

Knowledge and Skills for Policy Making: Stories from Local Public Managers in Florida

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ABSTRACT

Local public managers regularly participate in the legislative policy-making process and even play a leadership role in policy preparation and deliberation. This phenomenon challenges the dichotomy model of the politics-administration relationship and raises some rarely studied questions: How do managers work with their elected officials to shape legislative policy making? What knowledge and skills do they need to participate effectively in policy making? And how can MPA programs help prepare students who are interested in a local government career for this role? To answer these questions, we conducted interviews with city and county managers in Florida. The opinions from local public managers help us better understand their role in policy making and provide us with valuable insights about the development of MPA education.

In the public administration literature, scholars have recognized local public managers' participation in the local policy-making process and criticized the politics-administration dichotomy (e.g., French & Folz, 2004; Hassett & Watson, 2002; Lee, 2001; Montjoy & Watson, 1995; Nalbandian, 1999; Newell & Ammons, 1987; Svava, 1999a). There remain some questions to be further addressed: How do local public managers work with elected officials in the policy-making process? What knowledge and skill set should they possess for policy-making responsibilities? And how can MPA programs help? This study explores these questions based on interview data collected in Florida. The article starts with the background of the research questions, followed by literature review, research methods, and findings. Discussions and implications are at the end.

BACKGROUND: LOCAL PUBLIC MANAGERS PARTICIPATING IN POLICY MAKING

The dichotomy model of the politics-administration relationship assumes that local elected officials and appointed administrators have separate responsibilities in the policy process: making policy by the former and implementing policy by the latter. This model has provided a long-standing frame of reference for research on the behavior of elected officials and public administrators. However, numerous studies have engaged the questions of whether and to what extent administrators participate in policy making and politics (e.g., French & Folz, 2004; Hassett & Watson, 2002; Lee, 2001; Montjoy & Watson, 1995; Nalbandian, 1999; Newell & Ammons, 1987; Svara, 1999a). Alternative models to the dichotomy concept have been developed, such as the dichotomy-duality model (Browne, 1985; Svara, 1985), the modified dichotomy model (Montjoy & Watson, 1995), the complementarity model (Svara, 1998, 1999b; Zhang & Feiock, 2010), and the partnership model (Dunn & Legge, 2002).

Extant research has explored why public managers exert considerable influence in policy making. By county and city charters, managers typically do not have the institutional authority in the policy-making process independently from the council. The legitimacy of making policy originates in the elected body since its members have a political base resulting from the election by and accountability to the electorate (Protasel, 1988). However, local elected officials are mostly amateur and part-time politicians. They may not be able to develop policy without the manager's professional assistance. Therefore, elected officials rely on managers' professional knowledge and skills to make policy decisions (Zhang & Feiock, 2010; Zhang & Yang, 2009). Novak and Nalbandian (2009) emphasize that "it is critical that the professional manager prepares the council for its work" (p. 24). While professional knowledge and skills legitimate public managers' participation in local policy making, it is reasonable to ask the question: What specific knowledge and skills are particularly important to local managers for their policy-making responsibilities? One way to understand this question is to infer from the activities that make up managers' days—how they work with elected bodies on a daily basis and help make policies. Another way is to ask managers directly what knowledge and skills they think are important for them to participate in policy making. This study adopted both approaches.

LITERATURE: WHAT IS THE LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGER'S ROLE IN POLICY MAKING?

Along with the conception that public managers actually participate in the policy-making process, research has identified interaction patterns between the manager and the elected body (Box, 1992; Boynton & Wright, 1971; Morgan & Watson, 1992). Boynton and Wright (1971), for example, provide a classification of mayor-manager interactions across the regimes of administration, policy, and politics. They identify seven types of mayor-manager interactions: strong mayor,

traditional role, policy-initiating team, policy-making team, governing team, dominant manager, and manager “boss.” Among the seven types, the strong-mayor and manager “boss” patterns represent two extremes of power allocation: On the one extreme, the mayor dominates all three regimes and leaves little room for managers to exert influence; on the opposite extreme, the city manager gains dominant power in all three regimes and elected officials have little control over the manager.

Morgan and Watson (1992) focus on the policy-making regime and propose four possible patterns of mayor-manager interactions: (a) Both the manager and mayor are strong; (b) the strong manager dominates policy-making; (c) the strong mayor dominates policy-making; and (d) both the manager and mayor are weak in policy leadership. Morgan and Watson also find that the three most representative roles in the policy-making process chosen by the city managers in the survey are facilitator, coordinator, and policy director; but these three roles are not specifically defined in Morgan and Watson’s article and may overlap.

