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Providing Problem-Solving Assistance to Smaller local Governments: The Cornell Local Government Program

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PROVIDING PROBLEM-SOLVING ASSISTANCE

TO SMALLER LOCAL GOVERNMENTS:

THE CORNELL LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

By

Bert Mason

April 1978

No. 78-12

PROVIDING PROBLEM-SOLVING ASSISTANCE TO SMALLER
LOCAL GOVERNMENTS: THE CORNELL LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM^{1/}

by
Bert Mason^{2/}

History, Organization and Objectives
of the Cornell Local Government Program

Justification. Increasing pressures on local governments demand improvement in the quality and effectiveness of local governments and their officials. Critical problems of human, environmental, community development and other public concerns fall largely on the local level of government. Decentralization and decategorization as embodied in the programs of the "New Federalism" -- such as general revenue sharing, Housing and Community Development and CETA -- indicate a shift in federal-state-local relations which requires greater local self-competence in decision-making. Well-publicized financial difficulties of the local sector highlight the need for effective local financial planning and management.

Despite these obvious needs, there are very few educational programs available for local officials, particularly those in smaller communities. Since 1972, when the title "Cornell Local Government Program" was adopted, the Program has focused on the information and training needs of two groups of local government officials in New York State. One includes local legislators

^{1/} Prepared for the American Society for Public Administration National Conference Panel on "Management of Smaller Cities and Smaller Bureaucratic Organizations," Phoenix, Arizona, April 10, 1978.

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on county, town, city, village, and school district governing boards. The other group consists of supervisory, management and professional administrative staff in local governments.

Local legislators in New York State usually serve part-time and their tenure is relatively short. In a survey of local elected officials in New York State, it was found that 47 percent of the respondents were in their first term of office and 35 percent had less than one year experience on the board.^{3/} Local legislators aggregate 10,000-13,000 people in New York State. Their group decisions as governing bodies sanction or block public actions that often have important effects on community welfare. The legislators are the official representatives in representative democracy, yet their information and training needs have generally received little attention compared with professional and technical personnel in administrative agencies and departments.

Supervisorial and managerial personnel in local governments are often placed in their positions with little previous background and training in management responsibilities and functions. Such individuals in smaller local governments usually have less opportunity for in-service training than is available in larger governments and in many types of private enterprise. And these two groups of local government officials -- elected legislators and administrative staff -- are responsible for managing finances and making policy which require substantial commitments of society's resources.

History of the Local Government Program. Interest among Cornell faculty in the subject of local government dates back to the 1930s. At least in part, it was stimulated by the economic conditions of that period and public concern over local taxes and expenditures and their impact on farm and rural life. In the

^{3/} Michel L. Hiser, "Survey of Training Needs of Local Governing Board Members in New York State." Ithaca: Cornell Local Government Program, December 1972.

intervening years, numerous faculty from various disciplines demonstrated interest and participated in projects and programs related to local government.

As the state's land-grant institution, Cornell's College of Agriculture and Life Sciences is charged with improving the quality of life for farm and rural people through research and education. Activities over the last forty years in the area of local government have aimed at meeting this charge of improving the economic and social well-being of rural people. An early effort to assist local governments directly was a three-day school for County and Town Highway Superintendents, held on the Cornell campus in the late 1930s and designed to improve their skills and knowledge in highway construction and maintenance. It became an annual affair, and has continued without interruption except during the last World War to the present time. It was started as a cooperative effort of the College of Agriculture and the College of Engineering, working with the New York State Association of Towns and other agencies and organizations. Over the years, other schools were organized for Town Clerks, Fire District Officers, Town Justices, City and Village Public Works Superintendents, Assessors, County Welfare Caseworkers and others.

In the early 1950s, Cornell faculty helped reestablish and revive the New York State Association of Clerks of County Boards of Supervisors. The innocuous title of Clerk camouflaged the real importance of the office at the hub of county government. Assistance and guidance was given to this organization, and work with the Association resulted in production of educational materials and the organization of an annual school. Using this Association as a springboard, efforts were expanded in the 1960s by virtue of a grant under Title I of the Higher Education Act. The first statewide training seminar for county legislators and administrators was initiated during this period of time.

In the late 1960s, managerial and other training was undertaken for the County Officers Association on an expanded basis made possible by federal grants under Title VIII of the Housing Act of 1964 supplemented by state matching funds. At the inception of the Taylor Act (New York Public Employees Fair Employment Act) and since, the Extension Division of the Industrial and Labor Relations School has conducted widespread instruction in collective bargaining for public employees under the terms of the Act to both managerial and employee groups. In 1961, a series of discussion pamphlets centered on community problems was initiated. The series was first called "Operation Advance." County Cooperative Extension agencies throughout the State organized small informal groups of local leaders and used the material as a basis for discussion seminars.

