEOs of companies.

Grote (1996) describes research in which business managers identify major areas of responsibility. Seven broad areas emerged: Knowledge of the business, priority setting, problem solving and decision making, interpersonal skills, communication, people development, and achievement orientation. Within these areas, specific competencies were defined. For example, the area of interpersonal skills includes these competencies (or related behaviors): Expresses emotions appropriately, initiates friendly interactions, provides positive and negative feedback, interacts effectively with superiors and senior managers, accepts positive and negative feedback, and faces and resolves conflict (p. 294).

What is striking about these competencies is that they emphasize the manager’s role as a generalist. Grote notes the importance of “knowledge of the business” (p. 294), but beyond this, the particular industry or sector seems not to be a factor. This emphasis on the manager as a generalist appears to be consistent in the literature on business competencies. Research done by Personnel Decisions International is summarized by Davis, Skube, Hellervik, Gebelein, and Sheard (2001), who identified 39 competencies (expressed as performance actions) that they found “to be critical to managerial success” (p. vi). Only 1 of the 39, “know the business,” addresses substantive knowledge of a sector or industry. Their list of critical competencies is organized into nine factors: Leadership, interpersonal relations, communication, thinking, motivation, self-management, administration, organizational knowledge, and

organizational strategy. Specific competencies range from fostering teamwork and influencing others to listening skills.

*Public management competencies.*

Managing a governmental, or public, organization is not the same as managing a private business. Montgomery Van Wart (2005) provides an in-depth discussion of a wide range of literature and research on the competencies required for public administrators. As in the private sector research, competencies are typically organized into groupings of related competencies. Different researchers group the same competencies differently, and an important caveat in all this work is that the groupings are less important than the individual competencies that are contained within each group. Van Wart, for example, uses broad categories of traits, skills, task-oriented behaviors, people-oriented behaviors, and organization-oriented behaviors. Within these categories are specific traits, skills, and knowledge, such as personal integrity, social skills, and articulating the mission and vision. The list is very similar to the one provided by Davis et al. (2001) in their assessment of private sector management competencies; if the two lists were placed side by side, it would be difficult to ascertain which describes private managers and which describes their public sector counterparts. Both lists include interpersonal skills, communications, developing and motivating employees, management of work tasks, and organizational skills. Both include a (similar) list of traits, such as personal integrity and self-motivation.

*Local government management competencies.*

Van Wart (2005) acknowledges that his focus is on organizational leadership within the national government. His work draws extensively on a 1991 study performed by the U.S. Office of Personnel Management that consists of a survey of 10,000 Federal managers and lead workers. To what extent do local government managers need a set of competencies that is different from that of Federal agency managers?

One way to understand the competencies needed by local government management is to infer them from the roles managers play and the activities that make up their days. There is a rich literature on the role of city managers in the policy-setting realm, where the manager acts as a community leader and a facilitator of community dialogue (Gabris, Golembiewski, & Ihrke, 2001; Nalbandian, 1991; Svava, 2001). This requires competence in such areas as political sensitivity, understanding of council/manager roles and relations, collaboration, mediation, conflict resolution, team building, and civic engagement.

As important as this externally focused role is, a number of researchers (Ammons & Newell, 1989; Green, 1989; Stillman, 1974) analyzed how city managers spend their time, and found that the internal management of the organization remains an essential part of the city manager's job. This is true even

in large cities, where more internal management functions can be turned over to assistants. The internal management role implies the need for competencies in leadership, human resources administration, and the nuts-and-bolts management functions of budgeting, project management, strategic planning, quality control, and performance measurement, among others.

Another approach to gauging the critical skills and knowledge of local government managers is simply to ask their opinions on the subject. This can reveal different information, such as critical skills that are used relatively infrequently. It can also illuminate skills that are being used *during* an activity but are not explicitly identified in a description of the activity itself. An example would be psychological skills that are used by a manager during the activity of attending a city council meeting.

Several surveys of practitioners have been done over the past four decades (Green, 1989; Hinton, Kerrigan, & Frederickson, 1995; NASPAA, 2006). These studies all sampled the same population—members of the International City/County Management Association (ICMA)—and all used a Likert scale to gauge the practitioners' opinions of the importance of knowledge and skills in local government management. It is therefore possible to combine the results of the three studies in a meta-analysis (Lazenby, 2009).

The results of the meta-analysis (the details are shown in Appendix A) are notable in that for many areas of practice—for example, budgeting and financial management, organization principles, information technology—the ratings from the three independent studies are very similar, yielding the same rank order in the meta-analysis. This holds both for high-rated and low-rated areas of practice. The overall population surveyed is the same (members of ICMA), but the three studies used different samples over a two-decade time period. The stability of the results indicates that the surveys do a good job of representing the average opinions of ICMA members, and that these opinions have not changed substantially over time. The practitioners seem to agree with scholars that some form of community leadership role is important. All rated very highly skills used in assessing community needs, being open to citizen participation, and situation analysis. Nevertheless, internal management skills and knowledge are equally important, including budgeting and financial management, staff supervision, and administration/organization theory. Several skills cover both arenas: Ethics and integrity, communications skills, leadership, teamwork, and negotiating.