Box (1992) provides a typology of administrative discretion that distinguishes local public managers as trustees, delegates, and interpreters. According to Box, *trustee administrators* “believe in their ability and duty to identify situations in which the governing body has failed to understand the community will correctly or has intentionally disregarded it” (p. 326). *Trustee administrators* regard it as proper to advocate for a new policy direction in the public interest, take a strong and inflexible stand on a policy issue, and stand contrary to the expressed wishes of the council. The opposite of trustees are *delegate administrators*, who regard the governing body as the duly political leaders of the community. Thus they do not attempt to influence the elected body to change policy direction; they do not take actions until they receive policy guidance from the elected body; and they even do not make policy recommendations to the governing body unless a serious matter forces them to do so. *Interpreter administrators* are between the trustees and delegates. On the one hand, interpreter administrators believe in their ability to identify political failures of representation and regard it as a professional duty to take remedial action. On the other hand, they “see their legitimacy as defined by the employment relationship and their sphere of discretion as determined by what is acceptable to the governing body” (p. 328). Interpreter administrators would provide sufficient information and alternative policy recommendations to their governing body for policy decisions. Box (1992) offers four examples, including two city managers, one city administrator, and one planning director, to describe their typical behaviors as trustee, delegate, and interpreter administrators respectively.

While the typologies discussed in previous research are very useful to understand public administrators’ role in the policy-making process, rich information about how these administrators work with their elected body on a daily basis to help make policy decisions has not been sufficiently explored in the

literature. This research will provide a narrative description on administrators' activities in policy making, attempting to bridge the understanding of managers' daily activities and the knowledge and skills they need. Such narrative description can also help MPA students who have only a hazy impression of what local government managers actually do (Lazenby, 2010).

LITERATURE: WHAT KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS DO LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS NEED?

The National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) conducted a survey of city and county managers in 2006 to explore their opinions of the importance of knowledge and skills in local government management. The respondents rated the following competencies as most important:

1. Decision making and problem solving;
2. Ethics and integrity;
3. Communication skills;
4. Leadership;
5. Teamwork; and
6. Budgeting and financial management.

Such findings are actually consistent with the empirical results in previous research by Green (1989) and Hinton, Kerrigan, and Frederickson (1995), who conducted similar surveys while using different samples.

Lazenby (2010) applies the Delphi technique to investigate the same question. His expert panel consists of experienced local government managers as well as scholars and members of International City/County Management Association (ICMA) boards and committees. The Delphi panel came to the consensus that ethics, community building, human relations, personal traits, interpersonal communications, leadership, and group processes are critical to local government managers.

While the few existing studies seem to have consistent findings, their shared research design features leave room for further investigation. First, the existing research provided a list of knowledge and skills in the survey for respondents to select or rank, except that the Delphi technique allows participants to revise the list. Some important knowledge and skills may be unintentionally omitted from the list. Second, these studies focus on the knowledge and skills needed for local government *management*, the traditionally perceived responsibility, and pay little attention to managers' policy-making role. An unaddressed question remains: Do managers need additional knowledge and skills as they get involved in policy making in local government?

With a particular focus on local elected officials rather than public managers, Vogelsang-Coombs and Miller (1999) investigate how elected officials should be prepared to make policies effectively. They find the following sets of knowledge and skills to be critical:

7. Personal (self) development, advanced communication techniques, and negotiation skills;
8. Human resource development and workforce empowerment;
9. Organizational/ jurisdictional development;
10. Governing body leadership and team building; and
11. Community development and regional cooperation.

It appears that elected officials are more demanding for knowledge and skills in negotiation, jurisdictional development, and regional cooperation for their policy-making responsibilities. Will the skill set for elected officials be applied to local government managers when they assist the governing body to make policies?

THE SUPPLY OF KNOWLEDGE AND SKILLS: MPA PROGRAMS

The traditional programs of public administration aimed to equip students for multiple roles in the general public management positions, with a focus on the technical perspective of competencies. The core curriculum in early ages incorporated personnel, budgeting, organization theory, political process, and institutions (Elmore, 1986; Stokes, 1986). Such curriculum was criticized for merely providing descriptive knowledge of government rather than prescriptive solutions (Stokes, 1986). The movement of public policy programs in the late 1960s originated in the rejection of the traditional public administration and placed “hard” analytic subjects such as economics, statistics, and decision theory at the core of the curriculum (Elmore, 1986). The founders of the policy programs purported to teach their students “how to make public decisions rigorously and analytically on the basis of systematic quantitative evidence” (Yates, 1983, p. 364; also see Elmore, 1986). However, the policy programs were criticized as lacking the training of political thinking in an environment with multiple stakeholders (Elmore, 1986; Stokes, 1986). Therefore, more general knowledge of social and political institutions and processes for situation analysis and assessment of community needs have been added to the curricula in many programs since the 1990s.

Such a trend is also reflected in the change of NASPAA Accreditation Standards. For instance, the 2005 version of NASPAA Accreditation Standards required inclusion of coursework about political and legal institutions and processes, economic and social institutions and processes, organizational and management concepts and behavior, and research methods in policy and program formulation, implementation, and evaluation. The purpose was to emphasize “an understanding of the public policy and organizational environments.”¹ The 2009 NASPAA Accreditation Standards further loosen the requirements on the technical aspects of knowledge by removing the common components of the program curriculum. They provide a more general framework that consists of five domains of required competencies: (a) to lead and manage in public governance; (b) to participate in and contribute to the policy process;

(c) to analyze, synthesize, think critically, solve problems, and make decisions; (d) to articulate and apply a public service perspective; and (e) to communicate and interact productively with a diverse and changing workforce and citizenry. The new accreditation standards reveal that NASPAA has shifted its emphasis from specific knowledge and skills to more general competencies in a complicated environment; it has also realized the policy-making responsibilities for public administrators. Of course, the NASPAA accreditation standards serve for career managers in general, not for local government managers per se.

