The Learning Projects of Municipal Elected Officials

An Executive Summary of the Research Conducted in Collaboration with

the University of Tennessee Municipal Technical Advisory Service

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March 2017

Introduction to the Study

Elected officials in local government frequently assume office with no prior knowledge of their formal responsibilities and are often compelled to learn on the job. Local elected officials are selected from among average citizens in a community and rarely come to the job with the necessary knowledge and skills. In smaller towns and cities, newly elected officials may find their access to educational resources is limited.

In 1971, Canadian educator Allen Tough published the results of his research on adult learning projects, which he described as a "highly deliberate effort to gain certain knowledge and skills (or to change in some other way)" (p. 1). Among his participants were mayors and city councilmembers from two cities. The elected officials in Tough's study were very active in their own learning. His typical elected official spent an average of 1,189 hours in 6.7 learning projects each year. These projects included both personal and work-related learning projects.

Now, more than 40 years later, colleges and universities, cooperative extension, the philanthropic community, and good government organizations like the University of Tennessee Municipal Technical Advisory Service (MTAS) are providing governance education for local officials. Too often, however, local elected officials are either choosing not to participate in governance education or reside in small or isolated communities where such educational opportunities are less accessible.

Local officials may, therefore, decide to engage in their own learning activities to educate themselves about the various requirements of their role as a mayor or city councilmember. Pinpointing the barriers to learning that these political representatives encounter and the resources they use can impact the focus of organizations like MTAS

that involved in their training. This study resulted in a dissertation that may be

downloaded from the University of Tennessee Trace database at:

http://trace.tennessee.edu/utk_graddiss/3746/

Purpose Statement

The purpose of this exploratory study was to identify and describe what elected officials

learned in 2015 that related to their governmental role as a city councilmember or mayor.

In this revision and update of Allen Tough's study, a learning project was defined as a

combination of related learning episodes that are composed of seven or more hours of

dedicated time to an effort to gain knowledge and skill that relates to the participant's

governmental role.

The Role of MTAS in the Study

The researcher is an MTAS employee and recognized that having the cooperation of

MTAS would be paramount in reaching the potential participants in the study. Because

elected officials are often employed in a fulltime position in addition to serving as mayor

or councilmember, it can be difficult to contact and schedule time with them. MTAS

executive director Jim Thomas wrote an introductory letter to the participants, explaining

the importance of the study and encouraging the elected officials to participate. The four

MTAS management consultants who had cities represented in the study also contacted

the city managers, city administrators, and participants to encourage their participation.

Allen Tough's original interview questions were modified to focus only on those things

that elected officials might have learned in order to better fulfill their role as a mayor or

councilmember. Several MTAS staff pilot tested the interview questions to improve the

wording of the questions and to help the interviewer improve time management of the interview process.

In addition, MTAS allowed the researcher to travel to the cities and conduct the interviews during her regular workweek. After the research was completed, the researcher presented her findings to all the MTAS management consultants, the MTAS training team, and other MTAS staff who wanted to learn more about the study.

Participants in the Study

For the convenience of the researcher, the participants were selected from 12 cities in East Tennessee. Each of seven population groups were included within the 12 cities, with greater representation from the smaller cities in order to better mirror the population of cities in Tennessee. Out of a possible 68 elected officials, 41 agreed to be interviewed. The participants were a mix of mayors (26.8%), vice-mayors (19.5%), and city councilmembers (53.7%). More than half (56.1%) served in cities with city managers or chief administrative officers and 29.3% were in their first two years of service. Nearly three-fourths (73.2%) were men; 87.8% were age 50 or older; and, 61% held a bachelor's degree or higher.

Research Questions

The study addresses the following questions:

1. What was the number of learning projects conducted by elected municipal officials during the past 12 months (Calendar Year 2015)?

2. What was the thematic content of the learning projects?

3. How much time was spent on learning projects?

4. Who was the primary planner of the participants' learning projects?

5. What resources were used during the learning projects?

6. What barriers or obstacles were encountered while engaged in learning projects?

Interviews

Of the 68 mayors and councilmembers who were contacted, 41 agreed to be interviewed. Participation was strictly voluntary and the participants could withdraw at any time. The researcher contacted each potential participant with a telephone call to set up an appointment time and location for the interview. As often as possible, the researcher scheduled the interview at the city hall/municipal building.

Prior to beginning the actual interview, the researcher asked each participant to sign an informed consent form. The consent form was a requirement of the University of Tennessee Institutional Review Board. To protect the participants, no identifying information was collected. The interviewer assured participants that their responses would be kept confidential and that no names would be used in this study. Because anything said by these elected officials is subject to an open records request, great care was taken to disassociate the content of the interview from the participant's name.

During a face-to-face meeting with the participant, the researcher asked semi-structured questions. Although participants might describe many facets and details of their learning projects, the researcher recorded the time spent on the learning project, the subject matter of the project, the amount learned, the primary planner of the learning, resources used, and challenges or obstacles the participant encountered.

