

# Bringing the University to City Hall: The Master of Public Affairs in City Hall

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## ABSTRACT

As more supervisory and management staff reach retirement age, local governments are realizing the challenges they face in finding qualified individuals to fill vacant positions. To best plan for succession, local governments need a pool of talented, educated staff from which to draw. This article discusses the approach taken by one university to address the educational needs of local government staff through a creative approach to the delivery of graduate classes in public administration.

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The Dallas-Ft. Worth-Arlington metropolitan statistical area is the seventh-largest metropolitan area in the United States and consists of 461 municipal and other local governments. These jurisdictions range from highly mature and professionalized municipal governments, such as Dallas and Plano, to emerging edge cities and special districts. Three traditional graduate programs in Public Affairs serve the area: The University of Texas at Arlington, The University of Texas at Dallas (UTD), and The University of North Texas in Denton. The programs serve as resources for employees of local municipalities who recognize that education can enhance opportunities to move up within their organizations.

The numerous local governments in the area realize the challenges they could face in finding educated, talented individuals to fill the vacancies in the governments' supervisory and management ranks. Informally, area city managers have informed us of the high percentages of their workforces that have reached or are nearing retirement age. The authors surveyed the city managers in north Texas, in an effort to determine the managers' perceptions of the value of the

graduate programs in Public Affairs in addressing the impending shortage of management talent in area local governments. The results of the survey are found in Table 1 and addressed in the first section of this paper, where the authors discuss the need for creative educational alternatives in light of the increasing demand for well-educated city staff.

#### SUCCESSION PLANNING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT

A *New York Times* article in January 2007 (Blumenthal, 2007) observed that the Baby Boomers who have traditionally filled positions in city management are aging and that managerial positions in city government may go unfilled as this population approaches retirement. Subsequent generations, such as the Gen Xers and Millennials, are more interested in positions that “place greater value on multitasking, independence, and short-term rewards than their predecessors” (Paules, 2007, p. 18). These more-recent generations generally do not believe careers in city government meet those criteria. As north Texas grows, the demand for talented employees in the region’s governments and the number of existing city staffers considering retirement have increased. In considering the potential shortfall in qualified municipal employees in north Texas, Jarrell and Pewitt observe, “succession planning is rarely undertaken by public agencies” (2007, p. 297). According to Rainey and Wechsler (1988), executive transitions in all levels of government are generally deficient in preparation and need to be actively managed to be successful.

To identify the attitudes of city managers in north Texas regarding succession planning and the future demand for competent staff, and to solicit this cohort’s views of local Master of Public Administration (MPA) programs meeting the local governments’ educational needs, the authors sent a survey to the email addresses of 54 city managers listed in the north Texas region of the Texas City Managers Association (TCMA) directory. Five of the emails were returned as undeliverable, resulting in a survey population of 49. Of the population of 49, 17 city managers (35%) responded to the survey. These respondents represent municipalities ranging in population size from 3,900 to 256,000 with a median population of 32,000. Six respondents had city populations over 75,000. All respondents are within 60 miles of Dallas, and almost half are first- or second-ring suburbs. There was little variation in responses, regardless of size or location of the municipality. For example, larger municipalities were no more likely to have succession plans in place than smaller ones, and close-in suburbs were no more likely to have these plans than cities located farther from Dallas.

Survey participants confirmed the Jarrell and Pewitt (2007) observation regarding succession planning, with 71% of respondents indicating that they do not have a succession plan. Responses demonstrate that all respondents establish educational criteria when replacing critical members of management, with 47% indicating that a master’s degree is either required or preferred. An

Table 1.  
*North Texas Local City Manager Survey*

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<b>Question</b>	<b>Yes</b>	<b>No</b>
Do you have a management succession plan in place?	29%	71%
Do you include educational requirements in the criteria established when filling vacant managerial-level positions?	100%	0%
Do you believe that available MPA programs in north Texas are accessible to city staff?	94%	6%
Do you believe that existing MPA programs are valuable in preparing staff for increasing responsibilities?	94%	6%
Do you believe that the demand for well-educated staff in local city government will be increasing?	94%	6%
Do you believe that existing MPA programs in north Texas will produce the number of graduates needed over the next five to ten years?	65%	35%

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overwhelming majority (94%) believes that the programs currently available in north Texas are both accessible and valuable to their staffs. However, they also believe that the demand for well-educated staff is increasing, and only 65% believe that existing programs will meet demand in the next 5 to 10 years. Municipalities with a population under 20,000 were slightly more concerned than more-populous cities that existing MPA programs will not meet the demand for well-educated staff in the coming years. In unsolicited survey comments, one respondent noted the importance of providing high-potential employees with appropriate training opportunities. One commenter remarked that, at times, MPA graduates do not seem to be realistic about the requirements of their jobs in city government, while another expressed the concern that MPA programs can be too theoretical.