Denhardt (2001) suggests that all career administrators need three types of personal development—cognitive knowledge, interpersonal skills, and intrapersonal skills; but each type of development has different contents/requirements as administrators move from technical to managerial and institutional positions. As such, he proposes that each MPA program should contextually identify its students and then provide different types of students with different combinations of theory- and practice-focused training. According to Denhardt, city managers would need greater knowledge of organizational environments and the process of policy development, as well as more skills in negotiating or brokering across organizational boundaries.

Koven, Goetz, and Brennan (2008), through analyzing 46 of the top 50 MPA programs identified by *U.S. News & World Report* in 2006, find that the leading core courses were “organizational concepts and institutions” and “policy evaluation” (both courses were required by 87% of all programs), “budgeting and finance” (85%), “public administration” (74%), “ethics and leadership” (59%), and “politics and legal institutions” (52%).

Lazenby (2010) examines 42 MPA programs with a concentration in local government. He finds that these MPA programs provide good coverage of competencies associated with administration, legal/institutional system, and technical/analytical skills. However, they are less likely to provide trainings of “soft skills,” the competencies associated with ethics, interpersonal communications, human relations, leadership, group processes, and community building. Nevertheless, since

formal graduate education is only one component of preparing an individual for a senior management role in local government. . . . 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.” (Lazenby, 2010, p. 351)

Lazenby also suggests that courses on policy analysis and analytical skills are less important than those on *managing* public organizations, and thus they should be eliminated from the curriculum in MPA programs with a concentration in local government.

METHODOLOGY

To understand local managers' firsthand experience in policy making, we conducted interviews with city and county managers in Florida. Florida is an excellent research site because of its great institutional, political, and demographical variations among local governments, which epitomize the nationwide conditions to a high degree. In particular, typically three forms of government are adopted by the 411 incorporated cities (including towns and villages) in Florida: council-manager, mayor-council, and commission; and three forms are adopted by the 67 counties: county manager, county executive, and county chair-administrator.

We selected and invited 30 managers (28 city managers and 2 county managers) for the interviews through multiple methods: Seven of them were viewed by their mayors as exerting very strong influence on local policy making, according to the 2006 Florida Mayor Survey conducted by one of the authors; 15 of them were evaluated by other city/county managers as having strong or relatively strong policy-making influence in local government; and 8 of them were evaluated by other city/county managers as having a moderate level of policy-making influence. All these interviewees are seasoned public managers with more than 10 years of experience in local government. In addition, they are from different forms of government and different geographic parts of Florida with varying population sizes, ranging from 7,600 to 140,000. All the 30 managers accepted our invitation to participate in the research.

A questionnaire with six open-ended questions was designed and sent to these county and city managers before a one-on-one phone or e-mail interview in August 2008 through March 2009:

1. Regarding the local government managers' role in legislative policy making, to what extent should they participate in the policy-making process and why?
2. To what extent do you actually participate in legislative policy making with your elected officials, both in the preparation stage and the actual deliberation and decision making stage?
3. When you started participating in local government legislative policy making as a local government manager, what education or experience helped prepare you for this new role?
4. Have you experienced any difficulty or frustration in the process? Do you have any examples of those experiences that you can share?

5. As an experienced professional local government manager, what do you now feel are the most important skills and knowledge a person needs to possess in the future to assist their elected bodies make sound policy decisions at the local government level?

6. As a follow-up to question #4, please identify the most important knowledge and skills useful to local government managers that you feel can be taught in classrooms and identify those that you believe cannot be taught in the classroom. Why?

7. You are welcome to share any other comments on how MPA programs can better equip students (future managers) with the knowledge and skills needed to prepare them for their role as local government managers in the local government policy making process.

The 30 managers were given a choice either to prepare written responses and send them back to the surveyor or to be interviewed via telephone. Six managers elected to send written responses, and 24 elected to be interviewed via telephone. The findings presented in the following sections are based on the 24 transcripts of the telephone interviews and the 6 written responses.

FINDINGS

By design, the interviewees are moderately or strongly involved in policy making. Indeed, they acknowledge, as one manager responds, “There is a fusion of the positions of city managers and city council members in terms of policy-making.”²² The managers attribute their policy-making role to their professional expertise that council members may lack: “. . . a city manager seems to be playing an increasingly important role, not so much in trying to direct the council but more so because of the experience and education he or she is able to bring to the council meeting a perspective that may differ from those of elected officials.” Another explains: “Over the years we’re getting less experienced policy makers. I’ve taken on a greater role in helping them develop policy, trying to make them understand when they come up with a policy, and what it will take to implement that policy.” Our interviews further provide rich details about how managers engage in policy-making activities.

