

Transforming the Knowledge Gap for Local Planning Officials: Impacts of Continuing Education in a Master Citizen Planner Program

Abstract

In an era of increasing complexity, the majority of local land-use decisions in the United States are made by volunteer citizen planners. Often these elected or appointed volunteers enter their positions with a passion for their communities but without appropriate background training. The Michigan Citizen Planner Program was developed to address this gap. The study described in this article investigated the self-assessed impacts on graduates of basic and advanced training. Findings suggest that training conducted as the result of collaboration by university Extension, other state agencies, and nonprofit groups is essential to realizing the positive community development impacts expected by citizens and local officials.

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Introduction

In U.S. democracy, planning and zoning decisions are largely conducted at the local level (Cullingworth & Caves, 2009). At the heart of these decisions are the locally appointed planning officials who make zoning recommendations, adopt plans, and review development proposals. It is estimated that there are 90,056 local units of government (Hogue, 2012), comprising both elected officials and, in a greater number, appointed officials charged with these important decisions. Yet despite a half dozen states that require mandatory training (Samson, 2008), local land-use decisions are made primarily by citizen volunteers with little to no formal training.

In addition, the complexity of local land-use decision making has increased substantially (Sullivan, 2012). Topics such as climate adaptation, resiliency planning, sustainable development, and place making require the attention of volunteer planning officials who struggle just to meet the basic responsibilities of their appointed duties. For example, since Hurricane Katrina hit New Orleans and, more recently, Hurricane Sandy leveled devastating effects on East Coast communities and infrastructure, local officials have been forced to contemplate and respond to increased complexities in local land-use decision making, including natural hazards planning and disaster recovery (Schwab, 2015).

Recent research of local planning officials in northwest lower Michigan, where significant growth was taking place, revealed that "most planning officials in the region were appointed with no prior background, little understanding of their roles, and no training upon being elected or appointed" (Solomon & Pape, 2014, p. 3). The need for

training and education also had been recognized by the Michigan Land-Use Leadership Council appointed in 2003 by former governor Jennifer Granholm. A report by the council included the recommendation that "60 percent of planning and zoning officials complete basic land-use planning, zoning, and smart growth educational programs by 2010 and document participation in such programs within 1 year of appointment" (Cullen, Norris, Beyea, Geith, & Rhead, 2006, p. 4; Granholm, 2003). In addition, research of Michigan planning officials statewide in 2006 revealed that nearly 80% felt that continuing education was an appropriate requirement for continuing to serve as a planning official (Cullen et al., 2006, p. 8). These findings are corroborated by views of land-use professionals and scholars nationally, with a 2008 document suggesting that local planning officials "operate with insufficient procedural guidelines and lack the appropriate expertise to implement effective zoning schemes" (Samson, 2008, p. 893).

In recognition of this knowledge gap, several states have increased efforts to provide training and continuing education for planning officials over the past decade or so. Between 2001 and 2007, six states passed laws requiring mandated training for local officials (Samson, 2008). The rapid increase in states' either mandating or encouraging training of local officials has been coined *the quiet revolution in training citizen planners* (Nolon, 2007). An early adopter of voluntary training was Michigan State University (MSU) Extension, with its Michigan Citizen Planner Program.

With over 18,000 locally appointed planning officials, Michigan is among the leading states relative to local land-use decision making (Solomon & Pape, 2014). Therefore, Michigan is an excellent laboratory for testing the impacts of training programs as other states contemplate further training requirements. In response to this situation, MSU Extension developed a new master citizen planner (MCP) initiative in 2006 to provide advanced citizen planner training.

Due to the onslaught of mandated and volunteer training programs for planning officials that has occurred over the last 15 years, there is a need to further understand and measure the effectiveness of such programs. The question remains: Do any of these programs lead to better results in local planning? The research described herein measured perceived impacts of entry-level citizen planner training (CP program) and advanced citizen planner training (MCP program) in response to the following research questions:

1. Do participants in the CP program identify perceived impacts at the local level?
2. Does completion of the MCP program create significantly higher perceived impacts at the local level?