According to a recently featured editorial on the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) Website, a critical element for local governments in acquiring and retaining talented staff is to invest in them professionally (“Top Talent,” n.d). As Haworth (2005) observed, although

investing in staff may require additional time, training, and funds, it is a worthwhile investment: Individuals remain with organizations that invest in them (Gaffney, 2005).

A study conducted by Young (2005) identified three priorities in developing public sector leadership: “(1) knowledge and understanding outside the employee’s own department or functional area, (2) knowledge and understanding at the enterprise level, and (3) a broad network of relationships” (p. 3). In 2006, in collaboration with ICMA, the University of Southern California created a fellowship program for MPA students; the fellowship provides education and training for students committed to local government management (Paules, 2007). The program intent is to provide an innovative approach to developing leaders in local government. The graduate program in Public Affairs at UTD also has developed creative methods of structuring meaningful and accessible education programs that will address the growing need to fill vacant city staff positions.

### *MPA In City Hall*

Recognizing that not all students can commit to a comprehensive graduate program, in 2004, UTD Public Affairs faculty created the Graduate Certificate in Local Government Management. Students can earn the graduate certificate as a stand-alone, five-course program of study. It can also be earned in the context of students’ MPA programs. The curriculum includes 9 hours of required coursework, in the following: Human Resource Management, Government Financial Management and Budgeting, and Local Government Management. The curriculum also includes 6 hours of electives, in any two of the following: Local Economic Development, Quality and Productivity in Government, Information Systems in Policy Environments, and Community Planning.

If a student decides to continue in the graduate program, the five courses count toward the MPA degree. Students must agree on the two electives as a cohort, and obtain the permission of the certificate coordinator. Some substitutions may be allowed, at the discretion of the coordinator. Because of the large number of local government employees in north Texas, the graduate certificate program has been popular for both certificate-only students and full-time students.

In 2006, the Public Affairs program at UTD determined that the staff of local governments might need to access a different distribution channel for their educational pursuits. In spring 2007, this faculty initiated the MPA in City Hall program with three north Texas cities—Garland, Plano, and Richardson. This program provides city employees with the opportunity to take the Graduate Certificate in Local Government Management classes at the city halls or training facilities of participating cities, instead of attending classes on campus. The five courses allow the students to earn their certificates and almost half of their MPA credit hours in off-campus classes.

The MPA in City Hall program was developed in consultation with the city

managers of the three Dallas suburbs mentioned earlier. All three cities have utilized council-manager government for many years, and all three city managers have long tenures with their cities. The city managers recognized that many members of their management teams are approaching retirement, and that their governments have a need for competent, younger managers that can replace the current ones when they retire. The cities either had implemented succession plans or were planning to (Jarrell & Pewitt, 2007), and the city managers realized that the MPA in City Hall program could play an important role in developing management talent.

*The MPA in City Hall cohort.*

A cohort in the MPA in City Hall program has approximately five to seven employee-students from each city. The employees of each city compete for the limited slots in the program. After the first cohort from the city of Plano completed the five-course program, the city manager empowered the graduates to interview and select the employees from Plano that would participate in the subsequent cohort. In Richardson and Garland, employees also applied for admission to the programs but were selected by the human resource departments. All of the employees have undergraduate degrees with sufficient grade point averages to gain admission to the graduate program in Public Affairs. They are admitted as nondegree-seeking students, are not required to take the GRE, and are allowed to take 15 hours without seeking admission as degree-seeking students. Administrative staff for the Public Affairs program handles all enrollments for participating students.

Employee-students attend classes for five consecutive semesters, including summer semesters, with their cohort. Every cohort follows the proscribed curriculum for the certificate; however, each cohort votes democratically on which electives it will take.