Managers’ Role in Policy Preparation and Deliberation

All managers in our interviews report that they are responsible for preparing policy proposals, including providing the council with background materials, identifying potential options and analyzing the pros and cons of each option,

and writing the proposal for the council to discuss. In addition to these common activities, a few managers report that they also proactively identify problems in the community and initiate policy questions for council members to consider. Some others state that they sometimes solicit community inputs upon council's request when they propose policy changes.

However, managers substantially diverge on whether they stand neutral or advocate for specific solutions to the council. Nearly half of the managers in our interviews think they are just information sources in policy making and should not make recommendations on policy solutions. "Usually I don't give recommendations; I keep myself out of the battle," reveals one respondent. Another manager emphasizes: "Sometimes we as managers have to be careful not to dictate what the policy should be through either the one-on-ones or the council meetings." This group of managers may be called *policy coordinators* or *facilitators* (Morgan & Watson, 1992) or *delegate administrators* (Box, 1992). In comparison, a smaller number of managers take a firmer position and suggest a certain policy direction to the elected body. "I make recommendations as how to best address the particular issue of the problem, and to advocate for one particular solution which I believe to be the best solution," explains one city manager. Some other managers would take a more balanced view and carefully place their recommendations in a specific context—they suggest that whether they recommend particular policy solutions depends on what the issue is:

There are some things that are really strictly political issues, and have generally very low impact on the operation of the city one way or another. Managers would hesitate to provide information and opinion in such circumstance.

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If there is a decision that is purely opinion, when you're getting into total subjective things like how something should look, nothing to do with function, and I knew I had some diverse opinions on that, I let them work through that by providing them enough information and let the group come to a consensus.

On the other hand, if the issue is associated with professional knowledge or involves technical concerns, managers would be more open to offer their opinions and recommendations. For example:

in proposing a budget and talking through the various alternatives, the manager should take a significant role in that process. When they are neighborhood matters, probably the manager should take a lesser

role and let the public deal more directly with the elected officials in the context of making ordinances and policy.

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If there is an issue that, in my professional opinion, is in the best interest of the city, I will make a recommendation.

Public managers diverge to an even greater degree on policy deliberation. Most managers see policy deliberation as a political process and thus are very hesitant to participate. The following reactions reflect their caution:

If you go to the preparation stage, that's where my participation is at its greatest level...When we move to deliberation stages, my role diminishes to answering questions when they may have them. I do not enter my opinion into policy decisions until they request a specific information point. I fully step away from the decision making.

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We don't disturb council to make final decisions. I would stay out of the dialogue during deliberation process.

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During their council meetings, I don't really participate to a great extent...But let me preface that by saying that unless I feel like they're going to make a decision where we fall off the cliff, I tend to let them just go ahead and do what they see fit.

Some managers would take a stronger stand in the stage of policy deliberation by guiding and facilitating the discussion to the direction of their recommendations. A manager frankly expresses:

We as managers can't sit back when we see something going on at a commission table that they (commissioners) may not see but that may have a dire ramification. We need to step up to the plate and be more assertive.

Another echoes:

If I see them going to a direction that will create havoc then I think it is incumbent upon the manager to provide the information and steer them in a different direction. After providing the facts, I think it's important to move back so the end product doesn't create more problems than you were trying to solve.

These managers perform like *trustee administrators* (Box, 1992) or *policy directors* (Morgan & Watson, 1992).

Among the policy directors, two strategies are found to be popular for managers in leading the policy direction. First, they discuss the issue with each of the elected officials in one-on-one meetings, lobbying for their policy recommendations. Second, they request the council to postpone the voting so that they can try to collect more information and then come back to the elected officials for reconsideration and deliberation.

In sum, although the interviewees are regarded as exerting moderate to strong influence in policy making, their actual participation in the policy process varies from the least extent, where managers merely provide information and policy alternatives upon the elected body's request, to the highest extent, where managers actively join the discussion with elected officials with an attempt to direct policy outcomes toward what they believe the best for the community interest. Nevertheless, the managers in our interviews agree that once the council votes for a policy, they must effectively carry it out regardless of their personal opinions. This indicates that although local public managers often have to fill in the policy vacuum for their policy makers and even proactively lead policy making in a certain direction, they clearly follow the professional ethics and respect the elected body's political authority.

Knowledge and Skills for the Policy-Making Role

As Lazenby (2010) suggests, "Another approach to gauging the critical knowledge and skills of local government managers is simply to ask their opinions on the subject" (p. 341). We asked the managers what they feel are the most important skills and knowledge to assist the elected body to make sound policy decisions. Table 1 summarizes the reported knowledge and skills, ranked by their frequencies. Notably, almost every interviewee indicates that communication skills are essential to their role in policy making. They also agree that both "people skills" and "the knowledge of basis" are important for managers to help their elected officials make sound policies.