In 1972, the caption "Local Government Program" was applied to many of these activities, coincidentally with funding from the U. S. Department of Civil Service under the Intergovernmental Personnel Act with Cornell matching funds. At this time, a full-time director of the Program was appointed. The Director brought to the Program twenty-two years of experience working in county government in various capacities.

Until 1976, the Local Government Program was funded almost entirely by grant monies. Over one-half million dollars were received from Federal and State sources for staff, the development of educational materials and the promotion and conduct of training throughout the State. In 1976, the salaries of the Director and Assistant Director were incorporated as regular line items in the State budget. For the first time, the Local Government Program acquired a degree of permanency.

Organization. The Cornell Local Government Program is jointly sponsored by two colleges -- the School of Industrial and Labor Relations and the College of Agriculture and Life Sciences. Policy for the Program is determined by an inter-college faculty group, consisting of faculty from the School of Industrial and

Labor Relations, the College of Agriculture, and the College of Human Ecology. A local government committee, comprised of College of Agriculture and College of Human Ecology faculty, county cooperative extension agents, and regional community resource specialists also provides input in determining program needs and priorities.

The Local Government Program is staffed by a full-time director, assistant director, and clerical support. Faculty from a variety of disciplines participate in education and research activities of the Program. All participating faculty are based in academic departments. Over the years, faculty from disciplines such as political science, labor relations, agricultural economics, rural sociology, law, agricultural engineering, engineering, and business and public administration have been involved (in varying degrees of commitment) in the Program's activities.

Relationships with Municipal Organizations. The Cornell Local Government Program has worked closely with various associations of local government officials in determining the educational needs of local officials and delivering training programs to this group. Cooperating New York State organizations have included the Association of Counties, the Conference of Mayors, the Supervisors' and County Legislators' Association, and the Association of Towns. A "Memorandum of Understanding" between the New York Association of Counties and the Local Government Program has recently been signed by both parties. The memorandum outlines a general framework within which the two parties will cooperate to provide in-service training for county officials.

A major strength of the Local Government Program is the relationship it maintains with these associations of local government officials. Vocal support by organizations of local government officials and by county legislative boards was influential in generating pressure necessary to obtain permanent State funding of the Program.

Objectives of the Program. The basic objective of the Cornell Local Government Program is to improve the quality and effectiveness of local government in New York State. In pursuit of this aim, research and extension efforts have produced a wide variety of materials that are available and accessible to local government officials on a local basis.

Local government is being looked to with interest not attained heretofore in modern American history. Currently, the federal and state governments, and community citizens disillusioned with federal and state performance, look to local government for coherence in attacking an array of societal problems. Research and education efforts of the Local Government Program are designed to assist local governments and their officials in responding to these new challenges.

Educational Programs

In 1972, two surveys of the training needs of local government were taken. The first involved the members of local legislative boards and the second, supervisory personnel at all levels. These surveys revealed a perceived need for instruction on the scope of their authority and responsibility and how to do their job more effectively. There was also a general interest in all aspects of the budget process. Closely following these priorities were expressed needs for training and assistance in the recognition and solution of community problems, relations with the media, securing information necessary for decision-making, and the field of collective bargaining for public employees. Based on these findings and input obtained from county cooperative extension agents and local government representatives, the Local Government Program has developed a wide variety of educational materials. A complete list of these materials is attached as Appendix A.

Legislative Powers and Duties. To provide local officials with information on their powers and duties, several courses have been developed. These include:

Legislative Reference Guides for County, Town, City, and Village Governments offer a broad treatment of legislative powers and duties, a description of the functions of local government, definitions, procedures, and legislation. They are indexed reference materials that legislators can use as a continuing resource as questions arise.

Legislative Powers and Duties is an introductory course for newly-elected officials. This is an instructor's manual for a four-session course designed to give training on the use of the guides, ways of approaching and resolving public problems, and the development of skills in obtaining information for others.

Advanced Training Course for Local Legislators is an instructor's manual for a four-session course on topics that supplement those covered in Legislative Powers and Duties for legislators with some experience in local government. Topics include parliamentary procedure, improving local government finances, and defining long-term objectives and performance targets for local government.

Budgeting and Financial Management. A second effort has been to provide instruction in the area of municipal budgeting and financial management. Because of the complexity of this material, the major emphasis has been in developing materials in the form of home-study courses. These courses emphasize available tools rather than introduce presently popular and sophisticated systems of budgeting beyond the reach and requirement of many municipalities.

