Role of MPA Education as a Professional Hub: Views from Local Government Managers

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The academic discipline and its practical field are often closely related or symbiotic. What about the public administration discipline and practice? By using a sample of local government managers, this study examines how they perceive the value, relevancy, and usefulness of Master of Public Administration (MPA) education in practicing public administration, and what competencies they value for future managers. Local government managers perceive that public administration is its professional home discipline and are generally satisfied with the quality and usefulness of public administration education. However, practitioners and scholars do not collaborate enough in practical problem-solving. Some competencies that local practitioners desire for future managers are often not the major goals or teaching priorities of public administration education. Such a loose connection of disciplinary education to practice has important implications for public administration scholars who want to align their programs and courses with practical use, to help students improve job competency.

This study examines how local government managers perceive the value, relevance, and usefulness of MPA education in practicing public administration (PA), and the competencies they value more for future managers. Since the inception of modern academic PA, connection/disconnection between academicians and practitioners has been debated (Wang, Bunch, & Stream, 2013; Ospina & Dodge, 2005; Davis, 2013; Nesbit, et al., 2011; Bushouse, et al., 2011; Posner, 2009; Battaglio & Scicchitano, 2013; Denhardt, 2001; Denhardt et al., 1997; Newland, 2000). Despite efforts to facilitate more dialogue and exchange, PA academicians admit that the connection issue remains (Newland, 2000; Bolton & Stolcis, 2003).

Although many studies have examined the issue from various perspectives, the underlying theme is whether the PA academic community provides what PA practitioners want. The studies treat the academic community as a supplier and practitioners as consumers (Gabris, Nelson, & Davis, 2010). The logic is: when the supplier provides products that do not meet the consumers' exact needs, the consumers avoid the supplier.

Such a perspective has pushed scholars to examine several key components that the practitioners demand explicitly or implicitly: for example, competencies (Lazenby, 2010; Haupt, Kapucu, & Hu, 2017; McSwite, 2001), skills (Aristigueta, 1997; Denhardt, 2001), knowledge (Streib, Slotkin, & Rivera, 2001), usefulness of academic scholarship for practice (Wang, Bunch, & Stream, 2013; Hummel, 1997), relevancy/linkage (Nesbit, et al., 2011; Lynn, Heinrich, & Hill, 2001; Bushouse, et al., 2011; Landry, Lamari, & Amara, 2003; Mohrman, Gibson, & Mohrman, 2001), prescription (Nesbit, et al., 2011; Bozeman, 1993; Kelly & Dodds, 2012), and co-production of scholarship (Ospina & Dodge, 2005).

In addition, some studies attribute the rough relationship between the two communities to practice gaps between what people know about theory and what they are actually able to put in practice (Holmer & Adams, 1995; Posner, 2009; Hummel, 1997), interdisciplinary issues (Mainzer, 1994; Pollitt, 2010), unclear professionalism/profession (Fox, 1992; Benveniste, 1987; Davis, 2013; Pitfield, 1982; Bowman, 1998), or a lack of engagement (Nesbit, et al., 2011; Ospina &

Dodge, 2005). Regardless of the different diagnoses and approaches, the common assertion of the studies is that the academic community needs to address the demands of practitioners in order to narrow the gap between the two sides. Of course, one could set forth a counterargument – the academic discipline is not obligated to provide all the technical and trade needs from its practitioners. Likewise, MPA programs might not be appropriate to teach all the technical and soft skills for public managers. Nonetheless, it would be important to know what practitioners want and face in their daily management while they practice the profession of PA. Without discerning the nature of demands, it would not be possible for suppliers to better provide what their clients really want.

While examining views and perceptions of local government managers regarding the connection issue of PA graduate education to practice, this study took a different approach on at least two points. Most studies used either an elite approach or a non-empirical approach in collecting and utilizing the data. They had small focus groups of elite local government managers with MPA degrees, International City-County Management Association (ICMA) memberships, and positions in relatively sizable city governments (Lazenby, 2010; Wang, Bunch, & Stream, 2013). Other studies used existing literature, academicians' opinions, and anecdotes, presenting suggestions and propositions (Nesbit, et al., 2011; Cunningham & Weschler, 2002; Ospina & Dodge, 2005; McSwite, 2001). Views from managers of relatively small governments were often missing even though the managers account for a large portion of government employees and serve as a stepping-stone for new PA professionals. This study used a random sample of 168 local government managers in the state of Georgia, which represents small, medium, and large cities and

counties covering diverse socio-demographic factors of local managers.

Importantly, this study focused on the local connection between MPA programs and government practitioners, including the key consumer-side issues such as relevancy, usefulness, applicability, and competencies. As Gabris, Nelson, & Davis (2010) suggested, local MPA programs and local governments together could create more mutual benefits through nurturing communication and relationships. Such an effort would deserve more study to contribute to better connectedness between the PA discipline and practice.