Table 1.
Top Knowledge and Skills for Managers in Policy Making

Knowledge and Skills	Frequency
1 Communication skills	
(a) Listening skills	27
(b) Compromising and consensus-building skills	19
(c) Writing skills	9
(d) Face-to-face communication skills	5
2 Budgeting and financial management	22
3 Information technologies	17
4 Local government structure	16
5 Analytical and research skills	13
6 Practical ethics	11
7 Human resources management	8
9 Strategic planning and management	2

People skills.

People skills are also called “soft skills.” Mintrom (2003) defines them as the “habits we cultivate that allow us to make good use of our time, to work well with others, and to communicate our ideas so that they are influential” (p. 1). Communication skills and practical ethics are key components of people skills. The managers in our interviews suggest that their policy-making role especially requires them to have a strong capability to listen to others, deliver ideas, interpret messages, negotiate and compromise with different opinions, and facilitate communications among diverse individuals. As one manager states, “the success of any city manager is based upon that (communication skills). Even if you are frustrated, how do you communicate your frustration as a city manager to your council? That is your challenge.”

Communication skills contain many aspects. The managers see listening skills as the most critical, followed by compromising and consensus-building skills, writing skills, and face-to-face communication skills. The following quotes demonstrate the importance of listening skills:

I think communication is one of the most important things they (local public managers) really need. They need to know when to *listen*, what to *listen*, and pick up the important issues.

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You have to have a very key ability to *listen*. . . . You have to be able to interact with your staff, commissioners, and the community. So the *listening* skills are really important.

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It is a big picture that you have to realize you have five bosses. Make sure you are *listening* to each of them: what is their concern, what is the best thing coming forward to the city? And share your opinion not only in the public meeting, but at least with the elected officials on a one-on-one base.

Compromising and consensus-building skills are frequently stressed by the managers. Local managers work with a group of elected officials who may have different ideologies, political goals, and constituencies, and who usually are not trained with professional expertise and sometimes make irrational decisions. “A lot of times policy is not created in a rational way. It is created for an irrational reason or for emotional reason,” indicates a city manager. The situation becomes even more difficult when a manager confronts a split council, which means no matter what issue is at stake, it is always hard to achieve agreement. Therefore, local public managers often have to put themselves in a political game and try to find a way out for the best interest of the community by compromising and negotiating with each party.

Being able to work with others, compromise on principles, and an ability to see the “big” picture as well as the smaller details are important skills for one to deal with elected officials.

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Effective policy making is dependent on being able to bring together diverse opinions. . . . The elected officials today are more diverse in every way which necessitates the aforementioned facilitation skills.

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I spend time on political process and group dynamics. Maybe that is more psychological. You can have all the technical skills you want, you can have good service delivery, your organization is doing things right, but if there is no connection with the council members, if the council does not like you, I don't think you would succeed.

Writing skills are another component of the necessary communication skills, especially when managers have to write to council members and citizens in the policy-making processes. One manager advises:

The style of writing for a graduate student is different from that of an administrator who has to write to be understood by a variety of citizens and council members with diverse backgrounds in education. The public administrator needs to be aware that his communication needs to be brief and comprehensive.

Of course, good writing skills take a volume of professional practice. Some managers are concerned about the lack of professional training on writing among the younger generation: "One thing I'm seeing now that irritates me is the lack of writing skills. We have not even gotten the text-message generation into the workforce. I think writing skills are very important and I'm seeing them get worse and worse."

Although telephone, e-mails, and text messages are widely used for communication nowadays, face-to-face communication still plays an important role for county and city managers when they work with elected officials, interest groups, and citizens in formulating policies. As one manager states:

One thing that hasn't been changed, and it's difficult too, and you can't beat its effectiveness, is one on one, face to face discussions, because you not only get immediate feedback and response, but there are just a lot messages from facial expressions and body language.

During the interviews, practical ethics is also emphasized. The managers think they confront ethical questions and dilemmas on a daily basis; and good knowledge of ethics can help them to do things appropriately. In particular, these managers make three principal suggestions on ethics to the younger generations. First, a manager should respect the political authority of elected officials and treat them equally: "Don't provide one with information that you don't provide the others." Second, a manager should try not to engage in any political debate with elected officials or citizens. A managers' responsibility is to use his or her expertise to provide the facts, relevant information, and possible solutions. Finally, a manager should hold the core values of respect, integrity, being a

public servant, having a humble heart, a sense of social justice, and being empathic toward people at any occasion.

The knowledge of basis.

The managers in the interviews recommend that budgeting and financial management, information technologies, government structures, analytical and research methods, and human resource management are among the most important knowledge required to work in local government and participate in the policy-making process. Financial knowledge is essential because “almost all decisions involve some type of financial analysis.” With knowledge of information technologies, a manager is able to use the Internet to search information for policy making; use Web-based tools to involve public officials, staff members, and citizens in the policy conversation; and create PowerPoint presentations about policy options, analysis, and ramifications and have them easily understood. Knowledge about local government structures is necessary because it helps managers to be familiar with the legislative procedures, the roles of each elected official and administrative staff, and the relationships among them. It helps managers to coordinate with each part of the local government in a legal and effective way. Managers also need to explain the government structures to elected officials and citizens when questions about responsibilities occur. Finally, analytical and research methods are also essential because these skills help managers to discover the true problems amid complicated phenomena and relationships. As a manager indicates:

What I’ve seen where a council member may come in and say we need to do such and such, all in good meaning. Often times after they go, I’ll say time out, let’s decide what the problem is rather than the solution. I think it’s important when crafting policy to have everyone on the same page as to what the problem is that we are trying to solve.

