

# State Municipal Associations as Intermediaries in Service Learning

Eric S. Zeemering, *University of Georgia, USA*


## ABSTRACT

Service-learning courses help students to identify career opportunities and foster civic engagement, but links to projects with local governments may be difficult to forge. State municipal associations are well positioned as intermediaries to link local governments and higher-education institutions, and their historic roots affirm their capacity to invest in the professionalization of the future public-service workforce. Yet, a recent survey of municipal associations revealed limited contact with higher-education institutions for the purpose of engaging students. Examples from Georgia, Iowa, and Washington highlight the potential role that municipal associations can have in the creation of service-learning opportunities for students. The demand for skilled workers in local government necessitates action by municipal associations and educators in political science to expand service-learning opportunities and access to local government.

Local governments in the United States are experiencing staffing challenges, including an increase in the departure of workers, consistent with what commentators have labeled “the great resignation” in the broader US workplace (Cohen 2021; Farmer 2022). The National League of Cities reported that local-government employment fell by more than 4% between March 2020 and March 2022 (Gottlieb and Bauer 2022). However, a 2023 survey on the state and local workforce by the MissionSquare Research Institute reported that the majority of respondents increased hiring during the year, and many municipalities adopted new recruiting strategies for difficult-to-fill positions (Young 2023).<sup>1</sup> Local governments continue to undertake new tasks following the COVID-19 pandemic with aid from the American Rescue Plan Act. Cities and counties also continue hiring in the wake of generational transition in the workforce (Svara 2010). This employment churn may benefit students of political science and public administration who are ready to enter the job market, but they must be prepared. State and local government jobs often demand postsecondary education or experience in government (US Bureau of Labor Statistics 2022). A career in local government is attractive to many students because the direct engagement with the public and street-level

policy implementation allows them to see the immediate impact of their work for a community and its residents (Rose 2015). Public-sector work is attractive to students with high levels of public-service motivation, and multiple studies have highlighted a link between students’ attitudes about serving others and a public-sector career choice (Bright 2017; Henstra and McGowan 2016; Ko and Jun 2015; Pedersen 2013; Wright, Hassan, and Christensen 2017).

To prepare students for the public-sector workforce, academic programs offer internships to expose them to work in government, expand professional networks, and apply skills from the classroom (Murphy 1973). Service-learning courses featuring projects with government agencies comprise another model that exposes students to local-government career opportunities (Redlawsk and Rice 2009). Gaining hands-on experience through service learning provides a valuable opportunity for students to see how their interest in public service connects to real employment prospects at the local level. The expansion of service learning has been a priority for many higher-education institutions, and political scientists have incorporated service learning to illuminate public policy and civic action (Bringle and Hatcher 2000; Carpini and Keeter 2013). Yet, faculty face challenges in developing and teaching service-learning courses; one of the most difficult is establishing relationships with local partners in the field. To help more students participate in service learning with local government agencies, state municipal associations can play an intermediary role that links local governments and classrooms.

Eric S. Zeemering  is associate professor of public administration and policy and Master of Public Administration Director at the University of Georgia. He can be reached at [eric.zeemering@uga.edu](mailto:eric.zeemering@uga.edu).

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State municipal associations have the potential to play a facilitative role in the expansion of service-learning opportunities for students. Typically, political science research investigates public-interest groups and professional associations because of their lobbying activities (Haider 1974; Jensen 2018); however, state municipal associations also have a role in local government training and capacity development. According to Arnold and Plant (1994), government associations made notable contributions to the development of the administrative state during the twentieth century through an emphasis on professionalism in public administration, leadership development, and subnational capacity building for intergovernmental program implementation. Unfortunately, few subsequent studies monitored the educational and capacity-building work of municipal associations (Battaglio 2008; Paddock 1996).

This article describes a survey of state municipal associations and key-informant interviews with three association leaders that shed light on how municipal associations can broker relationships between cities and universities. Brokering links between local governments and higher education can benefit all participants. Students benefit from exposure to local government, learning about the scope of careers available and applying classroom skills (Peddle and Zeemering 2018). Local governments benefit from easier access to the expertise of university faculty and support for small projects that require more time and labor than is currently available (Imperial, Perry, and Katula 2007; Jones, Goldfinger, and Koponen 2009). As a result, state municipal associations will be

to connect cities to the state's universities and system of higher education. Therefore, we should hypothesize variation in the extent to which municipal associations engage as intermediaries in service learning.