MPA Programs and Practitioners at the Local Level

Practitioners in local governments and scholars/students in local MPA programs might be the most visible presence of PA professionalism at the local level. They are often connected through MPA programs regionally. Practitioners who graduated from an MPA program near their workplaces often maintain a close relationship with their MPA programs even after graduation. Some are involved in their MPA programs by teaching as instructors of practice, serving as an advisory board member, or in some other capacity. Also, many in-service practitioners continue their study in local MPA programs to build knowledge and skills in PA and public policy and pursue an MPA degree as an important professional credential. MPA faculty are often engaged in local communities through providing consultancy on important projects and issues, serving on communitywide committees, and volunteering for grassroots nonprofit actions. Based upon the educational role and close interaction with practitioners, we could assume that local MPA programs are a hub of PA professionals.

Local practitioners and PA scholars interact through various formal and informal

venues. The American Society for Public Administration (ASPA) local chapters are highly organized networks that include practitioners, scholars, and students together. Although not many local government managers participate in local ASPA events, local ASPA chapters in many areas provide a place where scholars and practitioners regularly discuss local PA issues and share the same professional identity. However, it seems that local chapters do not draw enough attention from both practitioners and academicians, toward improving a feeling of professional fellowship. Local managers usually participate in more practitioner-oriented organizations such as the ICMA and local practitioners' associations.[1] For example, few members of the Georgia City-County Management Association (GCCMA)) are involved in ASPA chapter activities.[2] Even scholars in MPA programs, on average, do not appear to actively participate in the activities of local ASPA chapters. Chapter events are often designated for MPA or graduate students in PA and public policy, drawing participation from only a few local practitioners and scholars in major institutions. Similarly, the number of scholars who participate in ICMA and statewide practitioner-oriented associations is limited.[3]

In Georgia, for example, there are eleven NASPAA-accredited MPA programs (based on the NASPAA 2018-2019 roster) and one ASPA chapter (Georgia ASPA Chapter). The chapter holds conference every spring, open to all PA practitioners, faculty, and students. Typically, MPA students are the major force for panel presentations and audiences. The chapter also convenes two regular membership meetings annually, in which practitioners are invited to discuss contemporary issues, offering opportunities for professional networking. On the other hand, there are several practitioners' organizations such as Georgia County City Management Association (GCCMA), Georgia Municipal Associations (GMA), Association of County Commissioners of Georgia (ACCG),

Georgia's County Association, and other state chapters for specific fields. GCCMA is a recognized affiliate organization of the ICMA, a professional group comprised of appointed administrators serving cities, counties, regional councils, and other local governments in Georgia. GCCMA sponsors two educational conferences for members each year. The fall conference is held over a three-day period, and its programs emphasize personal and professional development topics of special interest to Georgia managers. The spring conference is held to provide networking opportunities among conference participants and students from graduate programs in PA from around the state.[4] However, both the ASPA chapter and the GCCMA seem to lack participation from the other side.

Although the MPA degree has become a de facto requirement for most positions in local government management (Hansell, 2002, p.184), it is usually not required for entry and mid-level jobs in local governments. While employees are often trained within their organizations by serving in various positions for years, necessary skills are learned by doing and mentoring (Atterton, Thompson, & Carroll, 2009). Similarly, Zhang, Lee, & Yang (2012) found that local managers tend to prefer their own work experience over formal education to build the knowledge and skills needed for their work. But some employees register for a local MPA program or a similar degree or certificate program to learn more skills and knowledge, looking for an opportunity to be promoted to a higher managerial position. Considering the importance of MPA education for local government managers, it would be essential to know how much it is valued and appreciated by local government managers.

Method and Data

This research used a mixed method of personal interviews and a mail survey. The interviews and survey were conducted by the author between August 2014 and March 2015.

The interviews had two stages: pre-survey and post-survey. The pre-survey interviews explored the general phenomenon of local managers' perceptions regarding the relationship between PA practice and education. The interviews were semi-structured and focused on roles of MPA programs and professional connectedness. The original draft of the survey questionnaire was modified through the pre-survey interview process by reflecting the practitioners' opinions. The post-survey interviews intended to elaborate reasons and background stories that supported the findings. The interviews included thirteen local government managers in Georgia: three city managers, two county managers, two general administration managers, two personnel managers, two financial administration managers, and two public works and technical managers. Interviewees were selected by stratifying the population size and location of counties and cities: one city manager, one county manager, one county personnel manager, and one county financial manager from a population of 100,000 and more; one county manager, one city financial manager from a population of 50,000 – 70,000; one city manager, one city personnel manager, two city general administration managers, two city public works managers from a population of 20,000 – 40,000; one city manager from a population of 1,000 – 5,000. Among them, one city manager, one county manager, one financial administrator, and the two public works directors did not have an MPA degree or a similar advanced degree. While the survey sampled only city and county managers, the interviews included lower-ranked managers than city or county managers in order to catch a broader perspective of the issue. The interview notes were typed for content analysis.

