

**AN ADVANCED DEGREE IN PUBLIC  
ADMINISTRATION – IS IT VALUED BY CITY  
COUNCILS?**

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**ABSTRACT**

Does holding an advanced degree in public administration matter to city councils, the local political institution that makes the hiring decision? Previous studies of city manager education place emphasis on city managers receiving professional training in public administration, and do so from a strong normative tradition stressing the professionalization of local government. The analysis presented in this paper asks whether city councils in fact place greater value on hiring a manager who holds an advanced degree in public administration compared to managers with other educational backgrounds. We employ logistic regression analysis of responses provided by city managers in the state of Texas to determine the extent to which this is the case. We find that an advanced degree in public administration is valued more than other educational backgrounds by city councils, and this value is independent of social and economic characteristics of cities and traits of individual managers.

**Keywords:** public administration, city manager, professional associations, city council hiring

*My experience in law enforcement gave me the ability to set priorities and deal with people. My time at the police academy gave me experience in policy and grant writing. My time at a law firm gave me the skills to deal with attorneys. And my education and MPA degree gave me a base and I would not have gotten the position without it.*

From interviews with Texas City Managers, November 2011

In this paper we investigate whether a graduate degree in public administration is preferred by city councils as an educational requirement for city managers. Our findings offer empirical evidence that an advanced degree in public administration is particularly valued by city councils. This, we argue, offers support for the presence of an isomorphic process – a process that points to the importance of professional associations such as the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA), and the American Society of Public Administration (ASPA) in promoting a field standard in which professional training in public service is highly valued. A remarkable aspect of organizational life is the extent to which separate and distinct organizations come to reflect one another in substantial ways. Without engaging in any coordination between each other, many organizations come to adopt features that are very similar to other organizations in the same field. The process by which an organization comes to adopt the attributes or standards of other organizations in the same field has been labeled “structural isomorphism” by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). While professional public administration associations cannot compel city councils to make specific hiring decisions, the standards developed and promoted by these associations may exert a soft pressure by which hiring decisions come to reflect these standards.

There is a historic train of thought in public administration that emphasizes specialized training as the best

way to achieve the goal of professionalized city administration (e.g. White, 1929; Stone, Price, & Stone, 1940). Recognition of the need to train individuals for the position was followed by the development of standards for professional education. Administrative professionalism became ensconced within a Masters of Public Administration (MPA) degree when the National Association of Schools of Public Administration and Affairs (NASPAA) issued the first guidelines for programs offering the degree. City councils, therefore, could identify the candidate with an advanced degree in public administration as the preferred candidate to become city manager.

We begin with a brief discussion of the professionalization of city management in the United States. Following this, we utilize results from a survey of city managers combined with census data on city socioeconomic characteristics to test for the importance city leadership attaches to having a manager with an advanced degree, particularly in the field of public administration. We then discuss our findings within the context of isomorphic theory, which posits the dissemination of field standards via professional associations. We also discuss the implications of our findings regarding city council hiring criteria and city management as a career goal. In so doing, we reference the results of a series of interviews with city managers that provide context for our aggregate findings. Finally, we conclude with some thoughts for future research.

### **CITY MANAGEMENT AND EDUCATION**

There is a tradition of thought among those concerned with municipal governance that focuses on specialized education as a means to ensure the professional administration of cities (e.g. White, 1929; Stone et al., 1940). This tradition of thought and its evolution provides an important foundation for what cities may look for in a manager today. In 1894 over 149 individuals who expressed an interest in reforming municipal government held the first annual meeting of the National Municipal League in Philadelphia (Mason, 1899). Originating from this meeting was the call for more effort to establish a better foundation for city management. The absence of any

training to prepare individuals for this type of work according to Mason (1899) prevented cities from reaching their full potential.

Shortly thereafter, the University of Michigan (in 1914), Stanford University (in 1919), the University of Southern California (in 1921), and Syracuse University (in 1924) all established some form of training for those interested in directing municipal affairs (Stillman, 1974). As the post WWII era in the United States unfolded, many cities witnessed the onset of a contentious political environment. Characterizing many cities was urban unrest, political movements aimed at increasing minority political empowerment, and political conflict over redistributive policies (Loveridge, 1968). Reflecting the difficulty of dealing with the urban crisis of the 1960s and 1970s, city council members would again stress the perceived need to develop professional governing capabilities among city managers to address these problems (Stillman, 1974).

Given the challenges facing local government, the 1980s and 1990s would see NASPAA and the ICMA work together to establish academic standards for training city managers (Pugh, 1989; Cox, Gabris, & Levine, 2010). As Cox and associates note, the goal of this collaboration was to ensure that city managers received training in the skills needed to be successful administrators. The skills would not focus on theoretical concerns, or purely academic questions, but involved the acquisition of skills that would solve real world problems most city managers would face. The efforts of both NASPAA and the ICMA would work to establish an environment in which soft pressure was exerted on city governments to hire those individuals who completed this level of training.

