Abstract:
The North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) has a vested interest in furthering county government careers in North Carolina. This report examines how NCACC can work with MPA programs in North Carolina to better prepare students for careers in county government. It includes an analysis of MPA courses at UNC-Chapel Hill and Appalachian State University, as well as a survey of alumni from both programs working in county government. The report concludes with recommendations for both NCACC and the MPA programs to further encourage students to pursue county government careers.
Introduction

In the summer of 2012, the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) funded a fellowship to encourage students to enter county government. The idea stemmed from the perception that there is a decline in students entering county government, an idea strengthened by the impending retirement of the baby boomer generation. Research suggests that while the impacts may not yet be fully seen, the retirement of the baby boomer generation will significantly affect local government careers by creating vacancies that will push an influx of younger professionals into the field.1

MPA students in North Carolina were surveyed about their interests in fellowships in county government. Results indicated that many students were unaware of the specifics of county government and hesitant to commit to a career in the area without further exposure.ii

Those results influenced the development of this capstone. NCACC is interested in learning how the association can work with MPA programs in North Carolina to encourage students to enter county government. NCACC serves as an advocate for county government, while MPA programs are tasked with preparing students for public service careers. With these differences in mind, this study aims to provide recommendations to both NCACC and MPA programs in North Carolina for how the two organizations can work together with students to encourage and prepare them for careers in county government.

Research Question

NCACC and the MPA programs at Appalachian State University (ASU) and UNC-Chapel Hill (UNC-CH) believe county government careers are worth pursuing.iii As such, this paper asks the question:

“How can the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners (NCACC) work with North Carolina MPA programs to encourage students to pursue careers in county government?”

Methodology

The study focuses on two MPA programs in North Carolina: Appalachian State University and the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill. These two programs were chosen because of their strong local government concentrations. The study is not generalizable to all MPA programs in North Carolina, but rather serves to create examples of best cases. The study has three primary areas of research.

First, case studies of Georgia and California’s associations were completed via staff interviews. The intent is to understand what other associations are doing to promote careers in county government. These two associations provided valuable feedback and examples for different ways in which associations can foster partnerships to encourage county careers. The associations were chosen based on input from Capstone committee members and NCACC staff.

Second, course syllabi from ASU and UNC-CH’s MPA programs were analyzed to understand the frequency that county government was studied, separate from local government and municipal government. Syllabi from every core course, as well as all courses required for the local government concentration were selected, totaling 24 courses.

Last, a survey of alumni from ASU and UNC-CH’s MPA programs who are currently working or have worked in county government in the past five years was conducted. County employees were selected to
understand what motivated them to choose the field. The five year time span helped provide more current feedback. The survey was distributed directly to qualifying alumni, through each program.

Findings

Case Studies: Interviews with staff from the Association County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG) and the California State Association of Counties (CSAC) revealed the diversity of efforts that county commissioners’ associations are undertaking to encourage county government careers. While NCACC is currently focusing its efforts on working with MPA students, these interviews showed the potential for also working with undergraduate students and in-service employees. NCACC can learn from these examples to create a comprehensive program to encourage county government careers.

Key advice from the conversation with Ross King, Executive Director of ACCG, included:

- Discussion of the Civic Affairs Foundation (founded in 2007) which “supports initiatives in the areas of civic education, leadership training, historic preservation and community improvement” through internships with undergraduate students in counties across Georgia;
- Benefits of working with students of any discipline;
- Importance of exposing students to first-hand experiences through internships and fellowships.

Key advice from the conversation with Bill Chiat, Dean of the California Institute for Excellence in County Government included:

- Offering MPA degrees to in-service managers through the CSAC Institute;
- Encouraging continued education and development of county employees by using a curriculum specifically targeted to county government.

Course Syllabi: Twenty-four course syllabi were analyzed from ASU and UNC-CH, 10 from ASU and the remaining 14 from UNC-CH. All core classes and any electives included in the local government concentration were selected. Four classes did not have syllabi available: two core courses (Capstone Research and Professional Work Experience) and two elective courses (Planning Theory and Process and Intergovernmental Relations).