National and Local Context

Complexity of Local Issues

The act of making planning decisions comes with its share of challenges, including those related to revenue raising, private involvement in provision of public services, land and real-estate markets, litigation, transportation, urban growth, communication, and various other areas (Freire & Stren, 2001). As urbanization increases, so does the pressure to achieve efficient planning at the local level (Olesen-Tracey, 2010). In cases of negligence in the line of duty, legislation such as the Federal Torts Claim Act (U.S. Code, 2006) holds planning and zoning boards as well as commissioners accountable for their decisions. Providing elected and appointed planning officials with the training they need to make smart decisions confidently is one way to prepare them for the challenges of urbanization.

Skills Needed in Planning Positions

Planning commissions and zoning boards of appeals are typically made up of concerned citizens who care about the futures of their communities yet do not have the skill sets to face the challenges that come with their jobs (Cullen et al., 2006). Local planning officials must learn how to hold hearings, conduct meetings, and process information from applicants and other agencies as well as how to stay out of court. In addition, officials need to understand planning, zoning, and economic statutes and must be able to set goals and work with the public, other units of government, developers, and real estate agents (Samson, 2008). Because planning commissioners and individuals serving on boards of zoning appeals and regional planning authorities are often appointed, commissions have not always kept pace with the times. The knowledge that people in these organizations accrued elsewhere, even in allied disciplines, is not the same as skill in policy discussion and practice. The capacities that commissioners bring to the table and how they interact with the general public and professional planning staff are key to how land and resources are used (Meck, 1997).

Rise of Training Programs for Local Planning Officials

The transition from work in the private sector to work in the public sector, or even between offices within the public sector, can be daunting. Specific aspects of governing positions—such as leadership, community planning, local governmental finance, and local governmental law—involve skills often overlooked while making that transition. These are areas officials need to understand to fulfill their responsibilities effectively (Laris, 2008). States such as Kentucky, Louisiana, Nevada, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, and Tennessee have laws that mandate continuing training for planning officials (Samson, 2008, p. 897). Some states mandate continuing education for certain officials but leave it optional for others. In some cases, failure to complete training results in exemption from pay raises, publication of failure to comply, or removal from office (Laris, 2008).

"Smart growth" needs "smart people" was the position the Kentucky chapter of the American Planning Association took when it sowed the seeds for Kentucky House Bill 55, which was enacted in 2001 and codified in Kentucky Revised Statutes section 147A.027. Kentucky was the first state to require continuing education, with statute section 147A.027 requiring planning commissioners and members of boards of adjustment to participate in at least 8 hr of training per 2-calendar-year period (Slagle, 2011). Employees such as planning officials, zoning officials, and planning assistants are required to undergo at least twice that amount of training, 16 hr per 2-calendar-year period, beginning from the date of employment (Ky. Rev. Stat. § 147A.027, 2001). Following the passage of Kentucky's statute, Louisiana, New Jersey, New York, South Carolina, and Tennessee also implemented laws with training requirements (Samson, 2008, p. 897). Some states, such as Massachusetts, Michigan, North Carolina, and Virginia, offer volunteer training opportunities.

Meeting the Local Knowledge Gap: Michigan's Citizen Planner Program

Beginning as a regional pilot program in 2000 and launched statewide in 2002, the Michigan Citizen Planner Program has trained over 5,000 local officials, making it one of the leading training programs in the nation for volunteer local planning officials (Solomon & Pape, 2014).

The entry-level CP program consists of seven 3-hr weekly sessions (21 hr). The session titles are

- Introduction to Planning and Zoning;
- Legal Foundations of Planning and Zoning;
- Roles and Responsibilities;
- Part I, Planning—Roles and Responsibilities;
- Part II, Zoning—Plan Implementation and Development Controls;
- Innovative Planning and Zoning; and
- The Art of Community Planning.

Participants receive a spiral-bound citizen planner manual complete with short chapters for each of the seven sessions, copies of PowerPoint slides, references, and exercises (Solomon & Pape, 2014). A signature aspect of the program is the use of the fictitious community Spartyville for exercises that simulate real-life local scenarios. The exercises include graphical depictions of characters and places to encourage fun, hands-on application of knowledge gained during the training.

Participants in the MCP program must complete the CP program sessions, pass an online examination, complete a capstone project, and meet continuing education requirements (Beyea, Crawford, Menon, & Neumann, 2014). The capstone projects involve time outside the classroom to allow participants to create measurable impacts. The continuing education requirements involve attending at least 6 hr of training annually. Participants can meet the continuing education requirements by enrolling throughout the year in MCP program–approved courses offered by MSU Extension and partnering organizations.