The practitioners, however, seem to take a dim view of knowledge in broad areas of the social sciences, and rated among the lowest the knowledge of sociology, political science, psychology, and economics. On the other hand, specific application of research in these fields seems to be more appreciated: The practitioners rated somewhat higher the knowledge of social characteristics of institutions, political institutions, and economic development. Many of the highest rated skills, such as negotiating, human relations, and handling

interpersonal relations, have a theoretical base in the field of psychology. With the exception of financial management, the more technical skills appear to be among the lowest ranked; these include statistics, systems and operations design, engineering, and information technology. The three studies' samples, predominantly male and white, also showed fairly low rankings for cultural competence and knowledge of minority and disadvantaged group issues. Policy analysis, the focus of some MPA programs, falls below the middle of the rankings.

The surveys that form the basis of the meta-analysis have two main limitations. First, the survey universe is typically ICMA members. The opinions of the average practitioner are important, but there is a possibility of bias due to professional myopia. Local government managers may feel the most important areas of knowledge are the ones they happen to possess, and the most critical management skills are the ones they actually use. And by its very nature, the subjective or intangible dimension of local government administration is subject to a wide range of opinion.

Statistical techniques can be used to find the most prevalent opinions, or average responses. But this information is not necessarily useful: The goal of the meta-analysis is to discover the fundamental competencies of local government management, not the average administrator's opinion of it. This is not a criticism of local administrators' knowledge of their field. Administrators may be very effective at what they do but still have difficulty describing it in a way that clearly identifies the competencies used and needed.

The surveys' other main limitation is that they included fairly short lists of skills and knowledge, typically around a dozen. This was probably done to encourage a reasonable response rate from the fairly large samples that were used. In some cases, categories were grouped in ways that included several disparate skills, or that became ambiguous, such as "urban economic development, including both public and private sector" or "leadership" (Hinton et al., 1995, p. 122).

To address these problems, new data were gathered by relying on a panel of experts in the field, using the Delphi technique to provide a richer and more complete understanding of the competencies essential to local government management.

#### DELPHI STUDY OF LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGEMENT COMPETENCIES

Rather than using a simple survey, the opinions of the panel of experts were solicited and distilled using a Delphi technique, a method used for "structuring a group communication process so that the process is effective in allowing a group of individuals, as a whole, to deal with a complex problem" (Linstone & Turoff, 1975, p. 3). Procedurally, a typical Delphi consists of these steps: (a) An appropriate group of experts is identified and invited to participate; (b) a researcher (and often a team of researchers) develops an initial set of questions for the experts; (c) the group responds to the initial set of questions; (d) the results of the first round are fed back to the participants, who answer a second set

of questions; and (e) the rounds are repeated until the results settle into a fairly stable pattern. When results are fed back to the participants, they are always done so anonymously (i.e., without attribution). This is one of the advantages of the Delphi study. In focus groups, for example, individuals can have a distorting effect on the group, leading to conformity or, in some cases, to polarization (Morgan, 1988).

The “expert panel” included the members of four key boards and committees that are part of the ICMA organization: The 2006-2008 strategic planning committee, the advisory board on graduate education, a smaller committee handpicked by Executive Director Robert O’Neill to explore the issue of critical practices in the profession, and the board of directors of the organization itself. These individuals have the respect of their peers as competent managers, and they have practice in thinking reflectively about the work they do.

To balance the possible bias from ICMA respondents’ professional myopia, two additional groups of experts were included on the panel. The first consists of the scholars who study and teach local government management. This sample was made up of the members of the local government committee of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA), and was supplemented by select scholars who have published extensively on local government management issues (as found through a literature search). The second source of independent observation on the critical issues handled by local government managers came from executive recruiters who assist governing boards in the hiring of top managers. These recruiters are skilled at drawing out from the board members the critical areas of knowledge, skill, and talent that a successful manager should possess.

The participation rate was high: Of 131 individuals invited to participate, 72 responded to the first-round survey. The panel ranked an initial list of 132 suggested competencies (compiled with the help of a four-person “key informant panel,” which had a combined 120 years of practicing or teaching local government management). In response to open-ended questions, the expert panel members suggested over 60 additional competencies. Many of these were duplicates, and again with the assistance of the key informant panel, the responses were distilled to 22 additional competencies. These were fed back to the expert panel in round two, along with the results of round one that had seen the most variation in response (a standard deviation of over 0.8 based on the 5-point Likert scale). Round two (also with a high—50%—response rate) produced a high degree of consensus: The mean rating of importance of the individual competencies ranged from 2.6 (where 2.0 corresponded to an importance rating of “somewhat useful”) to 4.9 (5.0 corresponded to “essential”), and in no case did the standard deviation of the responses exceed 0.65. An analysis of variations in responses (i.e., the importance rating of competencies) from the three groups of expert panel members (practitioners, scholars, and

executive recruiters) found very few significant differences (as measured through *t*-statistics). The two groups that are close to, but outside, the profession thus did not have a large effect on the overall ratings provided by the panel. But to the extent that they nudged the results up or down, the scholars and executive recruiters enriched the study; the purpose of including these groups on the panel was to provide a perspective that is different from that of practitioners.