Analyzing course syllabi presents challenges. Syllabi are written very differently, some with far more detail and specificity than others. The research mitigated this by separately analyzing course descriptions from readings and assignments. A full understanding of a course is not possible without attending classes and speaking to professors and students directly.

Of the seven core courses analyzed from ASU, one mentioned local government in the course description, while none mentioned municipal or county government. At UNC-CH, two of the eight core courses referenced local government in course descriptions, while none mentioned municipal or county government. Courses at both institutions mentioned local government, municipal government, and county government in readings and assignments, but there was no in depth discussion of the latter two units.

In elective courses at ASU, only one course (Local Government Administration) specifically discussed the local government unit in course overviews, readings, and assignments. This was also the only course
that made reference to municipal and county government, including differences between the sectors. Other courses made references to local government broadly, but none to specifics within municipal or county government.

At UNC-CH, five of six elective courses discussed local government broadly. However, two courses (City and County Management and Managing Local Government Services) were distinctive in their discussions of municipal and county government services.

Results from the syllabi analysis showed that within core courses, there was limited discussion of local government, and almost no discussion of specifics of municipal or county government. Course readings and assignments sometimes provided reference to these areas, but the depth of these discussions is impossible to gauge via syllabi. Within elective courses at both programs, many made reference to local government in course descriptions, but only three total courses specifically focused on differences between municipal and county government.

Survey Results: The survey was distributed to all alumni from ASU and UNC-CH who are currently serving or have served in county government in the past five years. Forty-nine alumni qualified for the survey. The total sample size was 30, a response rate of 64%. There was a 63% response rate from ASU alumni and 61% from UNC-CH. One respondent did not identify his/her school.

Demographically, 83% of the respondents were full-time students while completing their program. Twenty-eight percent had worked in county government for less than two years, 31% for 3-5 years, and 41% for over five years. Eighteen percent of the respondents had never worked in another field, while the majority had worked in various other fields. Eighty-six percent of the respondents were interested in local government when they began their MPA program. However, of this number, 68% were either undecided between county and city government or interested in both.

When asked why respondents chose to work in county government, three themes evolved:

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Table 1: Why did you choose to work in county government?* (N=27)</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td><strong>Responses from ASU Alumni</strong></td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Availability of Jobs</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Preference for County Services</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Internship Opportunities</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Other</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents could answer with multiple choices through open-ended comments allowing percentages to total more or less than 100%

The most common response related to the availability of jobs (choosing jobs based on availability, regardless of sector) for graduating students, followed by a preference for county services. Given that 68% of respondents were either undecided between county and city government or interested in both, these responses signified the importance of job availability for students.

When asked if MPA programs influenced students’ decisions to pursue a career in county government, 45% of respondents said yes, while 48% said no, and 7% were undecided. When asked to explain why or why not, four themes developed:
However, when asked if their respective MPA programs prepared respondents to work in county government, 97% said yes. When asked to explain further, major themes included the importance of internship experiences, the need for more specifics on certain county services, and the use of transferrable skills and knowledge.

Overall, 76% of respondents stated that they believed their program provided sufficient resources (defined as speakers, lectures, internships, or access to staff with county government experience). When asked to provide suggestions for how their MPA programs could better prepare students for careers in county government, the two most common themes focused on explaining the differences between city and county government and providing more exposure to county government (through internships and speakers).

**Recommendations**

**NCACC:** Themes from the research included the need for increased exposure to county government and further opportunities to gain experience. NCACC can be an advocate for county government and for students to pursue the field. This requires initiating contact with MPA programs and pursuing relationships. Specific low to no cost recommendations include:

- **Creating a speaker database:** "*Speakers helped me better understand how functions happen in reality.*" Respondents discussed the importance of being exposed to different speakers within county government, including elected officials. NCACC should create a speaker database, share it with MPA programs, and serve as a platform for finding appropriate speakers for events.