Service learning is one component of a broader agenda to enhance experiential learning in higher education by forging links between what happens in the classroom and the wider community served by colleges and universities (Boyer 1990; Fitzgerald et al. 2012). Service learning can illuminate career paths and job opportunities for students, and carefully crafted programs may yield broad civic benefits. Students who participate in service-learning courses report higher levels of civic responsibility and intentions for future civic action (Hébert and Hauf 2015; Hunter and Brisbin, Jr. 2000; Moely et al. 2002). Campbell (2000), for example, argued that experiences that strengthen bonds of connectedness may enhance students' future collective action. Therefore, many faculty in political science and public affairs have been attentive to the design and incorporation of service learning in their courses. When service learning involves local government, students also gain insight into how local political institutions interact with community problem solving. For instance, van Assendelft (2008) crafted service learning with both community volunteer activities and public-meeting attendance, thereby helping students to integrate their understanding of civic action and formal policy making.

To benefit from service learning, faculty and universities invest significant time and resources to foster successful partnerships. For example, Bernstein, Ohren, and Shue (2003) described a

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viewed as valuable partners by aiding access to labor and analytical capacity—a task consistent with their mission. Moreover, strengthening these ties allows municipal associations to be at the center of conversations about investments in the future local-government workforce, which can aid the long-term capacity of local government. Municipal associations hold a strategic position for fostering dialogue between higher education and local government; however, the position currently is underutilized, as illustrated herein.

#### **SERVICE LEARNING IN LOCAL GOVERNMENT**

State municipal associations have the potential to broker information about staffing needs within a state's local-government workforce as well as to bridge faculty in the classroom and service-learning opportunities with local governments. In the study of public management and policy networks, intermediary organizations are described as actors who bridge structural gaps in social networks for the purpose of connecting resources and enhancing capacity (cf. Beveridge 2019; Huset et al. 2023). Arnold and Plant (1994, 149) explicitly highlighted an intermediary role for municipal associations in their seminal book, stating that “a major purpose of associations is to institutionalize linkages—that is, to provide coordination points for state and local governments.” Yet, they also described municipal associations as “marginal” in the development of public-affairs education (Arnold and Plant 1994, 144). Although municipal associations form bridges between states and local governments, they may not invest the same effort

project that provided students in two undergraduate courses the opportunity to apply research-methods skills and local-government knowledge to assess public attitudes about a city street millage rate. The authors reported mutual benefits for students, who gained direct experience with a local-government project, and the city government, which gained data and insight into public attitudes about infrastructure and taxes. To achieve these benefits, faculty undertook significant organizational and project costs, which may be viewed as a barrier to service learning. Whereas faculty enthusiasm and investment may be critical factors in the success of service learning, universities and external partners can set the stage to ease the costs and burdens associated with project identification and management. For example, Christensen and Jackson (2009) described the institutionalization of a partnership between San Jose State University and a proximate neighborhood, whereby the establishment of an office inside the university routinized engagement with neighborhood residents, organizations, and projects. By developing a focal point for community engagement and the development of service-learning projects, the university assumed organizational costs to sustain consistent engagement and to aid faculty in the process of matching courses with opportunities for service. These and other examples of successful service learning demonstrate that faculty leadership and institutional support are critical for project success.

Although these service-learning models are laudable, the need to develop the future local-government workforce should incentivize more action on the part of the local government

management profession. Linking students with service-learning opportunities can inspire interest in public-service careers. Arnold and Plant (1994) described an era in which state and local public-official associations had a more active role in the professionalization of the workforce. In the conclusion of their book, they expressed concern that associations of the late-twentieth century did not share the same commitment to education and professionalization characteristic of an earlier era in public administration. Associations offered a wide range of seminars and professional opportunities to their members but did not exhibit the same commitment to external engagement. Regarding “preservice education,” Arnold and Plant (1994, 254) argued that “this is an area where associations may wish to be more active, acquainting students and university faculty with a sense of the opportunities available in public service employment.” Many municipal associations across the United States still offer educational opportunities to their members; however, the survey described herein indicates that few collaborate with universities to invest in the professionalization of the future workforce.

#### STATE ASSOCIATION ENGAGEMENT: SURVEY AND INTERVIEW EVIDENCE

In February 2021, following a modified version of Dillman’s (2000) total-design method, a two-page survey was mailed to the executive director or leader of each state municipal association in the United States. Contact was initiated with a postcard that notified the recipients of a forthcoming survey about municipal association engagement with higher-education institutions. One week later, the survey document was mailed with a postage-paid return envelope; reminders to nonrespondents were mailed about four weeks later. Twenty of the 50 associations returned a survey by mail—a 40% response rate. In addition to the surveys, key-informant interviews were conducted with association leaders in three states to gain more insight into their model for engaging students.