Data Analysis

Data analysis was conducted with the Statistical Package for Social Sciences (SPSS). The use of frequency and percentage distribution allowed for the accumulation of information

about the subject of the learning project, the resources used, the obstacles encountered, the number of learning projects, the hourly investment of time in pursuing the learning projects, and the primary project planner. Descriptive statistics were used to determine the mean, standard deviation, and other descriptive information from the data collected. In order to be able to compare her findings to previous learning projects research, the researcher also collected information about the individual learning projects, such as: the importance of the study to the participant; whether the participant was still actively learning about the project; how much the participant learned; the participants' enthusiasm for their projects; whether the learning project benefited others; whether the project was undertaken for credit; and the type of primary planner used.

Several demographic characteristics of the sample were selected for further analysis. They are: population of city; whether or not the participants served in cities with a city manager or chief administrative officer; the participant's elected office (mayor, vice-mayor, or councilmember); gender; age range; race; ethnicity; level of education; term of office; and years in office.

Using independent samples *t*-tests, the researcher determined the degree of association between the mean (average) number of learning projects conducted, as well as the mean (average) time spent on each learning project, with gender, city manager status, and years in office. One-way ANOVAs were used to analyze the average number of learning projects with the participants' elected office, terms of office, years in office, and city size. One-way ANOVAs were also used to analyze the average number of hours spent in each learning project with the participants' age range, elected office, terms of office, years in office, educational attainment, and city size. Cross-tabulations were used with primary

planners and a variety of demographic data, including gender, age range, elected office, term of office, years in office, educational attainment, city manager status, and size of city.

Analysis of Research Questions

This study explored the learning projects of elected municipal officials by posing six research questions.

Research question one: *What was the number of learning projects conducted by elected municipal officials during the past 12 months?*

The 41 participants interviewed reported that they conducted a total of 274 learning projects. The number of learning projects conducted by individual participants ranged from a minimum of two to a maximum of 16. The average number of their learning projects was 6.68. No significant differences were found in the number of learning projects conducted when considering the participants' gender, age, race, educational attainment, number of years in office, city size, or whether the city had a professional manager.

Research question two: *What was the thematic content of the learning projects?*

Learning about the city's budget was the most frequently undertaken learning project with 70.7% of the participants emphasizing how important learning about the budget was to them. Almost half (48.8%) of the elected officials agreed that economic development created important learning opportunities for them. Learning about topics centered on parks and recreation was reported by 41.5%; 36.6% of the participants described projects in planning and zoning; and 34.1% of the participants learned about issues with water and wastewater.

Research question three: *How much time was spent on learning projects?*

As in most of the earlier learning project studies, a minimum of seven hours had to be devoted to the learning project to be included in this study. Participants spent anywhere from seven to 1,000 hours on individual learning efforts. The average number of hours they devoted to a learning project was 76.8 hours. Each participant devoted an average of 513.24 hours annually to their learning efforts. The participants spent 40 or more hours on the majority (52.6%) of their learning projects. They spent between 20 and 39 hours on an additional 23.7% of their learning efforts and the remaining 23.7% required between seven and 18 hours. There were no significant differences in the number of hours the participants spent in learning when analyzed by gender, age, race, educational attainment, number of years in office, or size of city.

However, participants in cities with city managers or administrators spent significantly fewer hours, averaging 62.18 hours per learning project than participants in cities without a city manager, who averaged 90 hours on each learning project.

There were also significant differences found in the amount of time spent in learning about one particular topic according to the participants' roles. First, mayors devoted significantly more hours (119.74) per learning project than did vice-mayors (36.77). Mayors spent significantly more hours (119.74) per learning project than did councilmembers (76.59). Finally, councilmembers spent significantly more hours (76.59) per learning project than did vice-mayors (36.77).

Research question four: *Who was the primary planner of the participants learning projects?*

The primary planner of almost a third of the learning projects in this study was the individual learner/participant at 32.1%. Peer groups, often the council, board, or commission were the primary planners in 20.1% of the learning projects. A group with a professional was the primary planner in 19.3% of the learning projects. A mix of planners had the primary planning responsibility in 13.9% of the projects. The primary planner worked one-to-one with a professional in 12.0% of the learning projects. Less frequently used primary planners were a non-human resource as planner (1.5%) and one-to-one planning with a friend or relative (1.1%). No statistical differences were found when analyzing the demographic data collected with who planned the learning activities.

Research question five: *What resources were used during the learning projects?*

Each participant listed several resources for most individual learning projects. Resources were a mix of people, organizations, and objects. Participants identified 190 different resources that they consulted or used during their learning projects. Conversation was the most frequently reported resource and was identified by participants in 47 of the 274 learning projects (17.2%). The second most used resource was the board or council of the city with 34 occurrences (12.4%). City managers and other chief administrative officers garnered third place, being consulted in 29 learning projects (10.6%). Department heads and MTAS tied for fourth place with each being identified as a resource for 27 of the 274 (9.9%) learning projects. Slightly over half (51.6%) of the 190 resources were unique to one particular learning project.