The soft pressure created by this collaboration between NASPAA and the ICMA is an example of the influence needed to provide a framework in which isomorphism can influence a professional field (see DiMaggio & Powell, 1983). In promoting professional standards for the structure and content of MPA programs, these types of professional organizations create an institutional model that other actors will adopt. Remaining members of the organizational field will then feel pressure to conform to this institutional model to avoid looking distinct from leaders in the field. Through this process, influence to conform

will be exerted upon all who desire to be part of this community. We believe that such forces help account for the value associated with an advanced degree in public administration.

Let us be clear, we are not arguing that either NASPAA or the ICMA worked to create an environment that exerted clear pressure to adopt this level of education as a requirement for city managers. Rather, we are arguing that the efforts of these organizations and other similar professional associations work to create a soft pressure, an environment in which some city council members become more aware of the value associated with the benefit of this training. Given the focus on training candidates to acquire the ability to deal with real world concerns, we anticipate that city managers with an advanced degree, particularly an advanced degree in public administration, will be highly valued by city councils.

### **THE SETTING**

To test for the importance placed by a city leadership on having a city manager with specific educational criteria, our study combines results of a survey of city managers with census data. During October 2011 a survey was mailed to 319 city managers in Texas home-rule cities. This represented all home-rule cities in Texas that had a city manager, as identified through the Texas Municipal League Online Directory, accessed August 2011.<sup>1</sup> Cities in Texas operate under either a general-rule or a home-rule charter. Home-rule allows a community to establish its specific form of local government. The constitutional requirement for attaining home-rule status in Texas is that a city has a population of more than 5,000 (Article XI of the Texas Constitution).

One hundred and fifty-three surveys were returned, for a response rate of 47.5%. However, we had to eliminate some returned surveys from our analysis for two reasons. A 1991 amendment to the state Constitution allows a city to maintain home-rule status even after its population falls below 5,000. Because we did not comprehensively canvass cities with a population below 5,000, we eliminated responses from cities below this threshold. Second, because manager education level

is central in our analysis, we excluded returned surveys where the education question was unanswered. The result was a set of 129 surveys from city managers for analysis (a list of surveyed cities is available from the authors upon request).

Cities in Texas provide an advantageous setting for our study. Despite its history as a frontier state and images of cattle farmers and oil derricks, modern Texas is highly urbanized. The state is home to more census-defined metropolitan statistical areas than any other state except California (U.S. Department of Labor, 2012). It is also home to some of the largest cities in the country including Austin, Dallas, Houston, and San Antonio. In addition to being highly urbanized, Texas contains a large number of economically and socially diverse cities. Among the cities identified in 2011 as city manager cities with a population above 5,000, per capita income ranges from just over \$7,000 to nearly \$133,000 while the percentage of city residents with a Bachelor's degree ranges from 2.4% to 85.3% (according to 2010 Census reports). Further, Texas is an ethnically and racially diverse and diversifying state. The ethnic and racial composition of these same cities ranges from 3.4% to 98.4% Hispanic and from 0.1% to 68.3% African American. This diversity among cities in Texas allows us to account for potentially relevant city social and economic characteristics in our investigation into the value cities place on a manager who holds an advanced degree in public administration.

In addition to survey results, our study utilizes city socioeconomic characteristics drawn from the 2010 census. The social and economic conditions of a city have the potential to influence the ability of a city leadership to hire and retain a manager with the preferred educational background. For example, the level of wealth available to city government based on resident's income works to determine what salary level that can be offered to any potential candidate (Stillman, 1974; Clinger-mayer & Feiock, 2001). City size will also work to establish certain needs that the city council must respond to when hiring a city manager (Stillman, 1974). Further, any given city manager may be attracted to work in cities with certain attributes, such as a highly educated citizenry.

Our survey generated responses from managers in cities whose socioeconomic characteristics reflect the broader range of cities in Texas that employ a manager and have a population greater than 5,000. As reported in Table 1, with the exception of percent Hispanic, where survey results are from managers in cities that only slightly under represent this cohort, the economic and social characteristics of surveyed cities are virtually identical to those of the larger group. Therefore, the survey results used in our analysis are from managers in cities that are representative of all cities in Texas that employ a city manager and have a population of at least 5,000.

**Table 1**  
***Texas Home-Rule Cities with a City Manager and a Population Greater than 5, 000 Compared to Surveyed Cities***

	<i>All Cities</i>	<i>Used in Analysis</i>
Population	52,108 (166,045)	52,710 (138,002)
Per Capita Income	23,900 (12,473)	24,814 (10,899)
%Bachelor's	23.0 (14.8)	24.0 (14.3)
%Unemployment	7.5 (2.7)	7.4 (2.5)
%Poverty	17.2 (9.6)	15.6 (8.6)
%White	63.2 (22.0)	65.2 (20.4)
%Hispanic	34.7 (25.1)	30.6 (22.0)
%Black	10.5 (11.6)	10.2 (11.5)
N	319	129

Mean is reported; Standard Deviation is in parenthesis (the standard deviation for the population variables are driven by large-city outliers in the data set).