- **Marketing internship and job opportunities:** "*I went where the job opportunity was.*" A common theme was the impact that job availability had on student decisions to pursue a career in county government. NCACC should help market available opportunities to MPA programs. This can include a website with internship and entry-level positions, as well as job announcements.

- **Funding internships:** "*I was required to do an internship and that internship directly lead to a position with a county. It could have easily been a municipality.*" Internships directly impacted many respondents’ eventual career choices. If there is available funding, NCACC should offer internships at its Raleigh office and help other counties with stipends for interns.

- **Creating a comprehensive system for exposure to county government:** The case studies showed how associations can work with different sectors to encourage county government. NCACC should use existing programs with in-service employees and civic education training as foundations for programs with MPA students. Exposing MPA students to training with in-service employees can provide them with networking opportunities and first hand learning experiences.

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*Table 2: Explain why/why not your program influenced your decision to pursue county government* (N=25)

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th></th>
<th>Responses from ASU Alumni</th>
<th>Responses from UNC-CH Alumni</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>Internship Opportunities**</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Increased understanding/exposure to county government</td>
<td>12%</td>
<td>12%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Influenced by availability of jobs</td>
<td>16%</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>No major influence</td>
<td>8%</td>
<td>4%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

*Respondents could answer with multiple choices through open-ended comments allowing percentages to total more or less than 100%.

**Both programs require internships, but ASU may waive the requirement for in-service students.*
MPA Programs: The role of MPA programs is to provide adequate access to resources for students. Low to no cost recommendations include:

- **Creating an advisory system for students:** “It is difficult to be prepared for local government work through classes alone.” Programs with local government concentrations should create advisory systems for students that express interest in local government careers. By pairing them with mentors from different fields (e.g., counties), students can gain first-hand experience and receive more targeted information towards their preferred career path.

- **Encourage cross-enrollment amongst programs:** “It is important for courses to really lay out the general differences between municipal and county work.” While there was no consensus from respondents regarding the curriculum of MPA programs (some believe skills are transferrable, others believe more specific information is needed), the syllabi analysis showcased the broad range of exposure to county government across courses. Courses are available that provide distinctions between the two areas, but may not be offered at all institutions. By encouraging cross-enrollment and publicizing course loads to students in North Carolina that express interest in local government, specifically county government, students can be exposed to the knowledge they need for their career interests.

- **Job Fair:** “I would have to apply for work wherever there are job openings.” Respondents commonly cited effects of job availability on their career decisions. MPA programs are interested in high job placement rates for graduates. MPA programs should provide a better venue for students to learn about available job opportunities by hosting job fairs for MPA students in the state. They could invite organizations such as NCACC to market their respective fields with booths and informational material, while providing students the opportunity to network and learn about fields of interest.

**Conclusion**

It is important to understand the limitations of this study. The small sample size made it difficult to find statistically significant relationships. Course syllabi, while helpful, are merely glimpses into course content. Surveys of county government employees provide only one perspective of MPA experiences. Further research is needed from other MPA programs in North Carolina to gain a more complete understanding of student experiences with county government.

Nevertheless, this study showed differences in student experiences with county government in these two MPA programs. The case studies discussed more opportunities for associations to promote county government, while the syllabi review showed the spectrum of class discussion on the topic, with only a combined three courses at both institutions heavily focusing on the details of each sector. The survey showcased the different viewpoints from respondents regarding their own experiences within programs, but highlighted the significance of job availability to eventual career placement.

