

## FEATURES

# Two Perspectives on Local Government Management Internship Programs

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by Rob Baker and Carol Granfield, Springfield, Ohio, and Meredith, New Hampshire.

## Helping Prepare the Next Generation

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In 1993, this author had a brainstorm while trying to work out a local government summer internship for one of my students in her hometown of Muscatine, Iowa. Having a background in small-town administration, I am aware of the fact that local governments have projects that need attention but a lack of resources prevents their completion.

Undergraduate students are clamoring for meaningful internship experiences that will enhance their understanding of the real world of local government management and at the same time, help them make important decisions about their futures. These two facts, in addition to my preference for experiential learning options, helped me in developing an integrated internship program for students interested in management.

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My experiences taught me that positive internships had to meet the needs of three key stakeholders: 1) the local government host, 2) the student intern, and 3) the academic institution.

## Genesis of the Program

To meet these specific needs I devised a program that consists of an internship combined with an academic seminar that is portable and conducted under the auspices of any local government jurisdiction. Students would be placed as interns in local government departments for a period of nine weeks and given one or more projects to complete by the end of the program.

They also would take a class twice a week and attend selected local government meetings. Aside from teaching the seminar, my role would be one of daily mentor and administrator at the work site for students to consult on their projects, to troubleshoot any issues regarding supervision, and to help facilitate the independent work that would be required for the students to complete their projects. Since the internships would be unpaid and students would be paying tuition, it seemed the only way this would be financially feasible was if the host local government provided the housing and utilities. Given these basic parameters, I proposed the idea to a colleague who at the time was city administrator of Grand Island, Nebraska.



Town Manager Carol Granfield welcomes the ICMA/Wittenberg 2005 Local Government Management Interns to Meredith, New Hampshire. The interns participated in regular management team meetings and community meetings, as well as attended class two evenings a week.

He was enthusiastic, and we began planning how to pilot the program the following summer. In 1994, 13 students participated in the initial program, which proved to be a great success. It was followed by two more iterations-Fernandina Beach, Florida, in 1997, and Grand Island, in 2000-and numerous projects were completed for the host local governments. A list of projects can be found on the Web site at [www.localintern.org](http://www.localintern.org).

In an effort to expand the program to new localities, I worked to get commitments from potential hosts that had expressed an interest in it, only to have them drop out during the planning stages for various reasons. I was frustrated because I knew the value of the tremendous work students were accomplishing for the communities that had initially agreed to participate.

The students were uniformly energized, and the host governments were able to obtain-essentially for free-the full-time services of eager college students who were supervised by university staff with extensive local government experience. The only cost to the government was housing, and they were at liberty to be creative to work out agreeable arrangements.

It was at this point that I thought the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) could be a clearinghouse for highlighting the benefits of the program, and it seemed that ICMA might view this as a way to promote the local government management profession to undergraduates.

As it turns out, the Association had been focusing intently on what it viewed as a "quiet crisis" of a graying profession. It was launching new initiatives to try to offset trends that seemed to suggest a potentially serious lack of new managers coming into the profession to fill pending retirements. Much of ICMA's effort, however, was focused on graduate students.

Since my program was for undergraduates, it could fill another niche in ICMA's Next Generation strategic plan. In the winter of 2003-2004, I proposed to the ICMA staff that we partner resources to pilot a process where potential local government hosts could submit proposals to ICMA, and ICMA would provide a clearinghouse and publicity function for the program.

This effort was agreeable with all parties, and the first go-round was the fall of 2004 for a summer 2005 inauguration of the new partnership. Initially, some seven potential hosts demonstrated interest and Meredith, New Hampshire, was chosen as the first local government participant.

### **Pilot Program**

#### **Interested in hosting the LGMI Program for a summer?**

Contact Rob Carty by phone at (202) 962-3560, or by email at [rcarty@icma.org](mailto:rcarty@icma.org). For more information, visit [icma.org/nextgen](http://icma.org/nextgen) and look for the LGMI under the "Programs" tab.

Meredith was an ideal site for the pilot program for several reasons. First, Town Manager Carol Granfield was enthusiastic and extremely supportive of the need to help educate young people about careers in local government management.

Second, as a smaller town but located in a popular summer tourist area, Meredith had been experiencing significant growing pains, which its small-sized staff was struggling to deal with. Several projects had to be left unattended as staff members worked diligently to wrestle with providing quality services in the midst of tremendous growth pressures.

Third, as a New England town, the style of government presented a unique learning opportunity for the students. Given these advantages, Carol and I, along with program co-director, Dr. Jeff Ankrom, began planning for our arrival in Meredith on May 29. Carol's experiences in this regard, as well as her assessment of the program, follow.

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## Planning and Implementing the LGMI Program

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As a local government manager for more than 32 years, I must say that one of the primary challenges of managing a small community is having sufficient staff and expertise to handle the varied tasks and projects that the community and elected officials expect to be addressed effectively and efficiently.

Meredith, New Hampshire, has a permanent population of just over 6,700. As a quaint tourist community on Lake Winnepesaukee, however, the population triples during the summer and fall foliage seasons. With fewer than 100 employees, department heads and the manager must wear several hats and juggle many activities. Consequently, I am always seeking grant opportunities, volunteer work, and other innovations to accomplish progressive, beneficial, and cost-effective community projects.