% Bachelor's Degree is among those 25 and above; % Unemployment is % civilian Unemployment; % Poverty is % of individuals in poverty; % White is % White, non-Hispanic' % Black is % Black, non-Hispanic.

### TESTING FOR THE VALUE ON EDUCATIONAL QUALIFICATIONS

We test for the value city councils place on an advanced degree by modeling conditions under which cities employ a manager who holds an advanced degree, particularly an advanced degree in public administration. The dependent variable in the several models we test is the degree and/or major field of study of the city manager (discussed more fully in a following section). Testing for the value city councils place on a city manager with specific educational criteria requires a measure of value. We use the term value synonymously with preference and importance. The salary that councils allocate to the city manager position is our measure of value. *With salary as our measure of value, we expect that if an advanced degree in public administration is valued by city councils, our analysis will reveal a reliable association between educational background and salary that is independent of other reasons that a city leadership might hire a manager with this educational background.*

We recognize that salary is one form, though a primary form of monetary compensation. As Zajac and Westphal (1995) note, individuals considering accepting a position should consider the entire compensation package offered by their perspective employer rather than focus on only salary. This stems from the fact that each benefit can influence the quality of life he or she might enjoy in that position (see also Wade, Porac, & Pollock, 1997). The compensation package will include factors beyond one's salary level. Benefits such as providing resources for continued professional development support or the provision of work related technology such as a laptop or cell phone would also be included in the package.

While there are other forms of compensation in addition to salary, including time off, flex-time, or health benefits, salary possesses an attribute that makes it an extremely important factor for studying the value councils place on particular education criteria. Salary represents the level of the employer's commitment to hiring and retaining a specific person with their

individual qualifications. Westphal and Zajac (1994) argue that salary possesses this trait because salary level provides others with a public signal of the extent to which the city government values a particular candidate. Each particular city council will review the traits of a candidate and then determine the extent to which they value that candidate. The salary they offer will represent their calculation of the worth of that candidate. The level of salary thus serves as shorthand for the extent to which certain professional attributes are valued by particular city governments.

### **MODELING CITY MANAGER EDUCATION LEVEL AND FIELD OF STUDY**

We test for the value city councils place on an advanced degree by modeling conditions under which cities employ a manager who holds an advanced degree, particularly in public administration. Specifically, our analyses involve a test of three models. The dependent variable in each is the degree and/or major field of study of the city manager. Although we are most interested in the value placed on a city manager with an advanced degree in public administration, we recognize the presence of two components, an advanced degree and a degree in public administration. Therefore, we test for each component separately and then in combination. Each is operationalized as a dichotomous dependent variable: the presence of a city manager with an advanced degree, the presence of a city manager with public administration as the major field of study, and the presence of a city manager with an advanced degree in public administration. Each of these three dependent variables are coded 1 if the educational criterion in question is present, and 0 if not.

Managers were asked the following question: *What is your level of education?* Response categories included *High School, Some College, Associates Degree, Bachelor's Degree, Master's Degree, and Ph.D.* Those reporting a Masters (n=77) or Ph.D. (n=4) were coded as having an advanced degree. In all, 62.8% of respondents held an advanced degree (81/129). Public administration as a field of study was derived from responses to

an open-ended question: *Regarding the highest degree you earned, what was your major area of study?* Those who responded public administration (n=54), public affairs and administration (n=2), urban administration (n=1) or city management (n=3) were coded as having public administration as the major field of study. In all, 46.5% of respondents majored in the area of public administration (60/129). Finally, the category of city manager with an advanced degree in public administration is a composite of advanced degree and public administration as field of study. Overall, 42.6% of all respondents held an advanced degree in the field of public administration (55/129).

Our primary concern in modeling city manager education level and field of study is to test for the direct and independent effect of salary on these educational criteria. City manager salary is self-reported salary level in response to the following open-ended question: *Approximately what is your present salary?* The mean salary for the 118 city managers who reported this information was \$133,517 (SD=41,200, range=65,000-265,000). Salary was almost always reported by city managers rounded to the nearest hundred or thousand. Only slight variation is lost because our salary variable is rounded. The advantage is a direct reporting of salary from the recipient at the time the survey was completed. If salary is shown to have a direct effect on level of education and area of study, independent of other variables, we have support for the idea that city councils value these specific educational criteria.

Our models control for additional explanations regarding why a city has hired a manager with an advanced degree. The framework for identifying several of our control variables is drawn from a body of research that identifies managerial, policy, and political responsibilities as major components of the modern city manager's job duties (e.g. Ammons, 2008; Ammons & Newell, 1989; Zhang & Feiock, 2009). We employ a series of control variables, therefore, to address a council's perceived need to obtain a manager with the skills necessary to address the managerial, policy, and/or political aspects of that office. While our statistical models do not directly address a city council's preference for particular skill sets per se, the logic here is that

certain city characteristics and contexts are likely to promote the hiring of a manager with an advanced degree because of the ostensible connection a council makes between possession of an advanced degree and a desired skill set. For example, a city may confront economic issues, such as high unemployment – a likely scenario given the national economic downturn since 2008. Potential problems associated with unemployment abound and include citizens leaving the community, declining property values, and businesses leaving or closing. A council may well view an advanced degree as providing a manager with skills to assist in formulating policy to reinvigorate a local economy (a wealth of literature points to economic development as a major role played by city leadership; see, e.g. Reese & Rosenfeld, 2002). Therefore, we control for the percentage of the civilian city work force that is unemployed (Mean=7.5, SD=2.7, range=1.5-15.4).