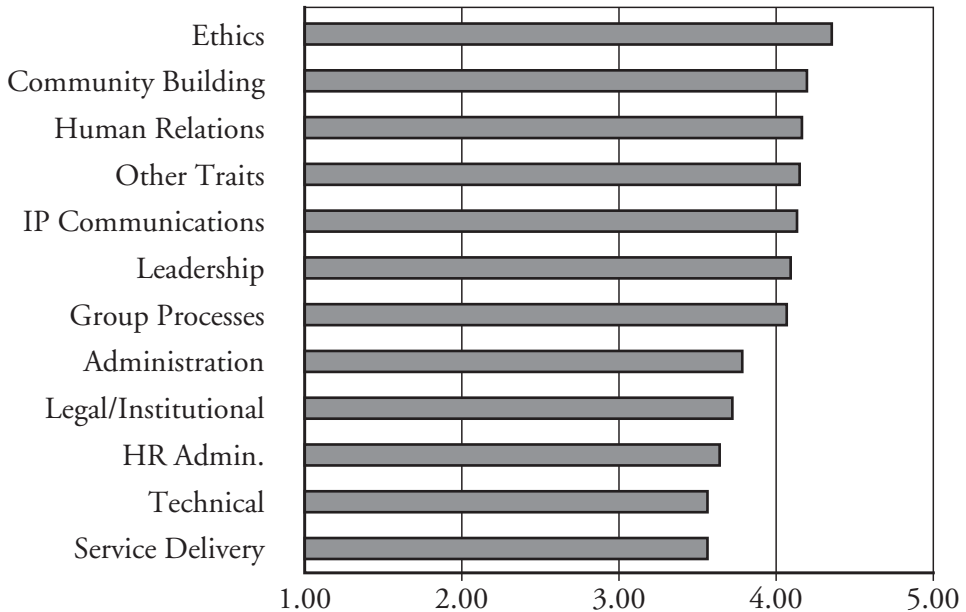
Finally, the resulting list of 154 variables (competencies) was reduced to 118. Two at the bottom of the ratings (knowledge of sociology, and general understanding of civil engineering principles) were dropped. Others were combined because they appeared to describe different dimensions of the same competency and their importance rating was similar. For example, the three variables, “understanding psychological needs of others,” “understanding the psychology of groups of individuals,” and “understanding of psychology of individuals” received average importance ratings of 3.81, 3.71, and 3.70, respectively, and therefore were combined into a single competency, “Understanding psychological needs of others; psychology of groups and individuals.” The full list of 118 competencies (along with their importance scores) is shown in Appendix B.

The detailed list of competencies that emerged from this process can be useful in creating professional development programs for current and prospective local government managers. It could also be helpful to MPA programs that choose a mission of preparing future local government managers. Even with the use of fairly cryptic descriptions of competencies, however, this list is rather long and unwieldy. Therefore, for summary purposes the competencies were grouped into 12 overall categories, shown in Figure 1 (listed in descending order of importance as ranked by the Delphi panel).

With few exceptions, the competencies identified as important or essential match closely the competencies identified by Van Wart (2005) as important to public managers in general (and based primarily on surveys of Federal agency managers). More than Federal managers, city and county managers require competencies when interacting with the legislative body (city council or board of commissioners), during civic engagement, and in community-building skills. What is more striking, competencies required for local government managers to be effective are very similar to those required for effective private business managers, based on the research noted above. There are some notable differences: Unlike private business managers, city managers rarely require competence in managing profitability, although budget management requires similar skills. Both city managers and company CEOs establish budget and personnel systems for their organizations; few Federal or state agency managers have this responsibility. Both Federal agency and city managers need to have a public service ethic; this is not as necessary for private business managers, although they do need to “promote corporate citizenship” (Davis et al., 2001).

*Figure 1.*

Local Government Management Competencies as Rated by the Delphi Panel



*Note:* On the scale shown, 1 = “not useful,” 2 = “sometimes useful,” 3 = “useful,” 4 = “important,” and 5 = “essential.”

But overall, there is a high degree of commonality in the basic management competencies needed by city, Federal agency, and business managers.

The competencies identified by the Delphi panel support the continued relevance of ICMA’s “Practices for Effective Local Government Management” (ICMA, 2008). These were initially developed in 1991 as a source of guidance for the organization’s professional development and publication efforts, and were later used as a basis for self-assessments and other purposes relating to ICMA’s voluntary credentialing program. The Delphi study did, however, provide a finer level of detail, and it identified some 20 competencies that are not explicitly mentioned in ICMA’s list (but are compatible with those that are listed).

#### MPA PROGRAM CONTENT ANALYSIS

To examine the coverage of local government management competencies within MPA curricula, content analysis was done on the courses offered by 40 graduate programs described by NASPAA as providing “state and local” or “urban” concentrations. The source of this information was NASPAA’s database

that is accessible online through the organization's Web site (as of spring, 2008). The programs listed include MPA programs accredited by NASPAA as well as some MPA programs not accredited by that organization (the NASPAA database includes both accredited and unaccredited schools). To check the completeness of this list, it was compared to the top 11 graduate programs specializing in local government management, as ranked by *U.S. News & World Report*. Two universities were ranked by *U.S. News & World Report* but not indicated in NASPAA's database as having a local government or urban track. These were added, for a total sample size of 42 graduate programs.