Understanding these results, MPA programs can better work with students to provide access to the resources they need, while NCACC can encourage and recruit students to county government. However, in order for this relationship to be beneficial to all, both organizations must understand their respective roles of preparation and advocacy. MPA programs must continue preparing students for careers in public service, including careers in county government, while NCACC can use its resources to create relationships with MPA programs and advocate to students on behalf of county government. Working together provides both organizations a stronger opportunity to fulfill their respective goals.
Appendix A
Syllabi List

*bolded courses indicate those analyzed for this study
**non-bolded courses did not have syllabi available at time of study

Core Courses- Appalachian State University

• PA 5000 Research Methods
• PA 5060 Seminar in Public Administration
• PA 5180 Public Policy Analysis and Program Evaluation
• PA 5260 Organization Theory and Behavior
• PA 5360 Public Personnel Administration
• PA 5460 Budgeting and Fiscal Administration
• PA 5558 Capstone Research
• PA 5559 Capstone in Public Administration

Local Government Electives- Appalachian State University

• PLN 5400-Planning Theory and Process
• PA 5560-Local Government Administration
• PA 5665-Public Management
• PA 5330-Problems in State & Local Government

Core Courses- UNC-Chapel Hill

• PUBA 709 PA Institutions and Values
• PUBA 710 Organization Theory
• PUBA 719 PA Analysis and Evaluation I
• PUBA 720 PA Analysis and Evaluation II
• PUBA 721 Professional Communications
• PUBA 723 Human Resource Management
• PUBA 731 Public Financial Management
• PUBA 745 Professional Work Experience
• PUBA 746 MPA Portfolio
• PUBA 760 Law for Public Administration

Local Government Electives- UNC-Chapel Hill

• PUBA 730 Government and Nonprofit Accounting and Reporting
• PUBA 751 City and County Management
• PUBA 752 Productivity Improvement in Local Government
• PUBA 758 Navigating Nonprofit-Local Government Relationships
• PUBA 761 Local Government Law
• PUBA 778 Intergovernmental Relations
• PUBA 780-003 Managing Local Government Services
## Appendix B
Survey Tool and Composite Results

### 1. How long have you been working in county government?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>0-2 years</td>
<td>8</td>
<td>28%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>3-5 years</td>
<td>9</td>
<td>31%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>6+ years</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>41%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</table>

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>Statistic</th>
<th>Value</th>
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<tbody>
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<td>Min Value</td>
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<tr>
<td>Max Value</td>
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<tr>
<td>Mean</td>
<td>2.14</td>
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<tr>
<td>Variance</td>
<td>0.69</td>
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<tr>
<td>Standard Deviation</td>
<td>0.83</td>
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<tr>
<td>Total Responses</td>
<td>29</td>
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### 2. In what other fields have you worked? (Check all that apply)

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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>None</td>
<td>5</td>
<td>18%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Local Government (Municipalities)</td>
<td>12</td>
<td>43%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>State Government</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Federal Government</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Non-Profits</td>
<td>7</td>
<td>25%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Education</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>14%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>7</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>36%</td>
</tr>
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</table>
3. When you entered your MPA program, what was your career interest?

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
</tr>
</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Local Government</td>
<td>25</td>
<td>86%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>State Government</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Federal Government</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Non-Profit</td>
<td>3</td>
<td>10%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>5</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>6</td>
<td>Other</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td></td>
<td>Total</td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

Other

Academia
4. Select which area of local government (choose all that apply):

<table>
<thead>
<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Municipalities</td>
<td>4</td>
<td>16%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>Counties</td>
<td>10</td>
<td>40%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Both</td>
<td>15</td>
<td>60%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>4</td>
<td>Undecided</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>8%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

5. Explain why you chose to work in county government.

Text Response

Working in County government happened through a bit of happenstance. As part of my MPA program, I was required to complete 2 internship periods. I applied to both municipalities and county governments to fulfill this requirement. I interned with a county and was able to continue the internship beyond the original designated time. Upon graduation the department I was interning with had a retirement. I applied for the job and was fortunate enough to be hired.

More impactful organizations, in my opinion, as it provides the "soft services" to residents. County governments also provide the property tax functions, and I have always been interested in real estate assessment and appraisal.

I have a commitment to public service in local government, and a position in county government was the best opportunity afforded to me during my employment search.