In addition, cities may confront a context that calls for political skills. A highly educated citizenry, for instance, is more likely to contact and place demands on city leaders than a less educated citizenry (Hajnal & Clark, 1998), while numerous studies indicate that ethnic and racial diversity can create a political environment that is more divisive than a racially or ethnically homogeneous community (see e.g. Browning, Marshall, & Tabb, 2003, for an a series of case studies that speak to the interaction of politics, policy, and ethnic/racial diversity). To accommodate these contexts, an advanced degree in public administration may be viewed as providing a manager with the necessary political skills to deal with an attentive public and even political conflict. We measure city education level as the percentage of citizens age 25 and above with a Bachelors degree (Mean=24.0, SD=14.4, range=3.4-77.4). We measure ethnic and racial homogeneity as the percent of citizens who are White, non Hispanic (Mean=65.2, SD=20.4, range=6.1-94.3).

Further, some city characteristics may produce a preference for managerial skills, ostensibly provided by an advanced degree. A large population necessitates the provision of a range of services that might heighten the perceived need for management skills. Similarly, because of the heightened level of interaction with residents of other communities, the perceived

need for managerial skills might resonate for councils in metropolitan area principal cities (we employ here the U.S. Census Bureau's classification of principle cities as the largest cities within an MSA county that by definition has a high degree of interaction, typically in the form of commuting, with residents of other counties; see Office of Management and Budget 2010). Consequently, we control for city population (Mean one race population=52,710, SD=138,002, range=5,053-1,166,093), and whether a city is a census-defined metropolitan statistical area principal city, coded 1 if principal city (N=18) and 0 if not.

Apart from the presumed connection between skills and an advanced degree, city resources may influence a council's ability to accord a higher salary to hire someone with an advanced degree. It is possible that though a city manager with an advanced degree is valued, the city possesses little capacity to commit to this value because of limited resources. Our resource variable is per capita income (Mean=\$24,814, SD=10,899, range=8,709-76,351). Finally, we account for the possibility that councils in some communities may want to show a commitment to having hired a non-traditional manager, and the value ostensibly accorded an advanced degree is in actuality a value accorded the gender or race/ethnicity of the manager. The gender and racial/ethnic background of city managers are operationalized as dummy variables, coded 1 for the presence of the characteristic in question (16 female and 16 non Anglo city managers), and 0 if not. We also control for a manager's age. With growth over time in the premium on obtaining an advanced degree, younger city managers may be more likely to hold an advanced degree relative to older managers. The mean age of the 126 respondents who provided their age on their survey was 52.8 (SD=8.5, range=32-72).

## FINDINGS

Observed differences in salary by degree and major field of study reveal stark contrasts. The salary of managers with an advanced degree and a degree in public administration is substantially higher than that of managers without these educational criteria. At \$144,532 the mean salary of managers

with an advanced degree (of any major,  $n=75$ ) is more than \$30,000 greater than the mean salary of \$114,303 for those without an advanced degree ( $n=43$ ). Similarly, the mean salary of \$146,209 for managers who majored in public administration ( $n=58$ ) is almost \$25,000 greater than the mean salary of \$121,247 for those who majored in some other field of study ( $n=60$ ). Finally, the mean salary for those with an advanced degree in public administration, \$150,182 ( $n=53$ ), is more than \$30,000 higher than the mean salary of \$119,928 for all other city managers ( $n=65$ ). These descriptive findings suggest a value placed on both an advanced degree and a degree in public administration. We turn now to the results of our multivariate analyses that will allow us to better clarify the relationship between city manager level of education, field of study, and salary.

Table 2 reports results of Logistic Regression models for our three dichotomous dependent variables: the presence of a city manager with an advanced degree (Equation 1), the presence of a city manager with public administration as the major field of study (Equation 2), and the presence of a city manager with an advanced degree in public administration (Equation 3). For ease of interpretation we recalibrated several control variables. The initial figures for city manager annual salary, city population size, and city per capita income were divided by 1,000 so that each was expressed in thousands.

At the .05 significance level, the likelihood of a city manager having an advanced degree increases as salary increases (Equation 1).<sup>2</sup> In this model, the only other variables reliably associated with an advanced degree are the city manager age and gender. The likelihood that a city manager holds an advanced degree declines as the age of the manager increases and declines when the manager is female. Neither the measure of city resources, nor the measures of economic, political or administrative needs are reliably associated with the holding of an advanced degree. This model correctly predicts in 73.9% of the cases when a city will have a manager who holds an advanced degree.