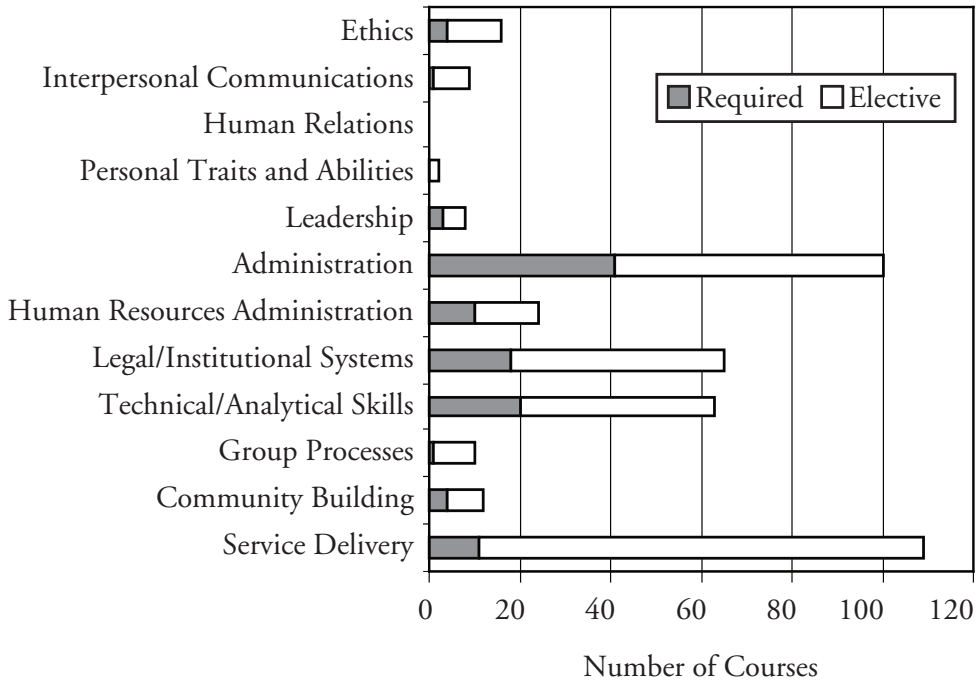
Using links provided by NASPAA's database, the Web sites of the programs were reviewed to specifically note the required and elective courses that comprised the local government track. This information was almost always available, in either the MPA program's Web site or the graduate school's or university's catalog, and it provides at least summary descriptions of curricula. Once these data were gathered, the courses were coded according to the list of competencies identified by the Delphi panel. A single course could cover more than one competency, so the coding allowed a many-to-one relationship between competencies and courses. There were 358 course-competency matches (e.g., a course that covered two different competencies accounted for two matches). Since most of these programs have been accredited by NASPAA, competencies covered by the "common curriculum components" of the NASPAA accreditation standards are assumed to be covered in all the programs. These include the general categories of human resources administration and legal/institutional systems, and specific competencies in budgeting, applications of technology, policy analysis, organizational theory, and decision making and problem solving.

### *Results: A Mixed Bag*

Overall, the majority (62%) of courses in the sample addressed competencies relating to managing the organization, about 25% addressed service-delivery knowledge (primarily in the form of public policy courses), and 13% addressed foundational skills, or competencies relating to community leadership and facilitation. Within these broad categories, four subcategories—administration, legal/institutional systems, technical/analytical skills, and service delivery—account for the majority (80%) of courses dealing with local government management competencies, as shown in Figure 2.

Within these categories, only 16 of the competencies derived from the Delphi analysis account for 75% of the course-competency results. Budgeting courses accounted for almost 50% of the administration category. Courses on competencies in general legal issues, administrative law, and intergovernmental relations account for 74% of the legal/institutional competencies. Courses on policy analysis, applications of technology (Web applications and managing information technology), financial analysis of policy options, and

*Figure 2.*  
 Number of Courses that Address Local Government Competencies,  
 by Competency Category.



capital improvement planning and financing account for 95% of the courses on technical/analytical competencies. Urban/regional planning and site development/urban economics account for almost 50% of courses on service delivery; the rest were scattered over a number of service areas. Table 1 lists the competencies that account for 75% of the course-competency results.

Competencies not shown in this table had six or fewer courses coded for coverage. In spite of the current popularity of the topic, only six courses appeared to explicitly treat performance measurement. Only one course explicitly addressed project management; only four dealt with the related competencies of group processes and civic engagement skills.

As a whole, courses covered competencies that were rated lower by the Delphi panel than a random selection of competencies would yield. The average importance rating of all 118 competencies identified in the Delphi study is 3.99. The average for MPA course coverage is slightly lower in importance, at an average rating of 3.87. The average is brought down largely by the preponderance of courses on urban/regional planning, applications of technology, and site development, which were given relatively low ratings by the

Table 1.  
*Competencies Most Often Covered in MPA Courses*

COMPETENCY	NUMBER OF COURSES		
	REQ	ELECT	TOT
Urban/regional planning	5	32	37
Functional/operational knowledge of common municipal services: police, fire, public works, planning, etc.	5	27	32
General knowledge of national, state, and local laws governing municipalities	5	19	24
Using the budget as a management tool; budget preparation	10	10	20
Ability to analyze and communicate public policy alternatives	7	13	20
Knowledge of specific services: emergency management; sustainability and environmental protection techniques; economic development; causes underlying urban problems	2	15	17
Intergovernmental relations	4	13	17
Applications of technology—IT, Web design, other Internet applications	1	16	17
Financial analysis of policy options	4	10	14
Political savvy—sizing up community politics; political sensitivity	4	8	12
Site development; urban economics	0	11	11
Capital improvement planning and financing	5	4	9
Mediating and resolving conflicts between individuals and groups	1	6	7
Effective implementation of programs and services	0	7	7
Labor negotiations; collective bargaining law and procedures	1	6	7
Administrative law; knowledge of legal institutions and processes	2	5	7

Delphi panel (although still acknowledged as useful).