The mail survey addressed the key research question and other socio-demographic information. The sample frame for the survey was collected from the websites of Georgia Department of Community Affairs and Georgia Gov. A team of research assistants verified the contact information via phone calls or emails and excluded inaccurate and non-responding governments. The city and county websites often did not post the email addresses of their managers. Even some personal emails posted on the websites did not respond our contacts. Thus, we did not choose an email or online survey because of a potential sampling error. The total collected included 434 cases, representing 139 county managers and 295 city managers. Among them, 300 managers (90 county and 210 city managers) were randomly selected for the mail survey.

We maximized Dillman's strategy for repeated contact (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2014) to improve the response rate. The survey was conducted over two months and yielded 168 returns, making the response rate 56%. After completing the survey, we checked any systematic or structural error in responders and non-responders. We found that the response rate was moderate, but the responses were widely representative of the population. As shown in Table 1, the sample was composed of 42 county managers (25%) including one consolidated government manager and 126 city managers (75%). There were 56 female managers (33%), 104 male managers (62%), and 8 unknowns (5%). On average, respondents were between 40 and 49 years old and had about 15 years of work experience in the government sector. The average level of education was very close to bachelor's degree (4.89).

Due to the limited variables and measurements, this study mainly presents a descriptive analysis of the survey rather than focusing on causality behind the issue. Only the importance of an MPA degree for local government job candidates is analyzed by an OLS model, with the variables in Table 1. The

Table 1. Major Variables Description

Variables	Measurement	N	Mean	Min	Max	Std. Dev
County Government	1=Yes, 0=No	41	.244	0	1	.430
City Government	1=Yes, 0=No	126	.750	0	1	.434
Consolidated Government	1=Yes, 0=No	1	.006	0	1	.077
Population	Population	140	25,656	380	300,000	44,951
	Natural Log of population	140	9.078	5.94	12.61	1.530
Years of service	1=less than 5 years 2=5 ~ 10 years 3=11 ~ 15 years 4=16 ~ 20 years 5=more than 20 years	168	3.57	1	5	1.450
Highest level of Education	1=Did not finish high school 2=High school graduate (or GED) 3=Some college 4=Associate's degree 5=Bachelor's degree 6=Master's degree 7=Doctoral degree	166	4.89	2	7	1.407
MPA degree	1=Holder, 0=non-holder	165	.34	0	1	.475
ICMA member	1=Member, 0=non-member	132	.63	0	1	.485
Academic meeting	1=Ever attended a meeting hosted by a public administration academic organization during the past three years, 0=Never	155	.45	0	1	.499
Gender	1=Male, 0=Female	160	.65	0	1	.478
Age	1=under 30 2=30~39 3=40~49 4=50~59 5=60 or older	159	3.68	1	5	1.039
Importance of MPA degree	How important is it that a potential job candidate for local government has an MPA degree? 5= Very important ~1=Very unimportant	151	3.84	1	5	.880

Table 2. Awareness of MPA degree

Awareness of MPA Degree	Frequency	%
I have an MPA degree or a similar certificate in the area of public administration	56	33.9%
I do not have an MPA degree but I know much about it	46	27.9%
I do not have an MPA degree but I have heard about it	39	23.6%
I have never heard about an MPA degree	24	14.5%
(N=165)	165	100.0%

Table 3. Academic Disciplinary Relevance to Local Government Management

Rank	Academic Disciplines	Unweighted				Weighted			
		1st	2nd	3rd	Total	1st (3)	2nd (2)	3rd (1)	Total
1	Public Administration	113	35	11	159	339	70	11	420
2	Business Administration	32	43	27	102	96	86	27	209
3	Public Policy	8	35	40	83	24	70	40	134
4	Urban Policy/Administration	1	21	28	50	3	42	28	73
5	Economics	2	15	24	41	6	30	24	60
6	Political Science	3	9	12	24	9	18	12	39
7	Sociology	2	3	6	11	6	6	6	18

(1 = Most important, 2= second-most important, 3= third-most important; N=162)

interview data assisted in interpreting the survey data results.

Findings

The pre-survey interviews revealed that it should not be taken for granted that all local government managers are familiar with the PA discipline and education. Similarly, the survey results showed that only 56 (33.9%) out of 165 responses have an MPA degree or a similar certificate in the field of PA (Table 2).