The relationship between public administration as the field of study and salary is reliable at the .10 level (Equation 2).

We have over 90% confidence that the probability of a city manager having public administration as the major field of study increases as salary increases. A manager's field of study is also reliably associated with our measure of city resources, per capita income. The odds that a city manager had public administration as the field of study increases as per capita income increases. Again, city manager age and gender make a reliable contribution to the model. The likelihood of a manager having a degree in public administration is greater when the manager is younger and male. This model correctly predicts in 70.4% of the cases when a city will have a manager who has public administration as the field of study.

The findings in Table 2, equations 1 and 2, indicate a reliable, positive relationship between advanced degree and salary, but a somewhat less reliable relationship between field of study and salary (reliable at the .10 level and not the .05 level). These findings suggest that an advanced degree per se, rather than field of study is of value. However, the importance placed on public administration as a field of study may depend on the level of education to which it is attached. Our findings support this idea.

Equation 3 shows results for the presence of a city manager with an advanced degree in public administration. Independent of other variables, the probability that a city manager possesses an advanced degree in public administration increases with increases in salary. Once more, city per capita income, and a manager's age and gender also demonstrate a statistically reliable association at the .05 level. The odds of having an advance degree in public administration increase with growth in city per capita income, but decrease when a manger is older or is female. Percent unemployment achieves statistical reliability at the .10 level. This finding suggests with 90% confidence that the likelihood of a city manager possessing an advanced degree in public administration increases as city unemployment increases. The model in Equation 3 has somewhat greater predictive ability than the first two models and correctly predicts in 75.7% of the cases when a city will have a manager who holds an advanced degree in public administration.

**Table 2**  
***Logistic Regression Results for Advanced Degree***

Predictor	Equation 1: Advanced Degree			
	<i>B</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Wald's</i> <i>X</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>e</i> <sup><i>B</i></sup>
Salary	.023 (.011)	.031	4.667	1.023
Population	.008 (.009)	.392	0.733	1.008
Principal City	-1.035 (1.076)	.336	0.924	0.355
%White	.014 (.013)	.303	1.060	1.014
Per Capita Income	.061 (.039)	.118	2.441	1.063
%Unemployment	.045 (.113)	.693	0.155	1.046
Age	-.085 (.032)	.008	6.983	0.919
Gender	-2.213 (.753)	.003	8.650	.109
Race/Ethnicity	.484 (.746)	.516	0.422	1.623
Intercept	-.391 (2.493)	.875	0.025	
<b>Test</b>				
-2 Log Likelihood	112.489			
Model Chi Square	38.474	.000		
R2	.284/.389			
% Correctly Predicted	73.9			

Standard Error is in parenthesis; Salary is reported salary in dollars divided by 1,000;  
 Population: is one-race population 2010 divided by 1,000;  
 Per Capita Income is per capita income 2010 divided by 1,000; R2 is Cox & Snell  
 R2/Nagelkerke R2; *e*<sup>*B*</sup> is the odds ratio; 9 degrees of freedom per model.

**Table 2, Continued**

Predictor	Equation 2: PA Field of Study			
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	<i>Wald's</i> <i>X</i> <sup>2</sup>	<i>e</i> <sup><i>B</i></sup>
Salary	.016 (.009)	.083	2.996	1.016
Population	.005 (.005)	.327	0.961	1.005
Principal City	-.408 (.942)	.665	0.188	0.665
%White	-.004 (.013)	.720	0.128	0.996
Per Capita Income	.062 (.031)	.042	4.121	1.064
%Unemployment	.185 (.113)	.103	2.663	1.203
Age	-.067 (.028)	.017	5.741	0.935
Gender	-2.013 (.752)	.007	7.162	0.134
Race/Ethnicity	-.842 (.726)	.246	1.346	0.413
Intercept	-.958 (2.328)	.681	0.169	
<b>Test</b>				
-2 Log Likelihood	122.397			
Model Chi Square	37.018	.000		
R2	.275/.367			
% Correctly Predicted	70.4			

**Table 2, Continued**

Predictor	Equation 3: Advanced Degree in PA			
	<i>b</i>	<i>p</i>	Wald's $X^2$	$e^B$
Salary	.022 (.010)	.027	4.877	1.022
Population	.005 (.006)	.413	0.669	1.005
Principal City	-.374 (.947)	.693	0.156	0.688
%White	.005 (.013)	.693	0.156	1.005
Per Capita Income	.082 (.035)	.018	5.566	1.085
%Unemployment	.236 (.126)	.062	3.495	1.266
Age	-.065 (.029)	.023	5.199	0.937
Gender	-1.872 (.782)	.017	5.735	0.154
Race/Ethnicity	-.422 (.745)	.571	0.321	0.656
Intercept	-3.660 (2.580)	.156	2.012	
<b>Test</b>				
-2 Log Likelihood	113.946			
Model Chi Square	44.424	.000		
R2	.320/.429			
% Correctly Predicted	75.7			

## DISCUSSION

### *Isomorphic Theory*

The findings to our question, "Is a city manager with an advanced degree, particularly an advanced degree in public

administration, valued by cities?” indicate that city leaders place a high value on a city manager who holds an advanced degree in public administration. Cities are paying more for managers with these educational backgrounds than other educational backgrounds. Accounting for city resources, city social and economic characteristics, and individual-level city manager traits, results of our analyses provide us with confidence that holding an advanced degree, particularly in public administration, is associated with higher salary. We infer from these findings not only the importance of specific educational qualifications to city councils when hiring a city manager, but also that this level of importance applies across a wide spectrum of diverse communities – an advanced degree in public administration is valued, so to speak, across-the-board. What might help explain such a wide spread value across communities? We speculate that the answer has to do with the process of structural isomorphism.