In addition, with analytical skills, “managers can boil down the complex policy issues to the point that council members and ordinary citizens can understand.”

Learning the Knowledge and Skills

Our respondents unanimously rate real work experience as the most important source of learning, followed by workplace mentoring and MPA internship; a few managers express appreciation of practical teaching and conceptual coursework in their MPA programs (see Table 2). As a city manager remarks, “Developing policy-making skills in the public arena requires extensive experience that one can only gain while exposed to and participating in the real process.” Most managers credit their policy-making ability to their experience in senior-level staff positions in local government, including experience as a strategic planner, a financial officer, a human resources manager, or a clerk.

Table 2.
Sources of Learning Knowledge and Skills

Sources	Frequency
Work experience	28
Workplace mentoring	8
Internships with MPA program	4
MPA courses with adjunct instructors	3

Experience with private and nonprofit organizations was also deemed as important to help learn the knowledge and skills of certain subjects (such as financial management), policy areas (such as health care), and people skills. One of the managers, who previously worked as the chief executive officer for a nonprofit organization, comments on how that experience helped him in local government policy making:

Working with the Board of Directors and understanding how important interpersonal communication was to moving disparate ideas towards common solutions was the skill that I found most valuable when I became responsible for local government policy making. I learned that policy makers have various information and motivational needs. Policy solutions require effective communications that can unify the different levels of understanding, different perceptions, and different motivations of those who serve in a policy making role.

A number of managers in our interviews appreciate their workplace mentors, who assisted them in enhancing their abilities for management and policy making. The mentors could be their colleagues or supervisors. One manager states:

I began my career in the planning and development office; and the city manager I worked with was a huge resource in helping me understand the obligations of the position. He also taught me how to think outside the box and to look for community partnerships that would help further our goals.

Two thirds of managers in the interviews hold an MPA degree, and approximately one fifth of them report that their MPA education is helpful to

the job they are doing. We acknowledge that the managers received their MPA degrees about 10 to 20 years ago and that MPA education in general has been changed significantly over the decades. Nevertheless, it is helpful to learn the expectations of these managers toward current MPA programs. The managers suggest that MPA programs should provide opportunities of effective internship and practical teaching. With internship opportunities, MPA students can discover how learned concepts can be applied in the real world; they can also learn people skills by interacting with elected officials and administrative staff in a real work setting before they take the public manager position. A manager points out:

Many people who were required to do internships may downplay the importance. A student has an opportunity to work with local government; and it takes a commitment: not only working in the management areas but also taking the extra step to attend all council meetings, to go to staff meetings to learn some of the basic operations of city government. Eventually, that combined with a good education, will help someone with the policy making process.

A few managers mentioned that their MPA programs did a nice job of incorporating real-world practices into classroom teaching via adjunct professors. Adjunct professors may share their stories of successes, mistakes, and failures with students. They may also discuss unintended consequences their decisions produced as well as their self-criticism about whom they should have listened to but they did not:

I chose that MPA program because they concentrated more on the practical and pragmatic as opposed to the pure policy theories of city planning back in those days...It teaches you to have your antennae up in order to recognize when something is going well or about to go wrong.

Nevertheless, while not many managers appreciate theories and concepts they received from MPA programs, some suggest that an MPA student may not recognize the value of theories until he or she has a certain amount of experience with the manager position. A manager went through two MPA programs 15 years apart, and he feels his experience with the second MPA program was much more rewarding because he had cumulated many more years of practical experience before taking it. "A text book cannot teach you fundamentals until you actually have worked with 5, 7, or 9 elected officials with many diverse personalities and opinions, and you were trying to build consensus with different interests."

Some managers also value their training experiences with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the Florida County and

City Management Association (FCCMA). Within the professional networks, they learned ethical responsibilities and the application of those responsibilities in accordance with the tenets outlined in the ICMA's Code of Ethics.

DISCUSSION: DO LOCAL GOVERNMENT MANAGERS NEED SPECIAL SKILLS FOR POLICY MAKING?

With interview data collected from 30 city and county managers in Florida, this study uses a qualitative approach to examine how local public managers contribute to the legislative policy-making process and what they need to know to fulfill this role. We acknowledge the limitations of this study. First, due to the nature of the qualitative approach—the sample is purposefully chosen and the sample size is relatively small, so the generalization power is somewhat limited. City and county managers in other localities and other states may hold different opinions due to their different experiences and different institutional and political environments. Second, this study merely addresses descriptive questions of “what” and “how.” With a small sample size, it is unable to answer explanatory questions—for example, whether managers’ responses are associated with their work experience or forms of government they serve. Future research with quantitative methods is expected to address the explanatory questions. Third, this study focuses on the demand side (public managers) rather than the supply side (MPA programs) of knowledge and skills for policy making. The research would be improved if we had data from both sides. Nevertheless, this study contributes to the literature by addressing new questions, and we hope it will encourage more scholars to examine these questions in the future so that we can cumulate our understanding and develop suitable MPA programs to better equip future public administrators.