Research question six: *What barriers or obstacles were encountered while engaged in learning projects?*

The participants itemized several barriers or obstacles for most individual learning

projects. Barriers and obstacles to learning were a mix of people, organizations, and objects. Participants identified 100 different obstacles or barriers to learning that they encountered during their learning projects. Participants identified lack of time as the most frequently encountered obstacle or barrier (75 occurrences) when they were engaged in the learning process during their 274 learning projects. Family obligations and work obligations tied for second place with 65 occurrences each. For 59 learning projects, participants indicated that they did not encounter any barriers during their learning activities. Several participants volunteered that it was up to them to solve any barriers or obstacles that they might otherwise encounter. Almost two-thirds (65%) of the 100 barriers or obstacles identified by individuals were unique to one individual learning project.

Major Findings

This study produced the following findings based on the responses to demographic questions, information gathered from city charters and population statistics, and responses to the six primary research questions:

1. During Calendar Year 2015, the 41 participants conducted a total of 274 learning projects related to their role as an elected official. Individually, they averaged 6.68 learning projects during the year with a range between 2 and 16 projects.

2. The thematic content of the 274 learning projects included 50 distinct topics, with the most frequently identified topics being budgets, economic development, parks and recreation, planning and zoning, and water and wastewater.

3. Participants spent an average of 76.80 hours on each learning project, with a range of 7 to 1,000 hours per project. The 41 elected officials devoted a total of

21,043 hours to their 274 learning projects, with each participant spending an average of 513.24 hours annually in learning efforts.

4. The learner was the primary planner in 32.1% of all learning projects. The peer group, in this case the city council, board, or commission, was the primary planner in 20.1% of all learning projects, followed by the group with a professional as primary planner in 19.3% of the learning projects.

5. The participants identified 190 resources that they used during their learning projects. Conversations with others was the most frequently cited resource, followed by a fellow board or council member, a city manager or other chief administrative officer, and a department head or MTAS.

6. The participants identified 100 obstacles or barriers to learning. The most frequently identified barriers to their learning projects were lack of time, family obligations, and work obligations. However, it is important to note that the participants reported that they encountered no obstacles or barriers to their learning in 21.5% of their learning projects.

7. Participants in cities with managers undertook slightly fewer projects and spent significantly fewer hours on their learning projects than did participants in cities without a chief administrative officer.

8. Most participants (86.9%) indicated that their learning projects were very important to them and were still active projects (96.7%). The elected officials believed their projects benefited others to a large extent (84.3%). The participants reported that they learned a lot in more than half (56.2%) of their learning projects and were very enthusiastic about what they learned in more than two thirds

(69.0%) of their learning activities. Very few projects (2.9%) were taken for any kind of credit.

9. Elected officials in their first two years of office conducted fewer learning projects, but devoted more time to their individual learning efforts than did their more experienced colleagues. The learner was the primary planner in fewer of the learning projects for those in their first or second year of office than for those who had held office longer.

10. The learning project experiences of municipal elected officials differed according to their elected role of mayor, vice-mayor, or councilmember. During the previous year, vice-mayors conducted the most learning projects, but spent the least amount of time on their individual projects. Mayors conducted the fewest number of projects, but spent the greatest number of hours on them. Mayors reported that nearly a third of their learning projects were conducted in a setting where the group with a professional was the primary planner. The learner was the primary planner for almost a third of councilmembers, aldermen/alderwomen, and commissioners.

11. Elected officials in large cities reported conducting the greatest number of learning projects and spending the most time in those learning activities. The learner was the primary planner in half the learning projects of participants in large cities.

12. While male and female elected officials conducted a similar number of learning projects, female participants spent more hours in their learning projects. The

learner was the primary planner in more of the learning projects conducted by men than in those conducted by women.

Because this is an exploratory study based on a small sample, the findings are not intended to be generalizable. The research results indicate that the municipal elected officials were extensively involved in deliberate learning efforts that contributed to their growth and development in their role as mayors, vice-mayors, and councilmembers. At the end of the interview, many participants expressed their surprise and satisfaction from considering the actual extent of their learning efforts during the past year. Their positive response suggests one specific benefit of using the face-to-face interview technique in this study.

Recommendations

In this study, the elected officials made several recommendations for organizations that are charged with supporting their learning efforts. Because these learners identified lack of time as their primary obstacle to learning, they suggested that having online courses would be beneficial. They also expressed the need to consult with subject specialists in a timely manner when they encounter a roadblock to subject-specific learning endeavors. These learners found value in the experiences of their peers in other cities and appreciated opportunities to interact with colleagues from similarly-sized municipalities to exchange ideas and share expertise. Many municipal elected officials noted the difference between running for elected office and holding office. Several recommended that an online course or a packet of information be developed, or that classes be held in several geographic regions of the state for those who are running for office.

Concluding Comments

In today's society, there are many factors that make it imperative that elected officials continue to develop professionally throughout their terms in office. The deliberate learning efforts of municipal officials contribute significantly to their professional growth and development. In addition to furthering their own professional development, the continued learning activities of mayors and councilmembers effect change and innovation in their respective cities and impact the daily lives of citizens. The overall learning efforts of municipal elected officials may benefit their cities and citizens even more if these individuals are recognized and encouraged and their learning efforts are facilitated by organizations like MTAS that share in the responsibility for their continuous educational growth.