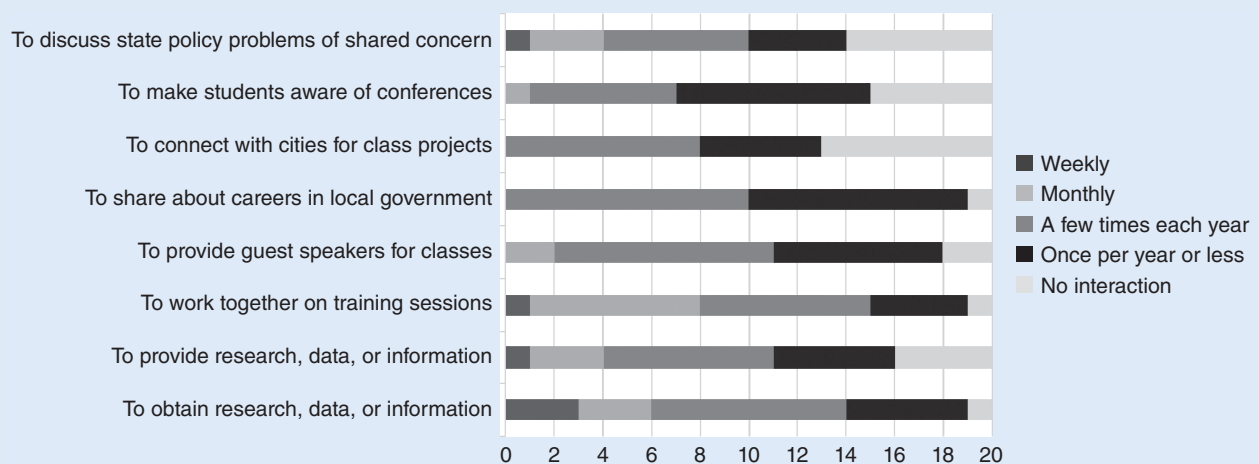
The survey queried how frequently municipal associations interact with higher-education institutions in their state in eight different activities. Results are summarized in figure 1. The most frequent interaction was reported for training sessions: eight

associations reported weekly or monthly interaction and another seven reported interaction a few times each year. Obtaining research, data, or information was another common area of engagement: 14 associations reported interaction at least a few times each year. Associations also provide data to universities: four reported weekly or monthly interaction and another seven reported interaction a few times each year. In the areas of engagement proximate to service learning and career preparation, the survey revealed less-frequent interaction. Eighteen of the 20 respondents provided guest speakers to higher education at least once per year, although only two of those associations reported monthly contact. Nineteen respondents reported sharing information about careers in local government, with nine of those stating that the contact is only once per year. Thirteen associations reported connecting for class projects at least once per year, but seven reported no interaction on class projects—the largest category for which associations reported no contact. Nine of the associations reported hosting interns, either in-person or through telework, and many of those internships were paid. In summary, the associations responding to the survey had occasional contact with higher-education institutions, but service learning and career development appeared to be more limited than other types of contact.

State-level data were examined to glean more insight into which states invested in service-learning links with higher education. State population, measured by the 2020 US Census; the number of municipalities in a state, measured by the 2022 Census of Governments from the US Census Bureau; and the number of undergraduate students within a state, measured by the 2021–2022 Integrated Postsecondary Education Data System, were tested to identify correlations with engagement measures from the survey. Few findings were significant. The frequency of providing guest speakers for courses demonstrated a modest correlation with the number of municipalities in the state ( $r=0.29$ ). The frequency of sharing information about local-government careers modestly correlated with state population ( $r=0.39$ ) and the number of undergraduate students in the state ( $r=0.37$ ). Serving as an intermediary between universities and municipalities for service

Figure 1

### Frequency of Municipal Association Interaction with Higher-Education Institutions



learning yielded weak correlations for all three measures. Together, the survey and secondary state data suggest that states with larger populations and undergraduate student bodies may be more engaged with universities to help students learn about local government. However, association engagement with higher education requires more investigation.