Each semester, the Public Affairs program offers a different class in the facilities of one of the participating cities. For example, for both of the two cohorts that have completed the program to date, the first class taken was Government Financial Management and Budgeting, taught in the Plano municipal building. A former city manager of Dallas who is now on the UTD Public Affairs faculty teaches the class from a strictly local government perspective. The second class taken was Local Government Management at the city of Garland training facility. It was taught by another former city manager who is also on the UTD Public Affairs faculty. The third class was Human Resource Management, held in Richardson. The fourth and fifth classes, the electives, selected by the cohort, were held in Plano, and Garland, respectively. Employee-students from all three cities travel to the class sites at city facilities, where they are hosted by the human resource departments of each city.

The classes are held on Wednesdays from 4 p.m. to 6:45 p.m. The

weekday and time are the same for all five classes to allow the students and their supervisors to adjust their schedules to accommodate their attendance. Because the employee-students normally work until 5 p.m., the cities donate one hour of each Wednesday for classes, and the employees contribute their personal time for the remaining class hours. The city managers, when developing the program with the Public Affairs faculty, decided that they did not want the classes held strictly on work time. They believed that the participants should be willing to commit some of their own time to the program. The employee-students also spend numerous hours reading and preparing papers for their classes.

One of the unique features of the MPA in City Hall program is that UTD contracts directly with the three cities for the tuition. The cities provide lists of students that will be included in the contract, issue purchase orders at the beginning of each semester, and pay the invoices at the end of the semester. The cities treat the graduate classes in the same way they do training, and pay for them out of their training and tuition reimbursement budgets. Because city facilities are used, the UTD Provost waives the student fees associated with campus classes, thereby reducing total costs to the cities. Establishing the purchase order system for the payment of tuition represents one of the larger challenges in setting up the MPA in City Hall program. However, once procedures were established by the Certificate Coordinator for the bursar and registrar offices, student enrollment in courses could be handled by MPA program administrative staff.

The program has several advantages for UTD Public Affairs: Each semester, it gains 15 to 20 additional students from the cohort-participating cities. After realizing they had completed nearly half the hours needed for the MPA degree, 4 of the 17 students in the first cohort decided to remain in the MPA program as degree-seeking students. Other city employees have entered the MPA program, attending classes on campus, because of positive feedback they have heard from the participants. The university also has experienced additional benefits because of the positive relationship developed with the cities: For example, the UTD Institute of Public Affairs has contracted with two of the participating cities to provide broader training classes for their city employees.

*From the students' perspective.*

Employee-students participating in the MPA in City Hall program are overwhelmingly positive regarding their experiences in the program. They believe that the program has provided them with improved knowledge, skills, and tools for their jobs. They are particularly pleased to be able to introduce their own "real world" challenges into the classroom discussions, as demonstrated by the following comments:

- "The MPA in City Hall program has afforded a unique opportunity to evaluate and align common public management history and theory to

the daily work involved in local government.”

- “The Graduate Certificate in Local Government Management is a valuable educational experience for someone currently practicing as a municipal administrator.”
- “I thought I knew a lot about local government—but the MPA in City Hall certification program has shown me I still have a great deal to learn.”
- “The program not only provided me with the knowledge and skills to do my job better, it also gave me the tools to see my job from a different perspective.”
- “Class assignments could easily be tailored to support work assignments with which I was engaged.”
- “I now understand with some clarity the various issues faced by government and elected officials, and this understanding makes me a better employee.”

Employee-students also cite a greater appreciation for local government in general and for their peers in the public sector, as shown in the following responses:

- “I’ve gained a new appreciation of what all the ‘players’ have to do and know in order to have a successfully managed city—from the council, to the mayor, to the manager and city staff.”
- “I’ve gained a new respect for city managers and the jobs they do.”
- “This program has opened my eyes to the intricate working of local government management.”

Finally, they are enthusiastic about the opportunity the classes provide them to establish networking relationships with employees of other municipalities, as evidenced by the following comments:

- “There was competition among the students of different cities that soon turned into camaraderie.”
- “I can’t tell you how many times I’ve used the contacts that I’ve made in this program.”
- “I particularly enjoyed meeting and exchanging experiences with other government employees.”