Such a low percentage is a bit surprising, given the long history of the PA discipline and MPA education. Forty-six (27.9%) managers without MPA degrees responded that they knew much about the MPA program. Thirty-nine (23.6%) managers without MPA degrees said they had heard about it. Twenty-four (14.5%) managers had never heard about an MPA degree. In particular, small-city government managers were less likely to be interested in the discipline and education. One city manager said, "I know many of them in

Table 4. MPA Graduates for Local Government Management

Items	Measurement					
How important is it that a potential job candidate for local government has an MPA degree?	Very Important	Somewhat Important	Neither Important Nor Unimportant	Somewhat Unimportant	Very Unimportant	N
	32	77	30	10	2	151
	21.2%	51.0%	19.9%	6.6%	1.3%	100%
MPA graduates have a clear understanding of what is expected of a public manager in local governments	Strongly Agree	Agree	Neither agree nor disagree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
	26	60	48	9	1	144
	18.1%	41.7%	33.3%	6.3%	0.7%	100%
How relevant or irrelevant is the job skill set of MPA graduates to the typical public manager job description in local governments?	Very relevant	Somewhat relevant	Neither relevant nor irrelevant	Somewhat irrelevant	Very irrelevant	
	46	76	12	5	0	139
	33.1%	54.7%	8.6%	3.6%	0%	100%

small city governments are part-time staffs, dealing with primarily water accounts and city payables. They must work at another job to supplement their income. We might not need such advanced academic stuff." And one director of public works mentioned, "My job is straightforward. There are work orders and schedules. My folks deliver the services efficiently and effectively. I am more concerned with the technical things than paying attention to the upper-level administrative management. I wish I knew better about public administration knowledge but… do you think it is necessary for my job?" Small-city governments and the area of technical services tend to pay less attention to PA education and its academic link.

The other way we can catch the connection between the academic discipline and practice may be practitioners' preferred identification of the PA discipline over other disciplines in local government management. The survey asked the respondents, "In your view, what is the most relevant academic discipline in local government management?" As reported in Table 3, 113 (70%) out of 162 managers responded that PA is the most relevant discipline. Business administration is ranked as the second-most relevant discipline by 32 (20%), followed by public policy, urban policy/administration, economics, political science, and sociology. When the weighted counts (weights given were 3 to most relevant, 2 to second-most, and 1 to third-most) were compared, PA looks much more relevant to the practice of public administration than other academic disciplines, more than double compared to business administration. The PA discipline seems to be recognized as the main field of academia for PA practice. Despite the recognition, local managers often mentioned the usefulness of business administration in general management. One county manager said, "I do not see any big difference between MPA and MBA. I think MBA graduates, compared to MPA graduates, could bring more technical and advanced business techniques

that we need to improve our performance in the time of rapid changing environment. On the other hand, MPA graduates have better understanding of overall governing processes than MBA graduates. Ideally I think MPA and business program education together are the education and skills needed in the future by local government managers."

The importance of an MPA degree was also adopted as a proxy measure for its relevance to practice. As shown in Table 4, the question of "how important is it that a potential job candidate for local government has an MPA degree?" shows that 51% perceive it as "somewhat important" and about 21% responded it was "important." Also, local managers tend to agree that MPA graduates have a clear understanding of what is expected of a public manager in local governments. Regarding another question of "how relevant or irrelevant is the job skill set of MPA graduates to the typical public manager job description in local government?" about 88% of the respondents thought either "very relevant" or "somewhat relevant." These questions were not intended to measure the usefulness and value of MPA education but to identify the closeness of MPA education to practical skills and job preparedness. In the interviews, most managers commonly mentioned that an MPA is a unique academic program to teach skills and knowledge needed in government agencies. One finance department director in city government said, "My skills that I learned in my MPA program helped me get this job and improve my ability to adapt to this environment. I think no other academic field can better prepare our future employees than MPA programs." Again, the perception of local government managers shows that PA education is closely relevant to PA practice.

One way we could estimate the value of an MPA degree is by asking local government managers, "How important is it that a potential job candidate for local government has an MPA degree?" To evaluate this question properly,

adopted a model to see what characteristics and credentials of managers affect the perception of importance of an MPA degree. The independent variables include city manager (versus county manager), population size, years of public service, MPA degree holding, level of education, ICMA membership, academic meeting attendance, age, and gender. However, ASPA membership was excluded because only four managers maintained its membership. The variables are described in Table 1. Since population is very skewed to the right, it was converted to a natural log to make a proper estimation. Table 5 presents correlations among the variables. Since there are significant correlations among the independent variables, particularly between an MPA degree and education level, between an MPA degree and ICMPA membership, between age and years of public service, multicollinearity was examined by VIF; the result shows a very low possibility of a multicollinearity problem. As shown in Table 6, the overall model fit is moderate – about 26% of the variation is explained by the set of the variables, but only MPA degree holders are significantly associated with the dependent variable, holding other variables constant. Based on the model, city or county difference does not seem to make any significant difference in local managers' view of the importance of an MPA degree. Similarly, population size as a proxy variable for the size of jurisdiction is not significant. Although younger managers and women are relatively less supportive of the importance, the significance levels are not strong enough.