The survey asked respondents, “Have you confronted any challenges or barriers when working with higher-education institutions in your state?” Six associations identified challenges, describing misaligned goals, inconsistent points of contact at universities, and limited local-government course offerings. For example, one association stated that “Sometimes there has been a disconnect between what we expect as a project outcome and what the student is approved to provide. Clearer communication up front about the mutual benefit of the project would help.” Another shared, “Faculty and staff turnover have made it historically difficult to try to sustain programs. Not enough emphasis on municipal government in higher-education programs—particularly at the undergrad level.” Together, the survey evidence indicates that communication between municipal associations and higher-education associations is present but has room for improvement.

Nevertheless, within the data, there are exemplars of engagement, and several association leaders agreed to be interviewed to provide more insight into successful association–university engagement. Key-informant interviews are ideal for gleaning expert insight into organizational success (Weiss 1994). Examples from three states illustrate how municipal associations can forge relationships with higher-education institutions, thereby opening service-learning opportunities for students. The audio-recorded interviews were conducted on Zoom between February and March 2021.

### Georgia

The Georgia Municipal Association plays the role of broker for local-government practicum projects by soliciting project needs from member cities and linking faculty with communities. The program was developed to “help bring along the next generation of local government managers” and provide students with practical experience before entering work in local government. The program launched in 2007 with the University of Georgia and expanded to other universities. Recent projects include housing assessment studies, performance measurement systems, and communications plans. The association emphasizes the value of the projects as an illustration of professional work for students’ resumés and expanded professional networks in local government. Some students have completed doctoral degrees and work in higher education; many others work in local governments or regional associations in Georgia. Projects often involve formal presentations for city officials, councils, and municipal-association staff. “From the state association standpoint, it is something that we can offer our cities that is free, that gives them an objective research consultant for a semester...and if that student ends up applying for a job with that city, then they have had experience working with that city.”

### Iowa

The mission of land-grant universities is complementary to municipal associations’ statewide engagement with local governments. The Iowa League of Cities identifies the Iowa State

University Extension Community and Economic Development Program as a partner, including shared staff for research and municipal-clerk training. These relationships are built on shared goals. As a League staff member explained, “You just have those relationships, that trust, that buy-in...it is very important that you have that meeting of the minds to know exactly what each party is wanting to get out of this relationship.” Due to limited graduate-level education in public affairs within the state, the League currently does not partner with universities for service-learning courses, but it emphasized the importance of trained professionals in local government. League staff explained that mayors and city governments are seeking skilled workers, elaborating that “They are looking for someone who has had at least some formal training in this area to show their commitment to working in local government.” This example illustrates the challenge of crafting service-learning opportunities even when strong ties exist between municipal associations and higher-education institutions.

### Washington

The Association of Washington Cities reports a history of engaging students through internships and ad-hoc class projects and recently has invested in sustainability planning projects. The association engaged Western Washington University and the University of Washington to link students and cities in Sustainable Cities Partnerships. “We provide a communication conduit to our members for that program on a regular basis, trying to make sure that our members, particularly newly elected who are coming into office in a community, know that this kind of thing is available within the state...” Expanding on the meaning of *conduit*, association staff explained that a university may be expert in the development of a sustainability project, but packaging and linking that information with member needs can be difficult. “It is an ongoing feedback loop that I hope we are providing not only for the university but also for our members to understand, there are projects and programs out there in these universities that currently help you as a municipality.” Clear expectations by the participating parties and consistent faculty engagement throughout the course of a project are described as critical for shared success.

### IMPROVING THE PATH FROM SERVICE LEARNING TO LOCAL-GOVERNMENT CAREERS

Municipal associations and universities have the potential to benefit from stronger ties, but both parties must make new investments to forge sustainable service-learning relationships. “I think there is a tremendous amount of value to be derived by a municipal association in having an ongoing dialogue with their colleges and universities in their state around how they can partner on things,” explained one association official. Examples of success feature reciprocity, clear communication, and high levels of faculty engagement. In the interest of introducing more students to career pathways in local government, both parties have a reason to collaborate. Pedersen (2013) found that students’ field of study in higher education moderates the relationship between public-service motivation and public- versus private-sector career choices. If this is true, then crafting student exposure to local government across fields may be necessary to illuminate pathways into local-government careers. Municipal associations may find open doors with political science faculty who already are teaching students about government. However, faculty and university



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leaders should consider how to engage a broader base of students in service-learning opportunities that highlight local-government career paths.

Whereas prior studies provide evidence that service learning enhances student learning (Warren 2012), many challenges attend

careers, thereby fulfilling part of the linkage role described by Arnold and Plant (1994).