A majority (68) of the 118 competencies identified in the Delphi process did not appear to be explicitly covered by any of the MPA courses. These competencies tended to be concentrated in the categories of human relations (e.g., listening skills, ability to communicate among diverse groups, ability to cope with difficult people); leadership (e.g., ability to translate council policies into action, delegation and empowering employees, mentoring and coaching employees in the organization, and developing and communicating the mission of the organization); personal traits and abilities (e.g., team building, persuasion, ability to build trust, effective use of negotiating strategies, personal time management); group processes (e.g., ability to diplomatically disagree with elected officials and present alternative courses of action, collaboration, strengthening council-mayor relationships); and community building (e.g., articulating a community vision/mission and community-building strategies).

This result, however, overstates a lack of coverage, for several reasons. First, a full 25 of these “missing” variables are competencies associated with personal traits and abilities, such as judgment, initiative, creativity, and sense of humor. The literature on job performance supports the principle that while these are important to managerial success, they are difficult to instill in a relatively brief academic experience, and one might not expect them to be included in MPA course content. Second, some competencies are gained through formal guided experiences (e.g., internships) and capstone projects. The identity of these competencies might be guessed or hypothesized, but it was impossible to do this with any certainty, and they were not coded. Competencies in areas such as political sensitivity or understanding the psychology of groups and individuals (for example) might be therefore underreported. Third, the quality and completeness of the course listings and descriptions on Web sites varied by program. Some content may in fact have been provided, but the Web site information might not have mentioned it.<sup>1</sup> Finally, it is highly likely that many competencies are covered in courses, but there was insufficient detail in course descriptions to code for an individual competency. This problem resulted in some (18%) of the courses being coded with a competency category code but no corresponding codes for the more specific competency. For example, 10 courses were coded with the human resources administration category, and it is probable (but not certain) that at least some of these courses touched on missing competencies related to hiring, disciplining, and training employees. Six courses were coded as relating to the leadership category, and again it is very possible that one or more of these courses touched on missing competencies such as empowering and motivating employees, and communicating the mission of the organization.

#### *Analysis of Syllabi*

The complete syllabi for 25 of the 42 sampled MPA programs were spot-

checked for key words or phrases that would typically be associated with a missing competency. This search was done for one general management competency (project management) and three in the community leadership/facilitation category (competencies in collaboration, community building, and identifying and articulating community vision/mission). The investigation revealed 10 courses that were missed in the initial coding of courses and competency coverage. There were two courses that offered education in project management as a component of a broader course, five that had some coverage of collaboration as a skill used in community leadership, one that addressed techniques for developing and articulating a community vision, and two that addressed some aspect of community building.

Based on the syllabi, then, some of these courses address competencies that were not noted in the initial coding of MPA programs. How were they missed? The primary reason is that due to timing differences, the content analysis and the syllabi analysis were based on two different samples. The course content sample is based on an analysis of curricula found on the Web sites of MPA programs in early 2008. The syllabi sample is based on NASPAA records collected as part of the self-assessment for MPA program accreditation. These have been collected on electronic media since 2003, so the sample represents the syllabi of the programs at the point they completed the self-assessment, ranging between 2003 and 2008. It is natural to assume that courses on community building or collaboration will come and go over time, depending on the interests of the faculty. They have not been part of the core curriculum recommended by NASPAA standards for accreditation.

## CONCLUSION

It would be difficult to prove that any single competency identified through the Delphi study suffers from a complete lack of attention by local government MPA programs. For every one of the competencies (with the possible exception of innate personality traits), it is possible that somewhere, at some time, a course has touched on that competency. On the other hand, the results clearly show that coverage by MPA programs is sparse for many competencies important to local government management. A student would have to attend a scattering of courses over many different MPA programs to be educated in the full range of competencies important to local government management. MPA programs with a concentration in local government management provide good coverage of some of the competencies associated with administration, legal/institutional systems, human resources administration, and technical/analytical skills; there is less coverage of competencies associated with ethics, interpersonal communications, human relations, leadership, group processes, and community building (including civic engagement). Aside from any considerations of pedagogical effectiveness (which were beyond the scope of this analysis), it would appear that

many universities do not perform well in preparing individuals for some aspects of local government management, simply because the schools do not provide courses in those areas.

This may not be as much of a problem as it would first appear, because formal graduate education is only one component of preparing an individual for a senior management role in local government. Undergraduate education, life experience, work experience, mentoring and coaching, leadership institutes, and professional training seminars all contribute to the process of building managerial competencies. In fact, students entering MPA programs have already drawn on many of these sources of learning, and begin from a fairly strong base in many of the innate ability competencies. Given a finite number of hours available in a 2-year professional degree program, it makes sense to focus this time on the kinds of competencies that lend themselves well to “book learning.”