Local managers who have an MPA degree evaluated the usefulness and value of their education to practice in local government. Overall, they are very satisfied with their education experience. As indicated in Table 7, almost 48% indicated that MPA experience is very useful for their current job; it is somewhat useful for 49%. They also strongly recommend MPA programs for their colleagues who do not have an MPA degree:

52% very strongly and 28% strongly. For future employees who will work for local governments, they recommend the program even more strongly (61% very strongly and 27% strongly). On average, they feel that city and county managers should get an MPA degree (85%).

The competencies that are mainly taught in PA education could be a critical link to PA practice (Lazenby, 2010). Practitioners might demand different competencies from those that educators prefer. The difference could eventually determine the distance between discipline and practice. Thus, exploring important competencies that practitioners desire would be a significant task. The survey asked the respondents to write four of the most important competencies for future local government managers. Table 8 shows 22 competencies by rank. This study did not factorize similar competencies together, but rather used original responses as much as possible to convey their preferred terms that they use daily. Therefore, some competencies are similar. Local managers often mixed soft skills with people skills implying a broader meaning — including interpersonal skills, communication skills, attitude, cultural understanding, willingness to learn/serve, maturity, and work ethic. In terms of rank, with 17.3% of the response, financial skills are the most important. The second-most important competency is leadership. Managerial skills, soft skills, communication skills, human resource management, planning, and such followed. Regarding the competency issue, the interviews with managers produced rich reactions. One financial director commented, "If anybody has a very good knowledge in financing and accounting, I think she or he is better qualified to be a manager in local governments. Financing and accounting are a major technical service, particularly, in the general administration side."

One city manager also similarly responded, "I know many city managers had served as a financial director before they moved up to a

Table 5. Correlation matrix

Variables	1	2	3	4	5	6	7	8	9	10
1. Importance of MPA degree for local government job candidates	1									
2. City Government Manager	0.014	1								
3. Pop (Ln)	0.146	-.532**	1							
4. Years of public services	0.054	-0.103	.230**	1						
5. MPA holder	.445**	-0.119	.391**	.298**	1					
6. Level of education	.334**	-.220**	.523**	.199*	.584**	1				
7. ICMA membership	.245**	-0.078	.400**	0.163	.365**	.499**	1			
8. Academic meeting attendance	.188*	-0.015	-0.014	0.007	0.138	0.102	0.163	1		
9. Age	-0.106	-0.059	-0.048	.361**	-.198*	-.183*	-0.037	0.041	1	
10. Gender	0.053	-.226**	.471**	.326**	.201*	.487**	.288**	0.054	0.128	1

** Correlation is significant at the 0.01 level (2-tailed).

* Correlation is significant at the 0.05 level (2-tailed).

Table 6. Importance of MPA degree for local government job candidates

Variable	Unstandardized B	Beta Weight	t	Sig.	VIF
City Manager (City Manager =1, Others =0)	.138	.064	.580	.563	1.487
Population (Log)	.004	.008	.058	.954	2.074
Years of service	.023	.037	.327	.744	1.538
MPA degree (Yes=1, No=0)	.627	.378	3.275	.001	1.642
Level of Education	.106	.136	1.144	.256	1.740
ICMA member (Member =1, other=0)	.041	.023	.212	.833	1.401
Academic meeting attendance (Yes=1, No=0)	.245	.147	1.574	.119	1.074
Age	-.020	-.024	-.222	.825	1.418
Gender (Male=1, Female=0)	-.077	-.038	-.348	.729	1.484
Model Fit	R^2=.264, F=3.620, Sig=.001				

N = 101

Table 7. Evaluation of MPA Education by MPA holders

Items	Measurement				
How useful is your study experience in the MPA program for your current job?	Very useful	Somewhat useful	Somewhat not useful	Not useful at all	N
	27	27	1	1	56
	47.7%	49.2%	1.5%	1.5%	100.0%
How strongly would you recommend an MPA program for your colleagues in your workplace who do not have an MPA degree?	Very strongly	Strongly	A little	Never	
	29	15	11	1	56
	52.2%	27.5%	18.8%	1.4%	100.0%
How strongly would you recommend an MPA program for future employees who will work for local governments?	Very strongly	Strongly	A little	Never	
	34	15	5	2	56
	61.4%	27.1%	8.6%	2.9%	100.0%
I feel that city and county managers should get an MPA degree.	Strongly agree	Agree	Disagree	Strongly disagree	
	29	19	5	2	55
	51.4%	34.3%	11.4%	2.9%	100.0%

city or county manager's position. Handling budget and resources, advancedskills in finance is necessary more than any other things." Another city manager commented, "We need someone who have enough soft skills. I mean, communication skill and writing skill for grants are really important." Similarly, one personnel director said, "We have worked with XX University on an internship program for the past several years. Most MPA students seem to lack the soft skills and tact necessary to work in a political environment. I've also noted a lack of knowledge when it comes to matters of state and local government." Managers highly recommended technical skills, but also emphasized work ethic, good fit, and team player. One personnel manager had a clear view about that: "Technical skills are important, but we are looking for someone who fits our organization. Technical skills can be taught and mentored later but I don't know how we can change personality and attitude." Although their comments are diverse, they think a future leader should have enough advanced technical skills, soft/people skills, and a good work ethic.