Due to the nature of many of the services county governments provide (health, social services, mental health), county government really tapped into the part of my personality that seeks to help others when they are at their most vulnerable and to provide life-saving and life-altering services.

I decided to take an internship with a local county government to gain another perspective, particularly as local governments work with nonprofit organizations. I really enjoyed the work and was offered a job upon graduation. I enjoy that county government has an immediate impact on the lives of its residents.

I wanted to have a more direct impact on the community I was serving. I wanted to see the people I was serving, and I felt like I would do better work if I was personally invested in my job, and I felt I would be personally invested if I worked locally.

That's where the job was, and it was a position that I knew would allow me a lot of room to grow and develop my professional skills.

I chose county government b/c of the opportunities.

Open position at time of graduation. The position was also in a desirable place to live.

Ability to positively impact a greater number of people than found in most municipalities. I also like working in a larger organization.

I don't have a preference between Cities or Counties.

I was pursuing municipal administration due to the smaller organizational size and a desire to "see" service results. At the time, I believed that County organizations were too large.

Scope of issues dealt with. More comprehensive than City Government

There was a position open upon graduation from the MPA program that happened to be in county
I had just finished my MPA and needed a job. My current position was the first offer I received.

Larger organization with more resources and challenges.

I interned with a county during the MPA program and fortunately that led to full-time employment after graduation.

I was already employed by county government while obtaining my MPA in the evenings. I wanted to continue public service with county agencies.

I applied to both municipalities and counties; the first position I was offered was with a county.

It wasn't really a choice, I applied to both municipalities and counties after graduating with my MPA and received a job with the county.

I had previously worked with county government and work in human services (social services) which is a county function in North Carolina.

That's where the jobs happened to be available.

There are three reasons that compelled me to work in county government: 1) Variety. The breadth of county functions greatly outnumber municipal government’s. 2) Leadership. I have the opportunity to work for & with one of the most respected County Managers in the state and one the most knowledgeable Budget Directors in the state. 3) Experience. I feel that county government is a nice middle ground between municipal and state government. With this experience transitioning to municipal or state government should be easy.

Desire to work in Social Services.

The County track offered more opportunities for advancement in terms of organizational size and complexity. The larger municipalities appear to have an internal track for advancement over a long period of time. Also, the larger municipalities which hired from outside the organization never seemed to select North Carolina local government managers.

I enjoy the programming at the County Health Department.

My undergraduate degree and graduate degree were in social work. I enjoy the helping profession and the variety of programs social services provide.

6. Did your MPA program influence your decision to pursue a career in county government?

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<tr>
<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
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<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>13</td>
<td>45%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>14</td>
<td>48%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>2</td>
<td>7%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100%</td>
</tr>
</tbody>
</table>

7. Explain why or why not.

Text Response

It only influenced my decision from the standpoint that I was required to do an internship and that
internship directly lead to a position with a County. It could have easily been a municipality, if one of those internships had worked out.

Earning the MPA degree helped me understand local government more broadly. Not only was I able to better understand county departments and services, but I also came to understand how county departments and services collaborated with other local governments and state agencies.

Prior to entering the MPA program, I knew that I wanted to work in local government, but did not have a preference for County or Municipal, upon completion of the MPA program, I applied for positions in both County and Municipal organizations, I ultimately landed in a County, which was the best fit for me at the time.

My decision to work in local government was not limited to municipal or county, and the MPA program did not affect that decision.

The MPA program really didn’t discuss county government that much - I became interested in county government during my summer internship with Durham County (where I still work!)

UNC MPA really focuses on local government rather than nonprofit management, which was my original focus. The focus of many classes was local government. To that end, it influenced and expanded my understanding of the importance of local government.

Somewhat. I had already decided before enrolling that I was going to work in local government. The program exposed me to the broad array of paths you could take in government. I found the instructors to be inspiring.

The MPA Program certainly pushes local government careers, and naturally many of the alums you meet work in local government.