Public managers’ involvement in policy preparation and deliberation is a great extension of responsibilities beyond their traditionally perceived work of administration and policy implementation. Such responsibilities reasonably require—as the city and county managers in our interviews suggest—strong people skills in listening, compromising, consensus building, and practical ethics on the one hand and solid knowledge in budgeting and financial management, information technologies, and analytical methods on the other hand (see Table 1). First, managers cannot develop sound *policy proposals* unless they possess adequate listening skills and information techniques that help them collect information in an accurate and effective way. Accurate and sufficient information is a precondition to developing a sound policy proposal. With strong listening skills, managers are able to hear the real needs and concerns of various stakeholders including citizens, interest groups, and elected officials. Information technologies not only allow managers to involve people in community-wide conversations with officials but also enable them to look for information and resources beyond their jurisdictions for policy change. For example, managers

may find regulations or guidelines on a particular policy issue from federal or state-level governments; they may search the positive and negative consequences of the policy change in other jurisdictions and learn their lessons; they may also find supportive programs provided by higher-level governments or nonprofit agencies through information technologies. Analytical skills are essential for managers to develop policy proposals because with such skills, managers can discover real problems underneath noisy surfaces, identify the relationships amid complicated phenomena, and analyze the pros and cons of each policy alternative. Since almost all decisions in local government involve some type of budgeting and financial management, managers need this type of knowledge to develop policy solutions that are financially feasible and economically beneficial for the community.

Second, managers would particularly need compromising and consensus-building skills when they advocate their *policy recommendations* or when they participate in *policy deliberation*. The challenge for managers is the diversity in the elected body—usually the elected officials have different socioeconomic backgrounds, constituencies, and political goals. In addition, many of the elected officials lack professional expertise and thus sometimes make decisions for irrational reasons. Therefore, managers must skillfully exchange opinions with council members, negotiating and compromising with them to make a certain agreement in policy direction that would protect or improve the common interest of the community. During such a consensus-building process, managers would also use their professional expertise and rational analysis skills to educate elected officials; they may use computer techniques to present their ideas in a way that elected officials can understand; and they need to be familiar with the local government structure and professional ethics to avoid violating institutional rules or norms. In short, managers should be equipped with compromising and consensus-building skills, knowledge of budgeting and financial management, information technologies, analytical skills, and skills of practical ethics when they engage in *policy advocacy* or *policy deliberation* with their elected body.

Do managers need special skills for policy-making responsibilities that are beyond their traditionally perceived administrative role? The knowledge and skills identified in this study are not fundamentally unique from those required for managers' administrative responsibilities as identified by NASPAA (2006) and Lazenby (2010). All these studies rate ethics, communication skills, and human resources management as important, reflecting the manager's role as a generalist in the public organization. However, differences exist with regard to ranking the importance of such knowledge and skills. Table 3 presents the comparison of the top five essential skills and knowledge, ranked by three studies respectively. It demonstrates that previous studies rate higher on community leadership and internal management skills for managers, which matches the traditional perception that local government managers are primarily responsible

for organizational management and community development. On the contrary, our study, with a particular focus on managers' role in policy making, does not highly evaluate skills of community leadership. It instead underlines the importance of two categories. The first is communication skills, especially the skills of listening, compromising, and negotiation toward consensus building. The second category is about managers' professional expertise in budgeting and financial management, information technologies, local government structure, and analytical skills. The first category actually reflects how managers participate in policy making, a sphere that is much different from the internal management of public organization. The second category of skills indeed legitimates manager's participation in policy making because elected officials, who are not encumbered by economic rationality and analysis skills, would otherwise make irrational policies if the manager's legislative assistant is not available.

Table 3.
Knowledge and Skills Ranked by Importance in Three Studies

	For Administrative Responsibilities		For Policy-Making Responsibilities
—	<i>NASPAA (2006)</i>	<i>Lazenby (2010)</i>	This Study
1st	Ethics and integrity	Ethics	Communication skills (listening, compromising, and negotiating)
2nd	Decision making /problem solving	Community building	Budgeting and financial management
3rd	Communication skills	Human relations (communication skills)	Information technologies
4th	Leadership	Personal traits (team building, negotiation)	Local government structure
5th	Teamwork	IP communications	Analytical and research skills

While Vogelsang-Coombs and Miller (1999) find that communication skills, particularly negotiation skills, are important for elected officials to make policies, our study shows those skills are important for public managers to participate in the policy-making process too. This is not surprising because policy making in local government is a collective process that involves diverse groups and interests. To “manage” in this political process, managers must possess communication and negotiation skills. Nevertheless, public managers are different from elected officials. Vogelsang-Coombs and Miller (1999) highlight elected officials’

competencies in community leadership and regional cooperation, which do not stand out in our interview. In contrast, our data indicate that managers should possess professional expertise in some knowledge of basis in order to be legitimized in policy making.