That said, the author—from the perspective of 30 years spent as a practitioner—would argue that universities have much to offer in the areas that appear from the analysis to receive relatively little attention. This is especially true in the “soft skill” areas such as human relations, interpersonal communications, group processes, and participatory decision-making. In many of these areas, some innate ability is important, and real competence might come only through practice and experience. But even for competencies that require a high degree of innate ability or creativity (whether in art, music, or dealing with human emotional issues), both intellectual understanding of theory and practical experience are necessary for full mastery of a skill. There does seem to be a tendency to create a false dichotomy between competencies that can be gained through learning and those that can be gained through experience, while in reality all competencies lie somewhere on a continuum between these extremes.

For example, in the analysis of syllabi noted above, the phrase “team building” appeared several times in course descriptions, but only in the context of a skill that a student would pick up (through experience) by being part of a project group. The instructors may well provide some informal coaching that helps students hone this skill, but there was no evidence of formal education on techniques that are helpful in being an effective team member or leader, even though there have been research and theoretical contributions to this problem.

A scholarly member of the Delphi panel, in response to a question on the adequacy of MPA programs in covering the areas of community leadership and group processes, commented, “There is typically little of this in the curriculum. Scholars themselves often don’t know this stuff.” There is validity to the concern that we can’t teach what we don’t know. But of all scholars, faculty of MPA programs should be in an especially strong position to do exactly this: Public administration is by necessity a very broad, multidisciplinary field, and its scholars are generally good at drawing on theory and resources from a wide variety of sources, including those that are far afield of the teachers’ own

education and research concentrations. Again, the survey of syllabi uncovered some (at least on paper) outstanding courses on servant leadership, civic engagement, participatory decision-making, and dealing with difficult human relations issues. And adjunct instructors can be used strategically to complement the specialties of regular faculty.

Given the time constraints of a typical professional degree program, to be most effective in preparing future local government managers, MPA programs concentrating on local government management would be well advised to eliminate from curricula courses on less useful competencies, and concentrate instead on the ones that are most important for managers. The results of this study can be helpful in distinguishing between these two groups of competencies. 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 time to the subject.

This is not the place to weigh in on the debate over the role of policy in the public administration field. But for a professional degree program that is intended to prepare individuals for *managing* public organizations, policy courses should be avoided for the simple reason that they take time and attention away from the critical competencies that prospective managers must obtain. City managers do occasionally draw on research in public policy issues when helping city councils solve problems. But these issues are so varied that it would be futile to try to cover them in any meaningful way. Some MPA programs offer long lists of electives in issues such as regional planning, urban issues, housing, crime, and transportation systems. These may be interesting for students, but they will be long forgotten as their future city councils struggle with weighty policy decisions on licensing cats, installing speed bumps in neighborhoods, regulating billboards, allowing beer in parks, banning the use of exhaust brakes, or using goats instead of herbicides to eliminate blackberry patches.

Like other public organizations, universities face pressures and demands from a number of stakeholders. Preparing students to be effective managers of local governments may be only one of several competing goals for graduate schools, even MPA programs with a concentration in local government management. Students who complete the programs often observe that, even though the course content may not have always been relevant to the actual challenges of their job, the intellectual rigor and experience of problem solving in the graduate program made a real difference in their professional success.

Nevertheless, going into the programs, many students have only a hazy impression of what local government managers do and are willing to accept that the courses being provided will be helpful. Especially in view of the fact that a new generation of managers will need to be prepared in a relatively short

period of time, the more closely the MPA course content matches the skills and knowledge that will be needed by these managers, the more the profession and the communities served by them will benefit.