The UNC program focused too much on municipal government.

I was an in-service MPA student. I already knew alot about county government.

I had only worked in Cities before the MPA program, so I was leaning towards working for a City. But I was able to secure an internship in a County, and that experience led me to pursue Cities and Counties equally.

Began to understand the scope of County Government. Listened to County Managers discuss current issues, seemed appealing.

The MPA program was focused on local government generally, not county government specifically.

I knew that, coming out of the MPA program without any prior professional experience, that I would have to apply for work wherever there were openings. For that reason, I was open to working in government at all levels or the private sector.

The type of classes the MPA program offers certainly promotes local government career aspirations.

The program influenced my decision to stay with county government because of the broader impact.

I was prepared to work in local government going into the program. I don’t think the program influenced me to work in county government, but a summer internship with a county agency while in the program made me more open to the idea.

I enjoyed both municipal and county, I went where the job opportunity was.

I was already working in county government. The MPA program just gave me additional tools to use.

Undergrad was in Planning, so it was already my focus.

A class titled City/County Management exposed me to a variety of city and county functions,
responsibilities, and managers. It was an eye-opening class that conveyed, as much as possible, the rigors and benefits of local government life.

Already working in county government when I obtained my MPA.

I was open to both tracks with a preference for municipalities based on the organizational hierarchy. However, after getting into County government, I enjoy the challenge of direct and indirect influence.

The MPA offered a good understanding of county government.

I was already working in county government as a program administrator and wanted more administrative development when I pursued the MPA.

8. Do you feel your MPA program prepared you to work in county government?

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<th>#</th>
<th>Answer</th>
<th>Response</th>
<th>%</th>
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</thead>
<tbody>
<tr>
<td>1</td>
<td>Yes</td>
<td>28</td>
<td>97%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>2</td>
<td>No</td>
<td>1</td>
<td>3%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>3</td>
<td>Unsure</td>
<td>0</td>
<td>0%</td>
</tr>
<tr>
<td>Total</td>
<td></td>
<td>29</td>
<td>100%</td>
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</table>

9. Explain why or why not.

Text Response

It prepared in that I received a foundation of knowledge pertinent to local government as a whole. None of my classes were specific to municipal or county government. I will say that the best preparation my MPA program gave me was the internship requirement. There are no substitutes for on-the-job training or real world experience.

I developed a very broad understanding of how I could be an integral team player regardless of my department of choosing.

Although the program is geared more toward municipal government, many of those same lessons are transferable to county service as well.

Many of the skills necessary for county government work (budgeting, policy analysis, human resources, finance, management theory) are taught in the MPA program.

The coursework was comprehensive. I gained both a theoretical understanding of government and the practical skills needed to succeed in the field.

I think the skills I learned could be applied to any government or nonprofit job.

Did not cover the services provided.

Adjunct professors an internships.

App State has the best program in the southeastern United States for local government administration and management. It has a strong focus on developing managers and leaders to be successful in local government.

I feel like the program covered differences/similarities between cities and counties in NC well, so I had a good understanding going into county government.
Yes, understood basics of local government management/practice. The people factor was the biggest challenge.

The MPA program prepared me for work in local government, which includes county government. This included completing a group project for a NC county.

Some of my courses were taught by practitioners in areas relevant to county government (and municipal government, as well). These classes were also focused on providing students with specific skills and knowledge. Examples of the classes include: Local Government Administration, Economic Development, Planning Techniques and Methods (elective taught by a non-MPA department), Project Management (elective taught by a non-MPA department). I also completed a summer internship with a county government.

I think they provided a good foundation, but the world of academics and the world of practitioners are different. There was much to learn on the job, but again, the foundation was there.

Specialized classes, such as personnel administration, were crucial.

I feel the UNC MPA program prepared me with the knowledge and confidence to go into a local government and be successful.

I am not sure it would have in isolation but I already had work experience. It is difficult to be fully prepared for local government work through classes alone.