For faculty, developing regular communication with municipal associations may routinize career-development relationships with local governments. Increasing the frequency of association-staff

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the successful pedagogical design of service-learning courses. Developing the interpersonal and organizational relationships linking universities, municipal associations, and cities may be among the most difficult and important design problems to solve (Bringle, Clayton, and Price 2009). Service learning will not be a panacea for the staffing challenges facing local governments. Educating more undergraduate students about career opportunities in local governments is one step in expanding their understanding of careers in public service, and well-designed service learning may enhance their civic engagement (Hébert and Hauf 2015; Nishishiba, Nelson, and Shinn 2005). If these goals are to be realized—and empirically assessed with more rigor—investments from municipal associations, cities, and universities will be necessary.

For municipal associations, identifying campus offices with responsibility for service learning may help to match associations

engagement on campus is a first step, including speaking invitations in relevant political science courses and the exchange of information about career-center recruiting events. Incremental improvements in contact facilitate dialogue about shared interests, allowing both parties to develop comfort with the benefits of working together. Informing municipal associations about regular course offerings that link to specific needs of city or county governments may aid associations in the identification of partners, as illustrated by the Georgia and Washington models. Service-learning success stories and the illustration of positive results for students may aid municipal associations in the recruitment of more local governments to partner with colleges and universities in the future. Faculty also should consider collaborating with campus career centers to provide municipal associations with data about student understanding of local-government career opportunities. By collecting and sharing data on student percep-

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with faculty interested in crafting service-learning courses. “Universities need to figure out a way...where there is almost a front door to the university, so they make themselves a little more accessible and available,” argued one association leader. University career centers and government relations offices should work together on this problem. If municipal associations are to serve as a bridge, developing a clear entry point to the university through the government relations office or career center may provide consistency and ease communication burdens. For municipal associations that do not already have strategies for university engagement, a within-state assessment of existing municipal–university connections is warranted. Understanding which cities partner with higher-education institutions, and how those partnerships benefit cities and students, may be a first step in expanding such engagement. Following the Georgia Municipal Association model, maintaining a list of cities interested in university- and student-supported projects also is a simple and practical step to reduce the organizational costs of identifying service-learning partners for faculty. Finally, municipal associations should create and distribute local-government-career information to higher-education institutions within the state, targeting career centers and academic departments that are working in areas of critical need. By doing this, associations can highlight opportunities and initiate more conversations about local-government

tions of these opportunities, universities may be able to motivate municipal associations into more action.

Finally, this study prompts several questions that require attention from scholars in political science and public administration. Systematic analysis of the educational role of local-government associations is limited. Whereas Arnold and Plant (1994) recommended that associations do more to foster student interest in government careers, the evidence presented herein suggests limited progress. A disconnect exists between general lamentations about the preparation of students for work in local government and purposeful action to illuminate career pathways. Do municipal associations have the capacity to engage in outreach with higher-education institutions in their state? Can we learn more about what differentiates the state associations that are active in this area in contrast to those that are not? Evidence from this survey suggests that measures of state and undergraduate student population alone do not adequately explain variation in engagement. How are associations responding to dynamics in the labor market and the shortage of skilled workers in local government? Across states, is variation in local-government administrative capacity related to the quality of collaboration between municipal associations and higher-education institutions? Can service-learning partnerships enhance student consideration of public-service career opportunities? If municipal associations take

action, can scholars use social-network analysis to explain the gains in engagement between municipalities and higher-education institutions over time? The continued development of professional local-government administration and the career readiness of students will benefit from a more systematic investigation into these questions.

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#### DATA AVAILABILITY STATEMENT

The editors granted an exception to the data policy for this article. In this case, replication data are not available on the Harvard Dataverse and the editors have not verified reproducibility of the published results. This exception was granted because the approval granted by the author's Institutional Review Board does not permit sharing of the underlying data.

#### CONFLICTS OF INTEREST

The author declares that there are no ethical issues or conflicts of interest in this research. ■

#### NOTE

1. The purpose of this article is not to enumerate human-resource and recruiting challenges in local government. The sources cited herein and Svava's (2010) overview of generational change in the local-government workforce provide context to understand the current staffing challenges facing local governments in the United States. Green and Louniche (2021) reported employment declines in state and local governments following the onset of the COVID-19 pandemic due to budget stress. Employment figures in 2023 demonstrated growth in local-government employment; however, local governments are still hiring (Davidson 2023). In an International City/County Management Association blog post, Lavinga (2023) used the word *crisis* to describe the current staffing challenges, writing that "it has put the ability to deliver essential services at risk."

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