As noted earlier, a remarkable aspect of organizational life is the extent to which separate and distinct organizations in the same field come to reflect one another in substantial ways without necessarily engaging in any coordination between each other. This process was labeled “structural isomorphism” by DiMaggio and Powell (1983). These two authors initially applied their theory to the art world, to account for the process by which art museums would come to identify common painters as “vital” representations of different genres.

Agreement upon which artists represented a vital contribution to certain movements did not result from conscious deliberation between different museums curators, but came about as some curators wished to duplicate the decisions made by others. Those curators who would adopt the behavior of others would do so because the individuals whose behavior they were copying were perceived to be more knowledgeable or successful. The desire to act like those who are more successful originates with the desire to minimize the likelihood that one is acting in a manner contrary to apparently successful individuals or organizations, so as to avoid being perceived as unsuccessful. Central to the theory of structural isomorphism is the existence of groups, typically professional associations, with

the power to promote the adoption of these standards by a larger community. As applied to the present research, the logic of isomorphism translates into hiring a city manager with an advanced degree in public administration. This is because such training is a part of the identity expected of city governments promoted by professional groups, such as the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA), the American Society for Public Administration (ASPA), and the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA). Through the process of isomorphism, these professional associations have come to adopt a similar set of standards that, via a soft pressure exerted on city councils, is reflected in council hiring decisions.

Professional organizations promote advanced degrees in specific fields of study for those who aspire to public management. NASPAA, for example, emphasizes a commitment to public service through a focus on the certification of master degree programs in the fields of public administration, public affairs and public policy (NASPAA, 2012). The ICMA promotes the value of an MPA in its credentialing criteria. According to the ICMA formula, although a Bachelor's degree in any discipline and field of study from an accredited educational institution is the minimum education required, the number of experiential years for accreditation decreases as level of education increases, and culminates in the Masters of Public Administration (MPA) or Masters of Public Policy (MPP) (ICMA, 2012). For its part, and among other activities, ASPA has been instrumental in advancing public administration as a profession with recognized attributes such as formal organization of members, a code of ethics, professional honors and awards, and university training programs (ASPA, 2012). While these professional associations cannot compel city government to make a particular hiring decision, they promote and ultimately legitimize a model of professionalism (i.e., exert a soft pressure) that for our study makes hiring someone with particular training a value.<sup>3</sup>

It is central to our interpretation of results to stress that the impact of these organizational efforts is very much connected to the needs that cities have for professional training.

Professional public administration and public affairs associations such as NASPAA and APSA do not create a need as a way to sell a product; a purely product marketing model does not apply here. Rather, as can be assessed by historic activity and current practices, these professional associations promote a degree and/or field of study whose curriculum is relevant to the real needs of cities. As they stand, our findings do not demonstrate a direct connection between the standards advocated by professional public administration and public affair associations and city council decisions. However, we believe our findings offer general support for the presence of an isomorphic process. The activities of organizations such as NASPAA and the ICMA potentially provide a context within which an advanced degree in public administration comes to be highly prized by prospective public administrators as well as by those who are not public administrators but who serve the public and who make important public-sector hiring decisions. The value city councils accord an advanced degree in public administration is seen in the higher salary paid managers with these educational qualifications despite city size, socioeconomic conditions, and characteristics of managers.

We believe that the logic of the isomorphic process we describe also has implications for public administration educational programs and curriculum. In this regard, our findings suggest a course of action for at least three different actors. First, instructors in and administrators of advanced degree granting programs should devote attention to the proceedings of associations such as NASPAA and ICMA, through attending professional conferences sponsored by these groups or utilization of the materials offered by these groups. Second, departments with advanced degree granting programs must make a commitment to offer the courses that will place their students on the cutting edge of public administration education. Third, knowing that program faculty and administrators are looking to them for guidance, professional public affairs and public administration associations will need to reflect deeply upon the larger impact of their actions. An example of this is provided by NASPAA's advocacy for ethics training within MPA programs. The absence of such training

within MPA programs was viewed as a weakness by NASPAA. It was a weakness NASPAA took effort to address by stressing the need for such training during conferences and in accreditation documents and standards.

### ***City Council Hiring Criteria and City Management as a Career Goal***

Our findings provide insight into both the criteria used by city councils when making hiring decisions and the pursuit of city management as a career goal. Accompanying the 2011 city manager survey was a set of interviews with six city managers in communities across Southeast Texas, conducted during November 2011. Although most interview questions pertained to economic development, one question concerned job duties and another, career goals. To provide additional contextual insight into our findings, these comments are reported where relevant.