However, there are some differences in the rank of competencies between managers who have MPA degrees and managers who have no MPA degree, as reported in Table 8. The most notable difference seems to be soft skill; the latter ranks it as the second-most important competency. They also regard people skill, general administration, and management more importantly, whereas the former picks leadership, communication skill, analytical skill, ethics, collaboration, and community building for a higher rank. The former appears to pick competencies that have been more visible in the recent professional publications and academic literature, while the latter sticks to the traditional competencies and the daily managerial focus. The difference might come from a study effect in which MPA degree holders had more chances to learn and were more aware of these topics and issues

Table 8. Most Important Competencies for Future Local Government Managers

Rank	Competencies	Total		MPA degree holders		Others	
		Frequency	Rel. %	Frequency	Rel.%	Frequency	Rel.%
1	financial skill	82	17.3%	38	18.8%	44	16.2%
2	Leadership	49	10.4%	27	13.4%	22	8.1%
3	Management	45	9.5%	20	9.9%	25	9.2%
4	soft skill	39	8.2%	5	2.5%	34	12.5%
5	communication skill	37	7.8%	18	8.9%	19	7.0%
6	human resource	29	6.1%	10	5.0%	19	7.0%
7	Planning	28	5.9%	13	6.4%	15	5.5%
8	public policy	21	4.4%	8	4.0%	13	4.8%
9	Administration	20	4.2%	3	1.5%	17	6.3%
10	people skill	15	3.2%	5	2.5%	10	3.7%
11	analytical/evaluative skill	13	2.7%	7	3.5%	6	2.2%
12	problem solving	13	2.7%	6	3.0%	7	2.6%
13	economic development	12	2.5%	3	1.5%	9	3.3%
14	Ethics	12	2.5%	8	4.0%	4	1.5%
15	legal knowledge	10	2.1%	3	1.5%	7	2.6%
16	Technology	10	2.1%	6	3.0%	4	1.5%
17	Collaboration	9	1.9%	8	4.0%	1	0.4%
18	common sense	8	1.7%	2	1.0%	6	2.2%
19	community building	6	1.3%	6	3.0%	0	0.0%
20	Experience	5	1.1%	0	0.0%	5	1.8%
21	job knowledge	5	1.1%	4	2.0%	1	0.4%
22	working with public	5	1.1%	2	1.0%	3	1.1%
Total		473	100.0%	202	100.0%	271	100.0%

Given the differences between MPA-holders and others, an interesting question would be: why do local government managers who have no MPA degree or similar degree/certificate not consider getting one? The reasons might reveal their attitude toward MPA education. As shown in Table 9, the most frequent reason was that their job does not require advanced study of public administration (29%). According to the interviews, some local governments require an MPA degree in hiring a new city or county manager. However, they do not require it for lower level jobs. Such a requirement policy seems to greatly affect the motivation to apply for an MPA program. Other major reasons are "I have no time," "I cannot afford to study," "I am too old to study," and "I am simply not interested."

Another way by which we can evaluate the usefulness of PA education for PA practice could be where local managers get their ideas to improve their organizational performance. In other words, the question addresses how much they rely on academic sources to improve their practical performance. As reported in Table 10, local government managers depend mostly on government sources such as collaboration with managers in other agencies (24.5%), government

Table 9. Reasons for Not Considering an MPA or a Similar Degree/Certificate

Rank	Reasons	Frequency	Rel. %
1	My job does not require an advanced study of public administration	43	28.9%
2	I have no time	29	19.5%
3	I cannot afford to study	13	8.7%
4	I am too old to study	11	7.4%
5	I am simply not interested	11	7.4%
6	I already have enough knowledge	9	6.0%
7	I have never heard about the degree	8	5.4%
8	No institution offers the degree near my home	6	4.0%
9	I am not qualified to apply for the program	5	3.4%
10	Degree programs seem not to provide useful knowledge for my job	2	1.3%
11	Others	12	8.1%
	(N= 80)	149	100.0%

Table 10. New Idea Sources to Improve Organizational Performance

Rank	New Idea Sources	Frequency	Rel. %
1	Collaboration with managers in other agencies	95	24.5%
2	Government training opportunities	91	23.5%
3	Professional public administration societies' publications (e.g., ICMA PM Magazine)	72	18.6%
4	Government newsletters	42	10.8%
5	Direct suggestions from the general public	35	9.0%
6	News media (Newspapers, TV, Websites)	18	4.6%
7	Academic public administration/management journals (e.g., PAR)	17	4.4%
8	Direct inputs from the legislature	8	2.1%
9	Others	10	2.6%
	(N= 158)	388	100.0%