After reading about a joint venture between the ICMA and Wittenberg University seeking a community to host a Local Government Management Internship Program (LGMIP), I thought, "What a great idea." Given Meredith's small size and corresponding resources, it seemed like the kind of opportunity that would help provide assistance to accomplish various projects our departments need to be working on but often don't have the time or resources to begin or complete. So I decided to pursue the possibility of Meredith hosting the program.

While the program's advantages were evident, several hurdles needed to be crossed. The first was to gain support from Meredith's elected officials and management team. The board offered support if there was no cost to the town, although they were somewhat apprehensive. The management team also understandably had mixed reactions and some concerns about the need to "train" the interns and supervise them adequately. I indicated that the purpose of the program was to be beneficial, not detrimental, and would seek more information to help all of us make the final decision.

### Program with Advantages

Two aspects of the program were particularly attractive. One was the opportunity to have several interns working for the town at no cost, providing the chance to mentor students interested in a public sector career. The benefits and challenges of public sector careers are often not known by college students, and I applaud Bob O'Neill and ICMA for promoting the venture to introduce these

opportunities, especially given the concern about the baby boomer generation (me included) retiring in large numbers over the next several years, taking vast experience with them.

The other unique aspect of LGMIP was the involvement of on-site professors who could answer various questions from the interns and point them in the right direction for research or contacts. These aspects were helpful to me in gaining support from my community.



The 2005 Local Government Management Interns outside the Local Government Center, Concord, New Hampshire. In the photo are (left to right): (Front row) Rob Baker, professor, Wittenberg University; Sarah Morgan, Willoughby, Ohio; Margret Zmrazek, Medina, Ohio; Carol Granfield, town manager, Meredith, New Hampshire; Ryan Deutschendorf, Northville, Michigan; and Michael Blum, New Albany, Indiana. (Middle row) Christina Vickers, Cincinnati, Ohio; Aaron Schmalzle, Nairobi, Kenya; Mike Judge, West Bloomfield, Michigan; and Jeff Auble, Noblesville, Indiana. (Back row) Peter Gillette, Mentor, Ohio; Josh Mishkin, Baltimore, Maryland, and Chase Cordial, Columbus, Ohio. A key step was developing the projects that interns would work on. I wanted to have a wide range of projects. Some were initially developed based on projects I had asked departments to do that just didn't get done due to a lack of time, personnel, or funding for consultants. Others came from staff suggestions.

My goal was to have the projects as fully detailed as possible before the interns arrived. I also planned a first-day orientation with the management team, a bus tour of the town, and a dinner the first evening that included an invitation to the sponsors. A challenge was arranging housing for the nine-week program at no cost to the town, particularly since it was during our prime tourist season and typical hotel space was limited. Host families were an option but not preferred, as the intent was to keep the interns together and make them fairly self-sufficient.

Through business associates connected with Plymouth State University, 20 miles away, I was able to find a relatively inexpensive rental-housing unit in Plymouth. To fund the cost, I sent letters to various businesses, civic organizations, governmental groups, and spoke to the local Rotary Club. I outlined the projects that would be completed and as a result, was able to receive funding for housing the professor and interns for the entire period of time.

We found that local governments can be quite creative with housing options. Aside from Meredith's use of sponsors to pay for lodging at a rooming house, examples from the previous programs included turning offices in an old city hall into bedrooms and the break room into a kitchen; renting a multi-bedroom house for the students and putting the professor up in an inexpensive motel suite; and renting apartments from a local business college.

### **Making it Interesting**

I attempted to provide the interns with broad exposure to many facets of local government. They attended board of selectmen meetings, as well as the state manager's conference; participated in a meeting and tour of the state municipal association; and attended an ICMA Web cast. Individual department heads also involved interns in their department and professional meetings.

The turnaround from apprehension and skepticism to total acceptance and support happened the very first week at a selectmen's meeting that was televised on cable TV. The selectmen not only welcomed the interns but publicly commented that they were mistaken in their original apprehension as they already had seen the positive benefits.

Initial skepticism of some department heads also quickly abated. In the first week, for example, I had a department head tell me that he had to talk to me about a problem. The professor and I met with him and learned that he thought his department was going to be assigned one of the interns but that the intern was also working on another department's project. This concern was addressed by designating the intern solely to his department for several projects. Now, instead of not wanting the interns, departments were vying for them.

Interns accomplished a significant number of positive projects, including a citizen perception survey with an estimated value of several thousand dollars if completed by a consultant, which provided Meredith with a report card on services, a town-wide sign inventory, a multi-year playground equipment replacement program, and a comprehensive parking-space study.

The projects will not only assist Meredith but can be models for other communities as project information will be provided to state municipal associations as a resource. Meredith also realized some intangible benefits by hosting the program. Most significantly, the interns' positive energy rekindled employee enthusiasm for more program innovations and involvement.

### **Consider Hosting**

My advice to local government managers is to seriously consider hosting the internship program. Key aspects to begin working on are sponsorships to assist with housing if that is a concern. Options to seek for housing include hotels, colleges, and other group-type facilities.

A primary focus can also be to identify several projects that can be started immediately upon the interns' arrival. This can be done by simply thinking of all the items you have on the to-do list that have not yet been accomplished. Also, review what projects you have requested departments to work on that have not yet been completed for various reasons.

Preplanning and organization are important. I encourage anyone who is interested in pursuing this program to contact me. I'd be happy to share experiences and offer suggestions.

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