A framework for the control variables we employed in our analysis involved the managerial, policy, and political job duties of the modern city manager. Comments from the city manager interviews support the prevalence of these responsibilities for city councils. The interview question on job duties was as follows: *In thinking of the three roles, Managerial (i.e. personnel, budgeting, executing policy), Policy (i.e. making or advising) and Political (i.e. public relations speeches/ceremonies, influencing government and nongovernment officials), where do you spend most of your time and which do you consider most important?* According to one manager, “Managerial would be where I spend the majority of time and is the most important role for the position, with policy coming next.” Another said the position was “strictly managerial – political is for the mayor and the policy is for the [local] economic development corporation and city council.” All interviewed managers said managerial duties took most if not all of their time. Aware of the position’s significant managerial responsibilities, city councils have a compelling incentive to take professional qualifications into account when hiring. Among these qualifications is appropriate educational training.

Our findings provide insight into the pursuit of city management as a career goal. Our analysis of city managers in

Texas shows that the majority of managers have an advanced degree (66.1%, 75/118). Most of these advanced degree holders hold a degree in public administration (70.7%, 53/75). Though not definitive, these descriptive findings suggest that an advanced degree in public administration is a particularly viable pathway to a career in city management. These data also indicate that not all cities hire managers with this particular educational background. As a profession, city management is not necessarily a career aspiration for those of “college-age,” staking out a career. Many individuals attain the position later in life. To provide some context for this, we refer once again to the interviews with city managers. The question was: *Was the city manager position a long-term goal of yours or was it an opportunity that came along later in your career?* According to one city manager at the time, “This [position as city manager] came later in life. I started in law enforcement and after spending time at the academy and a law firm, I decided to apply for a few chiefs of police positions to beef back up on my interview skills. Not expecting it, I was offered a chief of police position. Not long after filling this position, my city manager was accepted to law school and I was appointed the interim city manager. This turned into a full time position.” According to another manager, “In 1999 I had a possibility to be city manager, but I didn’t feel I was ready for the job at that time. Three years later in 2002 that opportunity was presented to me a second time and I accepted. I cannot say that becoming city manager was my long term goal, but that the opportunity and timing was right.”

Because in some cases the desire or opportunity to become city manager comes later in life, the pool of aspirants that city leadership considers will not necessarily be replete with those holding an advanced degree in public administration. Further, some cities, particularly smaller, rural communities, may have difficulty in attracting a pool of MPAs (Gabris, Davis, & Nelson, 2010). This said, there undoubtedly is a cohort of aspirants for whom city management is a career goal, and an advanced degree in public administration can distinguish them from others in a diverse applicant pool (Watson & Watson, 2006; Watson & Hassett, 2004). In fact, most managers we interviewed claimed to have set out to become a city manager,

with one saying it was a "...lifelong goal since junior high," and another noting it was a "long-term career goal."<sup>4</sup>

Finally, we believe it important to draw attention to the paucity of females in the city manager ranks, only 16 in all. The small number of female city managers is most likely not an artifact of our particular survey. A survey of city leaders in Texas conducted in 2005 also yielded a small percentage of females (Vanderleeuw, Sandovici, & Jarmon, 2011). The relative absence of female managers is particularly apparent among those who hold an advanced degree as evidenced by the inverse association between city manager educational background and the presence of a female manager in our multivariate models. While the small number of female city managers may in some cases reflect a city council bias, it seems at least as likely that females are not opting for an advanced degree in public administration and a career as city manager at the same levels as are males. At least this seems to be the case in the state of Texas. Even if the possibility of a hiring bias against female managers in some cases is taken into account, career options may be open for females who attain an advanced degree in public administration and set sights on city management.

### CONCLUSION

We expect that the findings presented in this paper to be representative of what would be observed in the continually expanding and rapidly urbanizing states in the sun-belt, such as Georgia, Florida, North Carolina, Virginia, and Arizona. We believe that the growth witnessed in these states and the past historical record of many rust-belt cities has emphasized the need for professional city administrators among elected officials. Cities within these states would have the resources to obtain the benefit of a professional manager. Future research will need to expend more effort on specifying how an advanced degree in public administration has come to be valued. In order to accomplish this task, work will need to be undertaken to separate the influence exerted through isomorphic pressure by groups such as NASPAA, ICMA, and ASPA from the benefits, in the form of specific skills, of the professional training obtained in an

advanced degree. It is highly likely that both influences contribute, but there has only been speculation about which exerts more influence.

