

**After the Boomers: Are We Preparing the Next Generation?**

Don Stolberg  
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The Government Accountability Office (GAO) of Congress now estimates that 53 percent of all government workers at federal, state, and local levels are eligible to retire in the next three to five years (Benest, 2007). The good news is that the “Great Recession” had a huge impact on the retirement accounts of many of the nation’s local leaders, causing them to postpone their retirement until such time as they were in better financial standing. The bad news is that most of those retirement accounts that were decimated in the crash of 2007 and 2008 have bounced back and many senior managers are considering or even planning their retirement. This poses a real problem for many communities and it is not certain that we have sufficient replacements in the pipeline. Jim Svara (2010) shows that in 1971, 71% of the appointed local government managers were 40 or younger, and 26% were under 30. In 2006, 86% were over 40 and only 2% were under 30. With such a large contingent of boomers retiring over the next decade or so, it is even more critical that we act now.

In an article written for the California ICMA Frank Benest states, “Local governments are braced to address a demographic tsunami of Baby-Boomer retirements. The largest “talent replacement gaps” are at the senior management, administrative, and key professional levels. How local governments respond to the demographic challenge will determine the quality of public service for decades to come” (2007). Replacing that talent is not going to be easy. For most, it will take several years of experience and training to be ready to assume these leadership roles. The burdens caused by the departure of so many of retiring managers can be turned into opportunities. The tickle-down effects of those key management positions being opened and filled by other senior leaders will open up a number of positions for those who are just now entering, or are in the pipeline to enter the profession.

One problem is that universities are not pursuing young people aggressively enough for their local government management programs. Keeping the key concept of outreach in mind, local governments can more easily replace retiring managers with the next generation of public employees (Friend, 2004). Most students have little knowledge of the programs and even less knowledge of what working in local government encompasses. Local governments are doing themselves a disservice by not reaching out to young people. All levels of government need to find large numbers of young (and not so young) professionals to fill vacancies that will be occurring over the next decade (Svara, 2010). Private sector employers frequently reach out at job fairs, talk to universities, and even hire staff dedicated specifically toward finding new and bright talent. This is not necessarily so with the public sector. As Friend points out in an article about recruiting young people into public service, local and state governments are not as aggressive at pursuing and recruiting these talented prospects as their counterparts in the private sector (2004). Joe Ferrara, a professor at the Georgetown Public Policy Institute, Washington, D.C., believes that local governments are missing the boat by not aggressively reaching out to young men and women interested in public service. "Local governments need to take action on several fronts to recruit the next generation of public managers," he says (Friend, 2004).

How do you get people interested in government service? You need to start early. Cox, et al. suggests that the presence of managers as teachers in undergraduate programs may encourage more students to consider local government as a career option (2007). In some cases, it may even need to be earlier than that. For some, public service is "one of the highest forms of citizenship"- an avenue by which a person can serve his or her community and country (Brewer, Selden, and Facer, 2000). This belief needs to be cultivated and fostered in our programs and brought to the forefront in many high school and even middle school civics programs. I know that when I

started my bachelor's program in political science, I had not even considered local government until it was pointed out by a professor as an option for my degree. Most of my exposure to government had been what I had observed of the federal government and national elections. I knew very little of the extensive services provided by local government and even less of how the process worked. "A more active outreach program will attract and interest young leaders at an earlier stage in their development. Many students may only have read about the federal government, they may not have a good sense of how local government is different" (Cox, et al., 2007). How are young people to know about the extensive public services provided and the good that local government does if we don't expose them to it? Active recruiting by colleges and local governments should not be exclusively pursued by graduate level programs. Svava (2010) points out that "local governments should be more active in service-learning programs in high schools and colleges. It is common to use internships as the avenue for student involvement in government work, but internships often go to those students who are already interested in local government and have relevant course preparation." If we can get youth involved in public service at an earlier age, the prospect of getting good, quality government at all levels is better assured.

It is critical that Public Administration programs seek out bright, motivated people interested in public service, and once they get them, to give them the tools that they need to be successful. These programs must prepare students for their future in government. One of our greatest assets is the wealth of knowledge that city managers and local government administrators possess and universities need to be bringing those people onboard and using them. City and county managers can and should play a leading role in the graduate education of the next generation of local government professionals. Master's degree programs in public

administration involve practitioners in a variety of ways, including mentoring interns, serving on advisory committees, and teaching courses (Wheeland et al., 2007). Universities need to actively seek out current and/or former managers to teach courses that require practical experience. Placing front-line city officials in the classroom is integral to addressing the dearth of local issues taught by most public administration and public policy programs (Friend, 2004). Practitioners also give students a perspective that only someone who has “been there, done that” can. They give them guidance and mentoring, provide professional networking opportunities and contacts, and much more. Active and former practitioners provide a view of the profession that can challenge and inspire prospective leaders toward serving in local government. “Talent development can only succeed if high-potential aspiring leaders are engaged in a series of challenging work experiences coupled with candid performance feedback” (Benest, 2007).

Some practitioners may not feel qualified to teach but as Mark Levin, city administrator of Maryland Heights, Missouri, noted, “Many city managers frequently serve as trainers of elected officials, staff, and other professionals. Explaining the city's approach to zoning or budgeting to a citizens' committee requires many of the same skills as those needed in today's classroom” (Vanacour and Denhardt, 2005). Given that many leaders already serve in this capacity in the performance of their daily duties, we should expand their teaching to incorporate their potential successors in the local universities’ public administration programs. Helping to prepare the next generation of public servants and especially urban management practitioners is extremely rewarding work (Vanacour and Denhardt, 2005).

**Conclusion:**

With Baby Boomers now reaching retirement age in record numbers, we need to be doing everything necessary to bring the next generation of local government leaders onboard. This will

ensure the preservation of good government and provide the necessary continuity of leadership when managers retire. To make certain that we have a suitable number of leadership candidates in the pipeline and that they are given the fullest education possible through teaching, mentoring, and training, universities and local governments need to partner with each other in the quest to attract bright, young (and not so young) students into their Public Administration programs. This will ensure that local governments not only survive, but thrive. Practitioners and academics need to work in conjunction with each other and the communities in which they live and work to energize and motivate young people to enter public service. Brewer, Seldon and Facer state, “Public employees emphasize the possibilities of government; they describe public service as an important process that involves serving others and the nation. We are left with vivid images of people helping people - not principals and agents chasing customers” (2000). We can use those vivid images to motivate prospective leaders toward public service. If we do, we can be assured that the future of local government will be in good hands.

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