Nice background to human resources and finances (although this needs to be improved at MPA level). Also, improved writing.

Classes on local government budgeting & accounting were very useful.

The program helped me advance in my career.

ASU has a well rounded program.

Kind of. Needed more classes geared toward County or municipal services.

I was interested in moving up the ladder to a director's position and feel the MPA program prepared me well for that position.

10. Did your MPA program provide courses that specifically discussed county government (separately from a general discussion of local government)?

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11. In your opinion, were these courses effective in preparing you for a career in county government?

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12. Explain why or why not.

Text Response

While none of the courses were specific to county government, one class was taught by an assistant city manager and a county manager. The two managers split the class for a semester.

I assume so, based on what I heard from others, but I never actually took the local government courses.

The courses were focused both on theory and the practical implementation of those public administration principles. Courses taught by professors who once were local government professionals and managers made their advice and teachings very relevant.

In my opinion, local government is local government whether municipal or county and the coursework is applicable to both career choices. In North Carolina, the service (police, fire, planning, building inspections, public works, etc) differences between municipal and county governments are more similar than different.

Usually each class had separate discussions of the effect on municipalities and counties.

Carl Stenburgs class focused a great deal on county government. However, the speakers were only able to give very high level generic assessments of county government. Better speakers are needed that can give more real-life examples. Most of the classes are too academic and do not do enough with case studies and other real-world examples.

It was useful in learning the basics. Each local government works differently. Having the basics down makes learning about the organization's unique methods easier.

Some were. Again, I learned more on the job in 1 year than I did in 2 years of graduate school. Program needs to be tailored more toward the work and services provided by County's.

My courses in budget and fiscal administration were very beneficial to me in my position as director and has helped to make that transition smooth. Also, my courses in organizational theory and behavior were valuable in my understanding of my organization and how to quickly discern problems. The public personnel administration course has been invaluable as well.

13. Did your MPA program provide speakers or lecture series about county government?

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14. In your opinion, were these speakers or lecture series effective in preparing you for a career in county government?

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15. Explain why or why not.

Text Response

The speakers helped me better understand how functions happen in reality. They gave great examples and experiences that really drove home the learning.

The speakers provided county insight on local government issues; however, I didn't find them any more or less applicable to my current career or responsibilities.

Current and former county managers came to speak in our city/county management class, and department heads from various county governments did as well. I appreciated their explanations of managing in the "real world" and they also reinforced that many of the skills needed to work in county government are universal to local government management.

I don't remember any specifics, but speakers were typically strong.

It gave a new viewpoint from local government practitioners.

Yes, could relay real life experiences. At ASU County Manager co-taught class on City/County Management.

Speakers are always interesting, but experience is the best teacher.

Not necessarily for me because I already had 5 years of county government experience. The discussions led by local government employees was more of "what to expect when you come to work here" and I already knew what was on the other side of the door mat.

They provided an insight from the top level of the organization. It was useful. More useful would be having a lower level person, which is the level one enters an organization, provide their insight.

Needed to have more. These are the people actual working in the field versus professors teaching you theory. You know what they say, those that can do, those that can't teach. Professors teaching the bulk of these classes should have to have some actual experience in the field....not just a degree.

The speakers were able to provide practical examples and experiences that would bring the course work to life and bridge the gap between my understanding of theory as it related to the real world.
16. Did your MPA program provide information on internship opportunities in county government?

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17. Did your MPA program have faculty or staff with previous work experience in county government?

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18. Do you think your MPA program provided sufficient resources* on county government? (*Resources include providing speakers, lectures, internships, or access to professors or staff with county government experience)

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19. What suggestions, if any, would you give to your MPA program to better prepare students to work in county government?

Text Response

I think have more opportunities to interact with county staff versus municipal staff. Our program was not heavy one way or another. I think having classes that show the differences between the issues each type of government faces. For example, county managers do not directly supervise the elected sheriff, whereas city managers supervise police chiefs. The differences may be subtle but they still exist.