Home-Study Course in Municipal Budgeting for Legislators emphasizes knowledge of the budgeting process as the most effective tool in managing fiscal affairs of local government. Topics covered include official budget requirements (including format), powers, duties and responsibilities of legislators, department heads and administrators, and basic tools of budgeting.

Home-Study Course in Municipal Budgeting for Administrative Officials

covers the same basic materials as the Legislators' course but from the perspective of administrators.

Local Government Capital Budgeting and Financial Management is an instructor's manual for a six-session course intended primarily for administrative officials, although some local legislators will find it useful. The focus of the course is long-term financial planning for operating and capital budgets and evaluation of proposed projects and programs from a financial point of view.

Management Techniques. Five courses in management techniques have been developed. These cover effective supervision, decision making and problem solving, communication and management, collective negotiation and contract administration, and improving relationships with the public. The format for all of the management courses is an instructor's manual, and all are designed to be delivered in two- to six-session courses.

Other Programs and Materials. In response to expressed needs of local officials, the Local Government Program has produced a variety of programs and materials with diverse topics. Courses for newly appointed members of planning boards and zoning boards of appeal and directors of soil and water conservation districts have been developed. A home-study manual titled Local Government and the Media is designed to help local legislators and administrators in dealing with the media. A reference booklet on intergovernmental relations provides information on how local governments may combine resources to provide services across municipal boundaries or solve intermunicipal problems.

A major effort of the Local Government Program was the development and delivery of a series entitled Shibboleths--True or False? This series is designed to aid local legislators and other community leaders engage in a series of four or five small-group discussion meetings on basic local government issues. Participants are provided background pamphlets which question the "conventional

wisdom" in local government. Topics for the sessions include "Growth...What Is It and Can It Be Managed?", "Restructuring Local Government...Is Bigger Better?", "Financing Community Government Programs...Is Local Control a Fantasy?" and "Information for Local Action...Is It Beyond a Layman's Grasp?" The series is not intended to bring participants to predetermined conclusions, but to help them explore fresh ways of looking at basic problems.

Between 1975 and 1977, a pilot educational project intended to provide new ways of organizing and using information bearing on local government policy decisions was developed. The project, entitled Dollars, Decision, and Action, was funded by the Federal Extension Service in the United States Department of Agriculture. The objectives of the program were to provide local government officials with information on population and demographic trends in their jurisdiction, develop methodologies to organize this knowledge and project future trends, and introduce program planning and budgeting as a management technique.

The most recent project of the Local Government Program is the development of courses and materials on property tax assessment and local government finance. In response to recent court decisions, administration of the real property tax in New York State faces massive overhaul. Two courses -- one aimed at local government officials and the other for the general public -- outline the fundamentals of property taxation, local government finance, and administration of the property tax. The purpose of these courses is to provide objective information and education in a highly controversial situation confronting local government.

Delivery Methods. Since the formal inception of the Local Government Program in 1972, there has been increasing use made of the services of county Cooperative Extension agencies in organizing and conducting training of local officials. Experience over the years and answers to specific questions on our

need surveys indicate that local officials prefer training that is given locally by local instructors at a time and place convenient to them. Consequently all training materials have been designed and written in consideration of the needs of local instructors. Teaching materials include instruction on organizing training sessions, securing an appropriate teaching location, creating the proper environment, using the visual aids supplied, and actually conducting the seminar. Training sessions for specific courses have been made available to Cooperative Extension Agents and others interested in instituting a program in their community. Under the leadership of regional specialists, counties across the state have been encouraged to promote the use of available teaching materials. The success of this effort to date varies substantially in counties across the State. Working through the community resource development agents of Cooperative Extension, some counties have developed well-organized and continuing programs of training for local officials. Other counties have yet to become involved. Although progress is at times discouragingly slow, each successive year finds additional training efforts being instituted.

Faculty participation in delivering programs is kept to a minimum by training personnel in the localities to provide direct teaching on a local basis. Training programs for agents are provided at Cornell and on a regional basis. For some programs, particularly those involving relatively complex materials, faculty and staff of the Local Government Program sometimes assist in teaching courses locally.

Several local government courses have been offered through New York State's community college system. Courses on financial management, budgeting and personnel management for administrative staff have been particularly popular with community colleges. Community organizations, such as the League of Women Voters, have also been active in organizing and teaching courses. Various associations of local

government officials have assisted in delivering materials. For example, directors of county tax services in many counties will work with cooperative extension agents in teaching the new courses on taxation and assessment. In a complex area such as taxation, the county tax directors will provide technical expertise necessary to complement the educational skills of cooperative extension agents.