In this regard, the process of structural isomorphism as it applies to the professional standards used by city councils in hiring city managers we think warrants further examination. Assuming a rational process at work, isomorphic theory will help explain hiring preferences not as a series of unique decisions, but as a product of an encompassing set of professional norms across city governments. In promoting field-wide professional norms, professional associations can guide an industry or field of endeavor. In addition to aggregate-level data, such an examination will necessitate interviews both with city council members and city managers to determine the importance they place on professional credentials such as education as well as communication links among city leaders, managers and professional associations. Our analysis to this point offers support for the isomorphic process, and has relevance for programs that offer an advanced degree in public administration as well as those who administer and teach in such programs. Further, future study will want to consider the prior work experiences of city managers. It is possible that prior experience mitigates to some extent the influence of educational criteria. To what extent, though, remains an open question.

We also acknowledge that another explanation for our findings might be the relative scarcity of applicants with an advanced degree, that then drives up salary for advanced degree holders. This leaves open the question of why city councils would conclude they must hire an advanced degree holder, aside from a value driven by the promotion of a field standard. If scarcity has an influence on salary, among other reasons it may be because prior experience of city council members indicates that an advanced degree holder is a more competent administrator or that an advanced degree holder is better prepared for the political nuances of the council/manager relationship. While our data did not allow us to address this alternative explanation in our analysis, it is worthy of future investigation.

Our study was guided by a central question, “Is a city manager with an advanced degree, particularly an advanced degree in public administration, valued by cities?” To address this, our analysis employed results of a 2011 survey of city managers in Texas with a population of more than 5,000 combined with 2010 census data for each city. The cities our surveyed managers worked in were demographically representative of the wider range of cities in Texas with a population of more than 5,000. We argued that because the council-manager form of city government was a prevalent form of city government both in Texas and across the nation, we also could have confidence that our findings had application outside of Texas. Of course in generalizing beyond Texas, we recognize that there are cultural, as well as other influences not accounted for. However, council-manager government is widely used and similarity in city government structure provides a foundation for the applicability of this present study to similarly organized cities in other geographic areas. Despite variation in important city social and economic characteristics such as per capita income, population size, educational and poverty levels, cities pay a higher salary to have a manager with an advanced degree in public administration. We concluded that city leaders value an advanced degree, particularly when that degree is in the field of public administration.

#### ENDNOTES

1. At the time we identified home rule cities with a manager, we did not take a count of the total number of home rule cities in Texas. However, according to the Texas Municipal League Online Directory there are 357 home rule cities in Texas (as of November, 2013). Thus, it seems fair to say that the overwhelming majority of home rule cities in Texas employ a city manager.
2. To model each, we utilize SPSS Statistics 19, Binary Logistic Regression. We report model results in a format recommended by Peng, Lee, and Ingersoll (2002) to help achieve constancy across disciplines in the reporting of Logistic Regression results. City per capita income was highly correlated with % Bachelor’s degree ( $r > .650$ ). Therefore, we tested two models for each dependent variable. One model included per capita income but excluded % Bachelor’s; the other included % Bachelor’s but excluded per capita income. Percent

Bachelor's failed to achieve statistical significance even at the .10 level in any model. Otherwise, there was little difference between models. Coefficients for salary as well as the control variables remained virtually unchanged. There was a slight difference in predictive ability between models, however. For each dependent variable, the model with per capita income correctly predicted a slightly higher percentage of cases (by about 3 percentage points) compared to the model with % Bachelor's. To conserve space, we present the models with per capita income, though models with % Bachelor's are available upon request. We also tested models that replaced the city demographic variables shown in Table 2 – population, percent white, per capita income, and percent unemployment – with variables that measured the change in these city conditions between 2000 and 2010. Based on decennial census data, these were percentage population change, change in the percentage of a city's population that is white, percentage change in city per capita income, and change in the percentage of a city's civilian work force that is unemployed. None of these change measures had a reliable association with any of the three dependent variables. Salary, city manager age and gender continued to make a reliable contribution to each model in the same direction as in the models reported in Table 2. Replacing the change measure of per capita income with change in the percentage of a city's population that had a Bachelor's degree yielded the same results. These model results are also available upon request.

3. We acknowledge the possibility that some portion of our surveyed city managers attained an advanced degree in public administration after being hired to the position. Our data do not allow us to directly address this possibility. However, to the extent that this does occur, its occurrence would provide added support for the influence of an isomorphic process that stems from professional public administration associations. As it stands, our central finding – cities tend to accord a higher salary to managers who hold an advanced degree in public administration in the face of numerous controls – attests to the value city leaders place on the type of educational background that has been promoted by professional associations such as NASPAA. We further acknowledge that our findings do not demonstrate a direct connection between what these professional public administration associations advocate and city council decision making, and that further research needs to establish such a connection. However, we again note that our findings are highly compatible with an isomorphic process.

4. Neither our findings nor discussion are to be taken as suggesting that the sole motive for working in city management is or

should be salary. Salary is part of a larger mix of motivating factors. For example, each interviewed city manager stated that they were motivated to work in city management to improve the lives of citizens and their community. One manager noted that watching his hometown, Wichita Falls, rebuild after devastating tornadoes encouraged his interest in working in city government. Others talked about “making a positive impact on someone’s life” and “making a difference.” Interview results are compatible with the aggregate data that supports the presence of an isomorphic process in which public service is promoted.

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