Implications for MPA Programs with Local Government Concentration

The managers in our interviews report that they earned their knowledge and skills needed for policy-making responsibilities primarily from work experience, while they are less likely to appreciate their MPA education, especially the theory-oriented courses. This is not surprising, because “learning by doing” is a typical pattern in many professions (Cohen, Eimicke, & Ukeles, 1995), and formal education is only one component of learning resources for local government managers (Lazenby, 2010). Nevertheless, managers may have underestimated the value of MPA education due to the time issue—as experienced managers, it has been a long time since they graduated from MPA programs; and as managers accumulate their work experience, their memory and appreciation related to their MPA programs might be diluted.

Consistent with previous research, this study verifies that both people skills and knowledge of basis are essential to local government managers. Many of these types of knowledge and skills can be taught in a formal educational setting. Therefore, both work experience and formal education can help. However, formal education should be more efficient in learning than work experience because formal education programs are carefully designed; they gather expertise in the field; and their training processes are intensive. MPA education should add value to the public administration profession; and we should think how the values can be maximized so that MPA students can be better equipped for future public positions.

In MPA education, local government managers deserve special attention because their competencies determine the performance of local government, which further influences citizens’ quality of life on a daily basis. In the increasingly dynamic environment, a competent local government manager should have mastery in internal management of organization, community development, and policy implementation as well as policy making. Although NASPAA is not particularly involved in training local government managers per se, its new accreditation standards recognize policy-making responsibilities for public administrators and focus more on general competencies rather than specific knowledge for public managers. The new NASPAA standards actually set up high criteria for accreditation, while creating more freedom for individual MPA programs. We agree with Denhardt (2001) that an individual MPA program should identify its target students and customize its curricula to meet the needs of its students in knowledge and skills. For MPA programs with a concentration on local government, we provide the following suggestions based on our interview findings.

First, MPA programs should maintain their efforts to enhance the practical components in the formal education. One way is to recruit more students with work experience in local government. These students are more likely to value structured learning because they can easily link theories with their work experience. They can also bring their experience and practical problems to classroom, helping peer students to understand the theories and issues. Another way is to work with professional organizations. For example, the Local Government Management Education Committee of NASPAA has closely collaborated with the ICMA Advisory Board on Graduate Education for years to build collaboration between practitioners and academics. Working with such professional organizations can help MPA programs find a large pool of public managers who can serve as adjunct faculty. The professional organizations can also provide resources of internships for MPA students (Facer & Owens, 2005). In addition, MPA programs may hire faculty members with practitioner background in local government, especially those with PhD degrees in public administration or public policy. Given equal scholarly training, their working experience with government should be particularly valued in the job market by MPA programs. These faculty members will be uniquely qualified to prepare future leaders in local government.

Second, technical knowledge is still important to MPA students. Lazenby (2010) suggests that in a limited 2-year period, MPA programs ought to focus on key competencies. He sees policy analysis and analytical skills as less important than those on *managing* public organizations, and he recommends eliminating these courses from MPA curricula. However, Lazenby concentrates on managers' administrative role while overlooking their policy-making responsibilities. According to this study, information technologies, local government structure, and analytical methods, along with budget and financial management, are among the most important knowledge and skills to managers, especially for their policy-making responsibilities. We suggest MPA programs continue to provide these courses.

Finally, MPA programs may create innovative ways to incorporate people skills in their curriculum. This study identifies practical ethics and communication skills such as listening, compromising, negotiating, and consensus-building skills to be extraordinarily important to local government managers. It is traditionally perceived by many that these skills are primarily determined by individuals' innate traits and cannot be effectively improved through academic training. However, O'Leary, Bingham, and Choi (2010) show that students can substantially advance their skills of negotiation, facilitation, conflict management, and other tacit skills through a specially designed course that provides students with collaborative practice. Another recommended way is to integrate people skills into core courses through case study, homework assignments, and in-class discussions. Kennedy and Malatesta (2010), for example, illustrate how ethics can be taught by this approach.

As a brief summary, this study finds that local government managers particularly need communication skills and technical knowledge when they participate in legislative policy making. Communication skills are particularly essential because managers need to skillfully listen to stakeholders, compromise, negotiate, and build consensus in order to achieve policy outcomes that represent the best interest of the community. The technical knowledge, including budgeting and financial management, information technologies, and analytical methods, equips managers to accurately understand policy issues and prescribe policy solutions. Therefore, MPA programs, especially those concentrating on local government, should maintain the emphasis on courses of technical knowledge while innovatively integrating communication skills in the curriculum.

FOOTNOTES

- 1 For this reason, we do not differentiate the MPA and MPP programs. We use the general term “MPA programs” in this article to refer to graduate programs in public affairs and administration.
- 2 The quotations are from the 30 interviews. For confidentiality concerns, we don't include the names of the interviewees.

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