training opportunities (23.5%), and government newsletters (10.8%). The sources of practitioners' societies such as professional public administration societies' publications (e.g., *ICMA PM Magazine*) are also influential (18.6%). However, they rarely refer to academic sources for their practical use: academic public administration or management journals account for only 4.4% in new idea sources that local managers use. In the interviews, local managers seemed to have a consensus opinion about the phenomenon. A manager commented, "In the practical world of local management, it is very useful and easier to learn from fellow local government managers or government professionals who have expertise on each specialty. In terms of academic sources, I am not sure how I can access. Even if I can, I might not be qualified to understand their work." The practitioners' lack of interest in academic sources is also seen in professional membership: while 83 managers have a membership with ICMA and 121 managers with Georgia City-County Management Association (GCCMA), only 4 managers are current ASPA members. During the past three years, 69 managers (44.5%) out of 155 responded that they attended a meeting

(e.g., conference) that was hosted by PA academic organizations.

Discussion

At the beginning, this study brought in a major connection question between the PA discipline and practice by focusing on the role of MPA education in local PA practice, and on the competencies that are desired for future managers. The overall finding shows that local government managers generally perceive that PA is its professional home discipline and are satisfied with the quality and usefulness of PA education. The results are not all positive, however, as there seem to be mixed opportunities and challenges. The lack of awareness of MPA programs among local government managers is surprising but at the same time appears to be an important opportunity for PA education. More local government managers without a PA degree will have learning opportunities by joining MPA programs, whereas MPA programs could have more chances to work with local government agencies and managers. For managers who do not have enough time to attend schools, taking online classes could be another option, which more and more MPA programs started to offer recently, not many practitioners are aware.

A more alarming issue may be the lack of engagement between both sides. Although local practitioners value the quality of the PA education and the graduates very highly, they seem to be less motivated to collaborate with PA scholars in order to deal with their practical needs or problem-solving activities. As the data indicated, they rarely join academic meetings. Also, they rarely use updated knowledge that has been developed and taught on the academic side. There are various barriers for them to access the knowledge, as already discussed in the previous pages, such as knowledge gap, technical issues, user fees, lack of practicality,

and lack of relevance. Although this study does not claim that all academicians and practitioners should engage and collaborate with each other actively, a closer relationship between theory/education and practice would be ideal for both sides, as already claimed by many others (Handley, 2005; Denhardt et al, 1997; McWite, 2001; Cunningham & Weschler, 2002; Ospina & Dodge, 2005; Bowman, 1998).

At the local level, the common venues where PA academicians and practitioners interact are local ASPA chapters and MPA programs. The former often provide opportunities for MPA faculty, practitioners, and current students to discuss local and regional issues, and represent PA professionalism regionally. Practitioners are also engaged in chapter leadership. Therefore, if chapter activities are drawing more people from both sides, chapters could be a more effective venue that narrows the distance between academicians and practitioners. For example, as some of the interviewees mentioned in this study, chapter conferences generally provide easier access for students and practitioners to share their research in a professional setting, through which students and practitioners discuss with faculty participants focusing on more local issues. Such a gathering could strengthen a regional nexus of PA professionalism in which practitioners acting as a demand force and students/academicians as a supply force can create a synergistic effect. Similarly, MPA programs could attract more local government employees by offering need-based courses that meet the needs of regional local governments. Under an open system, MPA programs try to take advantage of environmental niches that afford them an edge when competing with other MPA programs within their regions (Gabris, Nelson, & Davis, 2010). Because the majority of MPA graduates begin their careers within the same region as the program itself (Gabris, Nelson, & Davis, 2010), MPA programs should work harder to align with the changing

environment in local governments. MPA programs and scholars need to seek more opportunities to collaborate with local managers for practical assessment and improvement in local government. MPA programs provide skills and knowledge, while practitioners bring experiences and practical issues. Collaborating on a local project could be a great learning experience for both MPA students/faculty and practitioners (Gabris, Nelson, & Davis, 2010).

In terms of desirable competencies/skills that practitioners expect from MPA education, this study shows some differences from previous studies. While this study identifies financial skill, leadership skill, managerial skill, soft skill, and communication skill as the top five most important skills by rank, Lazenby (2010) identified decision-making/problem-solving, ethics and integrity, situation analysis, communication skills, leadership, teamwork, and budgeting and financial management among the top by a meta-analysis of three previous ICMA-based surveys. Lazenby also identified ethics, community building, human relations, other traits, IP communication, and leadership among the most essential competencies, from his own Delphi expert panels formed through ICMA and NASPAA committees. The results show some differences each time, mainly because the survey samples are different. Since this study included more non-ICMA members and managers from smaller local governments, they might be interested more in line-manager skills such as financial and managerial skills. Stillman (1982) found a similar result through a survey with more than 2,000 local government mangers, financial/budgeting skills to be the most important skill with a 2-to-1 margin. Although MPA courses typically cover the major competencies of financial skills, Grizzle (1985) found that a single course in the budgeting and financial management area rarely covers analytic skills, such as cost revenue analysis, financial condition evaluation, cost-benefit analysis, and

governmental accounting. Such a need for financial skills in local government was often documented through various surveys (Henry, 1979; Stillman, 1982; Grizzle, 1985).