Given the variations between services provided from municipality to municipality, much less county to municipality, it would be difficult to provide a course similar to the State Government course. More discussion in budgeting related to mandated services and passthrough or settlement revenues.
associated with state services provided at a county level may be valuable to future county employees.

Provide more in-class training on how to budget for medicaid and other pass-through funds, discuss methods of funding education, discuss the relationship between county governments and the state, and provide examples of determining the cost of "soft" services (social welfare, health) as is done for "hard" services (street paving, trash pickup, parking meters).

I think it is important for the courses to really lay out the general differences between municipal and county government work. Obviously, this can vary, but, generally, county governments in NC are tasked with state-mandated services (e.g., certain public health functions, restaurant inspections, social services, sheriffs); whereas municipal governments handle functions like water, trash pick-up, police, and public transportation. These services have high visibility and greater appreciation from residents. It's also important to note why city and county governments will offer identical services or choose to contract out services to a county.

I would suggest they offer a class that gives an overview of county government services.

More trips out of class to actually see the work of County government. Make students who want to go on that path do ride-alongs, etc.

Since I graduated the program has made a lot of improvements.

Continue to focus on teaching students to be successful managers and professionals.

Information from County officials came through the ASU Local Government Alumni Association rather than in specific courses. I found that these interactions were very effective.

Learn about Funding Sources from State and Federal Government dealing with Health, Social Services, Education, Community College, etc. Also important to know distinctions between elected, appointed and other County Officials, almost a relationship building seminar is needed.

Internships, projects, and speakers from County government.

Perhaps act as a liaison between county government alumni and students seeking internships. In my program, the onus is on the students to hunt down internships, though MPA professors will sometimes help with giving students leads or references. It might be helpful if my MPA program could connect students in a systematic way with alumni in county government.

Provide a better overview of the services counties provide so students can gauge their interest in working in those fields.

None at this time.

Better speakers, more realistic examples of the type of work you will be doing.

Nothing particular to county government, but finance for all public admin should be improved.

Include in those speakers people on the front lines, not just those in top management positions.

I would recommend a course dedicated to exploring the differences between municipal and county government. It is not sufficient to group the two as they are almost entirely different career tracks.

There is nothing I would change.
20. Where did you complete your MPA?

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21. While completing your MPA, were you a full-time or part-time student?

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Acknowledgements

I would like to acknowledge the support and assistance of my Capstone Committee- Chair Carl Stenberg, Julie Brenman, and Whitney Afonso- without whom this research would not be possible. I would also like to extend my gratitude to David Thompson and Patrice Roesler of the North Carolina Association of County Commissioners for their mentorship and encouragement in the development of this project. Lastly, I would like to acknowledge Mark Bradbury, Director of ASU’s MPA program for his help in securing necessary data from ASU’s MPA program. This Capstone is a culmination of efforts from all these people.
End Notes


ii Survey conducted through Qualtrics. Program Directors and other Program Staff were asked to distribute survey to students. Students from a total of eight NC programs responded. The number of responses from each school varied.

iii Thoughts reflected in interviews from Executive Director, David Thompson, and Deputy Director, Patrice Roesler


v PUBA 745: Professional Work Experience (UNC-CH); PUBA 778: Intergovernmental Relations (UNC-CH); PA 5558: Capstone Research (ASU); PLN 5400: Planning Theory and Process

vi PA 5460: Budgeting and Fiscal Administration

vii PUBA 710 (Organizational Theory), PUBA 731 (Public Financial Management)

viii See Appendix B; Survey Results, Question 15, Response 1

ix See Appendix B; Survey Results, Question 7, Response 18

x See Appendix B; Survey Results, Question 7, Response 1

xi See Appendix B; Survey Results, Question 9, Response 17

xii See Appendix B; Survey Results, Question 19, Response 4

xiii See Appendix B; Survey Results, Question 7, Response 14