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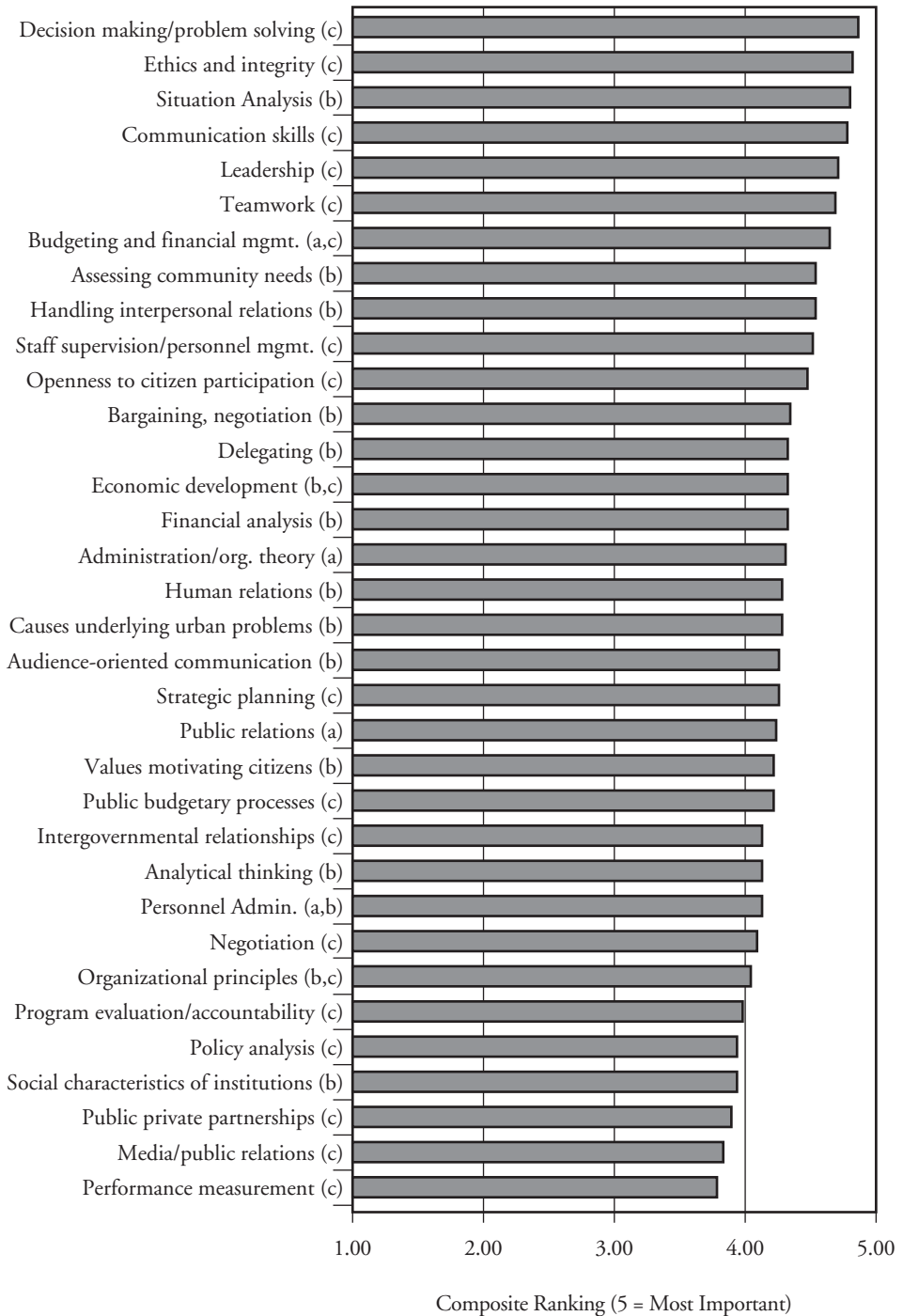
FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> As a marketing note, the “next generation” prospective managers have commented that online material is the primary source of information they used in choosing a graduate program. These prospective managers also tend to favor programs with inviting, complete Web sites and an admission process that can be done fully online.

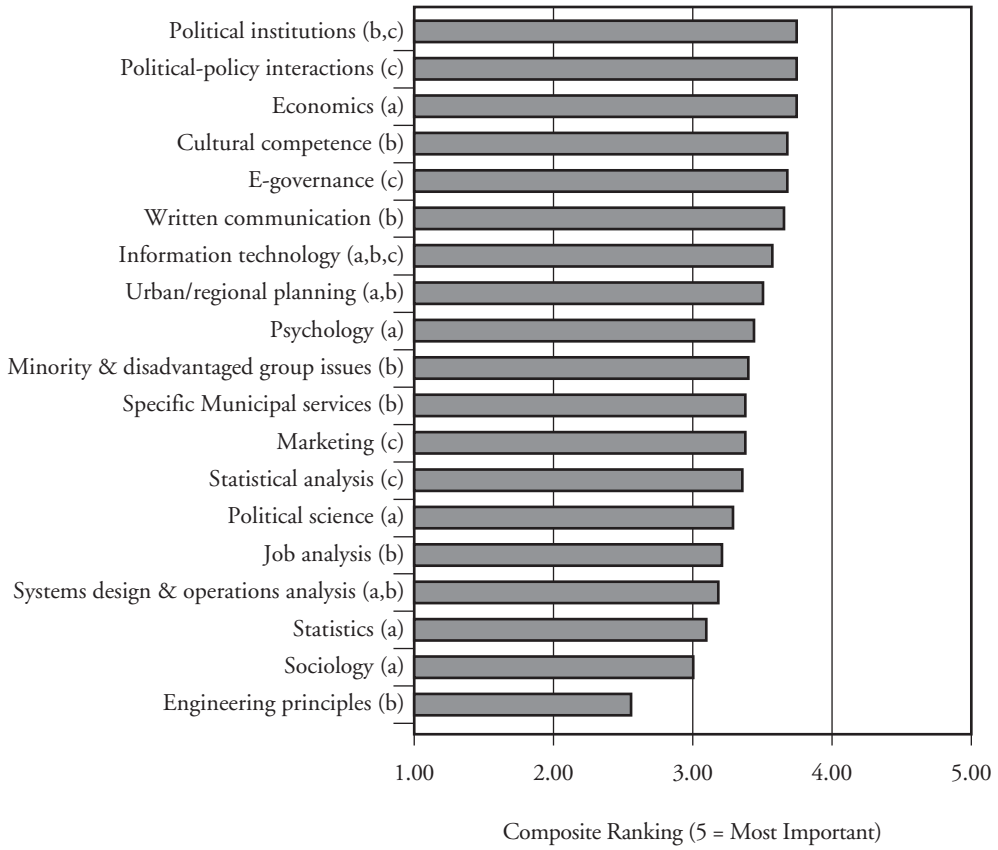
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APPENDIX A

*Meta-Analysis of Local Government Manager Surveys of Important Knowledge and Skills*



*The Adequacy of MPA Course Content in Preparing Local Government Managers*



Note. (a) = Green (1989); (b) = Hinton et al. (1995); and (c) = NASPAA (2006)

APPENDIX B

*Individual Competencies Identified by the Delphi Panel*

*Note.* The summary categories (numbered) and subcategories (lettered) were added by the author to assist in organizing the results. The major categories are shown in order of more general to more specific competencies. The order of subcategories within the four major categories is arbitrary.