The enthusiasm of the employee-students is sustaining the demand for the MPA in City Hall program. Even though city budgets are tightening because of recent economic events, the executives in all three cities remain committed to the program. This executive-level commitment has been critical to the continuation of the program.

*From the faculty's perspective.*

The faculty has benefitted from its exposure to the employee-students, who bring significant expertise and experience to the classroom. These midcareer management practitioners are anxious to participate in class and insist on interesting and challenging classes. One instructor for the program observes, “the City Hall program puts us in touch with what governmental agencies need to address their workforce requirements.” Consequently, there is a better understanding of ways in which the program itself and the traditional MPA program curriculum can be adapted to meet the practical needs of the local community. With the MPA in City Hall program providing a “bridge between academics and practitioners,” as one professor characterized it, the university is learning about the challenges faced by local governments while providing tools that can be used to address these challenges. Students “arrive as specialists in their particular fields and leave each course—and the program as a whole—with broad-based knowledge of local government management and the ability to view local management from an integrative perspective,” according to the instructor for Local Economic Development.

*From the city managers' perspective.*

Cities have benefited from the MPA in City Hall program by exposing a number of key citizens to graduate work in Public Affairs and, specifically, to local government courses. The cities are pleased with the program, and have described it as meaningful for a number of reasons. First, the cities have an interest in developing the next generation of managers from among their current middle-management ranks, because they do not have enough time to develop newly minted MPA graduates for leadership roles. Related to that, cities investing in their own employees signals the municipalities' commitments to maintaining intellectual capital through internal promotion. Second, most of the employee-students graduated from college many years before they began their graduate studies in the MPA in City Hall program. As one can tell from the participants' comments, they feel challenged and refreshed by learning new material and new approaches to the problems they face at work. According to one city manager, the program has provided his staff with a “convenient and stimulating educational experience” that has conferred “an outstanding enhancement to the career development of City employees.” Third, because three cities are involved in the program, the interaction of employees from neighboring cities sharing their experiences has created a synergy. Oftentimes, they learn better ways of facing problems, or they realize that other cities—often perceived as rivals—have more in common than they believed before entering the program. Another city manager observed that, because of its focus on service excellence, the program benefits not only employees, but also the city's citizens and the city organization.

*The MPA In City Hall Program's Value to Succession Planning*

Graduate school programs can have a significant impact on the strategic leadership of public organizations and facilitate acceptance of the concept that succession planning is a strategic concept (Schall, 1997). The results of the survey discussed earlier confirm that practitioners believe graduate programs in public affairs are valuable in developing leaders and that such programs will continue to be in high demand. By bringing graduate courses to the cities through the MPA in City Hall program, UTD is making it more convenient for city employees to pursue further education. The program helps to address the developmental needs of potential leaders, as identified in research by Young (2005), by providing students with a broader understanding of their municipal enterprise and a network of relationships within and beyond their local city governments. The program also increases the pool of educated employees available to fill upcoming vacancies in city government, by working with an existing population of city employees who, as the survey comments indicate, require a graduate program that blends the theoretical with the practical. Further, the program allows local municipalities to develop their own leadership, rather than have to look externally as existing staff retire, and it creates a "pool of well-trained and adaptable managers," according to Karaevli and Hall (2003, p. 63), who suggest this is necessary for the succession planning process.

Succession planning is the most effective approach for local governments to systematically replace lost talent, and it ensures the sustainability of the organization (Ibarra, 2007). However, the challenge for MPA programs is to determine how to assist local governments in this process. The need to develop innovative approaches to meet the growing demand for talent in local government management is obvious. The development of alternatives to the traditional on-campus classroom format can allow more potential students to be reached, and may be essential to meeting demand.

#### CONCLUSION

The MPA in City Hall program is now in its eighth semester. Both city managers and students of the program believe that it is bringing a unique opportunity to participants. From UTD's perspective, the university benefits by creating a new pipeline for students and contributing in a unique 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. Cohen, Eimicke, and Ukeles (1995) observe that the challenge of training students in preparation for positions in public management is determining how to provide relevant and practical concepts and approaches in their future work. Programs must overcome the perception held by some that senior city

government positions have risks and responsibilities that outweigh the rewards (Paules, 2007). By creating the MPA in City Hall program, UTD has reached out to local city employers and employees to both solicit and deliver those skills and methodologies that will help to prepare the next generation of city management.

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