Evaluation of the Program

Those of us who work in the Cornell Local Government Program believe we may have found a proper niche in the municipal government scheme for institutions of higher learning. We believe we have been able to assist in the upgrading of the skills of local officials, to create the competence at the municipal level to allow them to solve their own problems and to provide trainers and training in those subject areas of primary importance to local government.

Educational efforts in local government have allowed Cornell University to add to its educational clientele a group of strategically placed people who have been relatively neglected by other institutions. In providing a needed public service, the Local Government Program has provided a somewhat unique opportunity for Cornell to fulfill its mission as a land grant institution.

The success of the Cornell Local Government Program hinges on two guiding principles we have adopted over the years. The first is that training and educational programs should be based on the expressed needs of local government officials. Second, local officials are usually very busy. To make our programs easily accessible, we deliver them on a local or regional basis.

In recent years, we have found that the most successful programs have been those that provide facts and problem-solving techniques that are immediately applicable and useful for local officials. In current times of exigency

and financial stringencies for local governments -- particularly in New York State -- elected and appointed officials want training that will help solve their most immediate and pressing problems.

Two general types of programs have been particularly well-received by local officials. General and basic education on the functioning of local governments has been popular. Examples of this basic education are the courses in powers and duties for elected and appointed officials and local government budgeting and management. A second type of program that generates immediate and widespread interest is information on recent changes in state or federal laws that will impact local government functions. Educational programs on changes in welfare programs, the Taylor Act (collective bargaining for public employees), and the Occupational Safety and Health Act have been well-attended and well-received.

As can be expected in a program that is relatively new and untested, there have been problems and "failures". Some of the less successful programs are due to faulty conception and design. We have found that when we violate our fundamental Grail -- to provide training that has been voiced as needed by local officials -- response is mediocre at best. Academic pronouncements from on high are rewarding for academicians but are often not useful for those on the front line. Process-oriented programs that require long-term consideration and lengthy gestation periods do not provide immediate payback to local officials. Less ephemeral efforts may be useful in times and places that are not dominated by the crisis atmosphere which now pervades the environment of New York local governments.

A consistent and recurring constraint is resources. Until 1976, the Cornell Local Government Program existed on short-term grants. This made long-term planning difficult if not impossible. Faculty participation ebbs and flows depending on availability and interest. A high-quality applied research program from a variety of disciplines is necessary to underpin an education effort in

local government. Much of this basic research may not be academically "glamorous" and will not always receive proper professional recognition.

Evaluation of Local Government programs has not been sufficient. Once we have developed the materials and trained the teachers, we have little feedback in terms of the numbers of participants and their response to the programs. In this era of accountability, it would be useful and expedient to be able to cite statistics on enrollments to help justify the Program's existence. We do have some data on participation; for example, 3,500 local legislators took the powers and duties course between 1972 and 1975. But our data are sketchy and incomplete at best.

Delivery of programs has been, and continues to be, the major difficulty we face. The primary delivery system is Cooperative Extension. Training sessions for specific courses have been made available to Cooperative Extension agents and others interested in instituting a program of training in their community. Under the leadership of community resource development regional specialists, counties across the state have been encouraged to promote the use of available teaching materials. The success of this effort to date varies substantially among counties. Resistance to participation in the counties is the result of attitudes against striking out in new (i.e., non-agricultural) directions and limited personnel. Delivery of programs is labor-intensive and requires resources that are not always available. Although progress is at times discouragingly slow, each successive year finds additional training efforts being instituted.

Some "Lessons" From the Cornell Experience. While many of the specifics of the Cornell Local Government Program are unique to Cornell and New York State, there are some general lessons that might be useful and transferable for those who are interested in instituting training programs for local government officials.

The first, and perhaps most important finding is that there is a strong need for educational efforts in the local government arena, particularly for members of legislative boards. Local governing boards are responsible for appropriations and tax levies, local law and ordinance making, appointment or approval of appointments of important administrative and other personnel, decisions about performing numerous functions and services within options of state law, and other policy-making. In New York State, local taxes roughly equal those of the State; local spending is much more than that of the State. Despite the importance of localities in the governmental sphere, education for local officials, particularly for those who represent smaller municipalities, is often scarce or non-existent. The Cornell Local Government Program has attempted to fill the void between responsibility and assistance. A corollary to this need for local government training is that local officials are keenly aware of their limitations and most desire to obtain useful information that will enhance their decision-making capabilities.