Another important skill that local government managers chose were soft and people-based skills. Without having a unified definition, they tend to broadly include several meanings such as interpersonal communications, people skills, group process, and community building. Lazenby (2010) found that MPA programs cover those skills relatively less through an MPA curricula content analysis. Communication, critical thinking, and collaboration are critical skills for entry-level public service employees (Kerrigan, 2013; Raffel et al, 2011). Some managers include cultural competency in soft skills by emphasizing the importance of being fit to the organizational culture. Carrizales (2010) asserted that cultural competency discourse in academia sets the necessary foundation for future public administrators working in increasingly diverse populations. He provides a framework for a cultural competency curriculum in public affairs based on four conceptual approaches: knowledge-based, attitude-based, skills-based, and community-based (Carrizales, 2010). Although we recognize the importance of greater relevance and practicality (Denhardt et al., 1997) of these skills, it would not be realistic to offer independent courses for soft skills in the traditional MPA course curriculum. Rather, students could enhance those skills through a well-designed service and experiential learning that requires active transactions with more diverse participants including practitioners (Cunningham & Weschler, 2002; Denhardt et al., 1997). Also, practitioner guest speeches focusing on soft skills would directly benefit MPA students who generally are not aware of the practical importance of those skills.[5]

The academic community should provide practitioners more convenient access to the resources and information that local managers

want to use for their needs. Making academic work more available to practitioners is very important (Aaron & Watson, 2010). However, diverse barriers prevent practitioners from accessing academic works: expensive fees for use, technical difficulties of publications, and lack of applicability. Concerted efforts are currently being made to deal with the problems in the academic community. Some journals (for example, *PAR*) recently added practitioners' perspectives and summaries for practitioners to use to increase practitioners' readership. Also, academic conferences (for example, the ASPA annual conference) are attempting to be more open to practitioners by creating more practitioner-oriented forums and seminars. Such a movement should also be made at the local level. MPA programs could identify local issues and host a community-wide public forum (one of the survey respondents suggested) in which local public managers, nonprofit organization managers, and any interested residents could join. PA scholars and students should be encouraged to share their knowledge to assist local managers in dealing with common problems. This may also benefit MPA programs, particularly small ones, in searching for a meaningful role in the external community.

Conclusion

This study reviewed the status of the relationship between the PA academic and practice communities at the local level, while highlighting the role of MPA programs. It found that as a local anchor of PA professionalism, MPA programs are playing an active role in educating future PA professionals through building a closer relationship with practitioners and their professional organizations. Practitioners are generally satisfied with PA education that MPA programs provide. Yet they also demand important practical skills that MPA programs

might want to consider in the process of designing curriculum, advising students, and enhancing skill-components in instruction methods. Although some ideas are not new but recurring, it would be very worthwhile sharing the current status quo and developing a consensus for the future. In a nutshell, MPA programs, local practitioners, and local professional organizations (both academic and practitioner-based) need to form a "triple-helix" model[6] of collaboration and move toward one community.

The results of this study, however, should be interpreted cautiously because of the limited sample and responses; this study used only one state sample, focusing on upper-level administrators in city and county governments. In addition, because of the limited space, it does not appropriately address the issue of academic rigor versus practical needs in teaching PA courses. Thus, it is highly recommended that future studies use more diverse samples from both sides and provide forums to develop a broader perspective of knowledge and skills for future leaders.

Notes

1. For example, according to the ASPA (https://www.aspanet.org/ASPA/About-ASPA/ASPA/About-ASPA/About-ASPA.aspx?hkey=ca893802-9bb7-4541-a68e-6d24c185ad77), 40% of the ASPA membership is practitioners. Among the practitioner members, 52% is local government employees. Compared to the size of the overall local government manager pool, we could estimate that a small fraction of them participates in ASPA.

2. The author does not have a nation-wide statistic that show practitioners' attendance in local chapter events such as annual chapter conferences and

workshops. The statement is based upon the author's observations and experiences.

3. For example, the ICMA Annual Report 2018 shows that 1.3% of the membership are professors.

4. Carl Vinson Institute of Government coordinates and provides educational classes for the GCCMA and works with the association to offer the conferences and training services.

5. For example, Dr. Raphael Bostic, president/CEO of Federal Reserve Bank of Atlanta, identified three components of soft skills such as "be calm, listen, and embrace" while delivering his guest speech at the 2018 NASPAA Conference in Atlanta, Georgia.

6. The triple-helix model epitomizes the collaborative relationship in the national innovation system in which universities/research institutions, industry, and government form a close collaborative network (Leydesdorff, 2000). This system is often regarded as a key enforcer for innovation and further development.

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