1. Foundational Traits and Skills

A. Ethics

**Essential**

Personal integrity; public service ethic; modeling ethical and public-service-oriented behavior; processes for resolving ethical dilemmas

**Important**

Cultural competence (such as appreciation of diversity, promoting diversity in the organization); ability to factor social equity in policy decisions

B. Interpersonal Communication Skills

**Essential**

Interpersonal communication: one-on-one

**Important**

Written communication; interacting with news media; formal presentation skills; speaking (extemporaneous); ability to communicate complex technical information

C. Human Relations

**Essential**

Ability to build trust; listening skills; ability to communicate among diverse groups

**Important**

Interacting with individuals from different cultural or socio-economic backgrounds; ability to cope with difficult people; persuasion; understanding of personality differences; understanding psychological needs of others and psychology of groups and individuals

D. Personal Traits and Abilities

**Essential**

Decision making/problem solving; judgment (knowing which issues to push and which to let slide); ability to find solutions to complex problems; initiative and self-motivation

**Important**

Team building; ability to acquire new knowledge and learn

new skills; ability to multitask; ability to anticipate issues and resolve them before they become problems; clear sense of purpose; resiliency (bounce back from setbacks); giving credit and accepting blame; ability to accept constructive criticism; balance confidence with humility; crisis management; continuing professional and personal development; personal time management; innovation, creativity; effective use of negotiation strategies; professional personal appearance; ability to set personal priorities; interdisciplinary problem-solving; sense of humor; empathy and compassion; risk taking; take care of one's own physical and mental well-being

**Useful**

Aesthetic sense: recognizing both beauty and ugliness (e.g., in urban form, building design)

2. Managing the Organization

A. Leadership

**Essential**

Ability to translate council policies into action; council/manager role/relationship skills; developing and communicating the mission of the organization

**Important**

Delegation and empowering employees; motivating employees; direct supervision of subordinates (e.g., department heads); mentoring and coaching individuals in the organization; engaging employees during difficult economic times; professional development of employees; collaborative labor/management relations; effective handling of personal/emotional challenges faced by employees; ability to adjust management approaches in response to generational differences; continuous reexamination of the core business; entrepreneurial management

B. Administration

**Important**

Strategic planning; using the budget as a management tool and budget preparation; project management—coordinating resources, staff, and schedules; performance measurement; efficiency in operations; “lean” processes; ability to do more with shrinking resources; privatization—shifting former governmental responsibilities to the private sector

**Useful**

Contract management; risk management—general liability, insurance issues; quality assurance and total quality management

C. Human Resources Administration

**Important**

Hiring employees; disciplining employees; establishing policies and procedures; Training/educating other employees; organizational theory—what organizational processes and structures work best under different circumstances

**Useful**

Labor negotiations and collective bargaining law and procedures; employment law, compensation systems

D. Legal/Institutional Systems

**Important**

General knowledge of national, state, and local laws governing municipalities; intergovernmental relations; ability to be persuasive with state and Federal government officials; development of intergovernmental partnerships

**Useful**

Forms of government; administrative law and knowledge of legal institutions and processes; managing relations with nonprofit organizations

E. Technical/Analytic Skills

**Important**

Financial analysis of policy options; capital improvement planning and financing; using office technology (computers, PDAs); financial forecasting; cost/benefit analysis

**Useful**

Tax policies and strategies; setting prices of public goods and services; applications of technology—IT, Web design, other Internet applications; trend forecasting

3. Community Leadership/Facilitation

A. Group Processes

**Essential**

Ability to diplomatically disagree with elected officials and present alternative courses of action

**Important**

Collaboration; ability to analyze and communicate public policy alternatives; developing consensus on community vision/mission; mediating and resolving conflicts between individuals and groups; facilitating group discussions and decision-making processes; civic engagement skill; educating and coaching elected officials and other community leaders to improve their effectiveness; strengthening council-mayor relationships; skill in appropriate accommodation of council and citizen interest in the administration of the organization

B. Community Building

**Essential**

Political savvy—sizing up community politics; political sensitivity

**Important**

Articulating community vision/mission; understanding and exploration of community values and needs; community-building strategies; methods for creating or enhancing the community's "sense of place"

4. Service Delivery

**Important**

Effective implementation of programs and services; functional/operational knowledge of common municipal services—police, fire, public works, planning, etc.; public-private partnerships; knowledge of specific services—emergency management; sustainability and environmental protection techniques; economic development and causes underlying urban problems

**Useful**

Urban renewal and other redevelopment techniques; urban/regional planning; code enforcement and community beautification strategies; site development and urban economics; marketing; affordable housing strategies