A second lesson is that local officials are a busy group. The legislators typically hold full-time jobs in addition to their public office. Training programs must be designed to fit within these time constraints. We have found that the best delivery method is on a local basis with local instructors. Developing a local delivery system is the most difficult component of an educational program. Cornell's experience has been simplified somewhat with the existence of an extension education organization in most localities of New York State with some know-how and interest in community development and related matters.

Third, it is crucial that educational programming be based on the expressed needs of local government officials. Academic input should be limited to developing, packaging and promoting materials; basic subject content should be determined largely by those who are on the firing-line. It is important to maintain close contact with associations of local government officials. Close working relationships with these

organizations facilitate communication on program needs and provide legitimacy and acceptance among local officials.

A final lesson is that there is a demonstrated value of the academician in the training of local officials. The Extension Division of a land-grant college offers a locally based statewide network of trainers skilled in organizing and promoting educational programs. The political neutrality of a university and its stated objective to educate rather than to influence policy makes it less suspect than the professional consultant or even the departments of state government. Vast and diverse talents can be found in any university; if some of these resources can be harnessed to focus on problems facing local governments, viable and successful education can be achieved.

	<u>Price</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Total</u>
A Training Course for Soil and Water Conservation District Directors	\$12.00	_____	_____
Lecture Guide for a Public Meeting on Taxation and Assessment	\$12.00	_____	_____
Discussion Leaders Guide on Taxation and Assessment - For Local Government Officials	\$12.00	_____	_____
Shibboleths--True or False?			
Shibboleths--True or False? Packet, including Introductory leaflet and four background discussion pamphlets	\$ 2.00	_____	_____
Community Data Book (one free with every ten sets of Shibboleths)	\$ 3.00	_____	_____
Guide for Organizing Self-Administered Discussion Groups, Guide for Discussion Leaders, and Plan of Work	\$ 1.00	_____	_____
Cassette tape and 17 color slides (for orienting advisory committee, discussion leaders, and others)	\$ 9.25	_____	_____
A Film on Intergovernmental Cooperation Common Ground (rental fee \$5.00/day)	\$215.00	_____	_____
TOTAL			\$ _____

+ For description of Reference Materials and Instructors' Manuals, see Local Government Program brochure.

* These Manuals include copies of all Handouts and Acetates to enable the instructor to produce his own teaching aids. If he prefers to purchase either, he may do so from us at \$1.00 per Acetate and approximately \$0.03 per page of Handouts. Slide sets are also available. Please inquire as to exact cost.

SHIP TO: (Please Print) _____

Name

Address

City _____ County _____ State _____ Zip _____

Make all checks payable to the Local Government Program and return to:

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM
 200 ILR Extension
 Cornell University
 Ithaca, New York 14853

APPENDIX A

LOCAL GOVERNMENT PROGRAM

Cornell University
Ithaca, N. Y. 14853



PRICE LIST OF TEACHING MATERIALS

<u>REFERENCE MATERIALS⁺</u>	<u>Price</u>	<u>Quantity</u>	<u>Total</u>
Survey of Training Needs of Local Governing Board Members in New York	\$ 2.00	_____	_____
Survey of Training Needs of Local Government Supervisory Personnel	\$ 2.00	_____	_____
Legislative Reference Guides			
1. County	\$10.00	_____	_____
2. Town	\$10.00	_____	_____
3. City	\$10.00	_____	_____
4. Village	\$10.00	_____	_____
Language and Interpretation in Public Employee Collective Bargaining Agreements: Examples and Illustrations	\$ 4.00	_____	_____
A Guide to Intergovernmental Cooperation	\$10.00	_____	_____
A Home-Study Course in Municipal Budgeting for Legislators	\$10.00	_____	_____
A Home-Study Course in Municipal Budgeting for Administrative Officials	\$10.00	_____	_____
Local Government And The Media	\$ 5.00	_____	_____
Local Planning And Zoning Reference Materials	\$ 5.00	_____	_____
<u>INSTRUCTORS' MANUALS*</u>			
Legislative Powers and Duties of Local Governing Boards	\$12.00	_____	_____
Advanced Training Course for Local Legislators	\$12.00	_____	_____
Local Government Capital Budgeting and Financial Planning	\$12.00	_____	_____
Planning Boards and Zoning Boards of Appeals	\$12.00	_____	_____
Management Training Courses			
1. Effective Supervision of Local Government	\$12.00	_____	_____
2. Decision Making and Problem Solving	\$12.00	_____	_____
3. Communication and Management	\$12.00	_____	_____
4. Labor Relations and Contract Administration	\$12.00	_____	_____
The Orientation of Employees Who Face the Public	\$12.00	_____	_____
Local Government and The Media, Seminar Guide	\$ 5.00	_____	_____