At the inception of the Michigan Citizen Planner Program, the program originators identified (a) competency levels among members of planning boards and zoning boards of appeals as well as board members' reluctance to serve longer terms as core problems and (b) provision of a land-use training and certificate program for volunteer land-use decision makers in Michigan as a solution. Ten key intended program impacts were identified. For the study reported here, those 10 impact goals were revisited for the purpose of measuring perceived impacts of the program. The 10 impact goals are as follows:

1. Increase satisfaction of serving on local boards and commissions.
2. Improve continuity/institutional memory at the local level regarding land use and decisions.
3. Increase lengths of time served on local boards and commissions.
4. Enhance the understanding and responsibility of local officials in relation to ethics and conflict-of-interest issues.
5. Improve working relationships and citizen involvement within and among communities.
6. Provide locally focused, current, and ongoing land-use education.

7. Improve land-use decision making.
8. Nurture alumni to promote "good practices" in land use.
9. Increase awareness of existing land-use tools.
10. Reduce local litigation and liability through improved risk-management practices.

Research Gap

Many adults enroll in continuing education expecting to achieve a variety of outcomes, including the attainment of new knowledge, skills, values, and attitudes (Houle, 1980; Stein, Wanstreet, & Trinko, 2011). However, a main challenge of continuing education has been the inability to properly assess which programs work best and which do not work (Olesen-Tracey, 2010). Although the need for continuing education for volunteer planning officials has been well documented (Cullen et al., 2006; Laris, 2008; Samson, 2008), few have studied the impacts of these programs. The study described here investigated the participant-assessed impacts of the CP and MCP programs on communities in Michigan.

Methods

The research focus was to understand perceived impact at the local level. Impact in Extension has been defined as "the positive difference we make in people's lives as a result of the programs we conduct" (Diem, 2003, "Why Be Concerned with Impact?"). Putting a finer point on this definition, Extension programming should result in changes in behavior or attitudes or in benefits to society as a whole (Diem, 1997). Use of a survey to collect information about perceived impacts was identified as an appropriate method for reaching the full population of CP program and MCP program participants and creating a composite profile of the population (Scheuren, 1997).

The Qualtrics survey was sent via an email invitation to 3,402 people who had passed through the CP program or MCP program from 2003 through 2014. Techniques such as personalizing email invitations, ensuring anonymity, selecting a mailing list of people who had previously responded to surveys, sending an email reminder, and emphasizing MSU as a legitimate authority carrying out the research were adopted to increase the participation rate (Dillman, Smyth, & Christian, 2013).

The survey instrument included questions related to the previously identified 10 program impact goals. Respondents rated their perceptions of impacts using a 5-point Likert response scale, with 1 representing the highest impact and 5 representing the lowest impact. Mean scores were calculated for reported impacts for the CP program and the MCP program. Ordinal regression was implemented for the purpose of checking for a significant difference in perceived impacts between the two groups of study participants—those who completed only the CP program and those who also completed the MCP program.

Results

Of the 3,402 emails sent, 1,217 emails were opened, 411 surveys were started, and 333 surveys were completed. On the basis of the literature (Council of American Survey Research Organizations, 1982; Wiseman, 2003), a response rate of 27.36% was calculated through division of the number of completed surveys (333) by the number of eligible reporting units in the sample, defined as those who opened the survey email (1,217).

Overall, 9.8% of the email invitations resulted in completed responses. Cumulative averages in annual reports of the Michigan Citizen Planner Program indicate that 33% of participants were college graduates (Beyea, Thorne, & Shockley, 2010). In the survey discussed here, 32% of respondents reported that level of education. In addition, survey responses were from all 14 MSU Extension districts in Michigan, reflecting overall demographic characteristics of participants in the program.

Of the 333 respondents who completed surveys, 8% had participated in but not completed the CP program, and 92% had completed the CP program. Further, 32% of the respondents also had completed the MCP program. For data analysis, the study sample comprised 202 CP graduates and 105 MCP graduates. Responses from the 26 nongraduates were removed from the data.

Table 1 provides information about the study participants' perceptions relative to the 10 intended program impacts. The three top-rated impacts for all respondents were "increase awareness of existing land-use tools" (CP $M = 2.65$, MCP $M = 2.40$), "improve land-use decision making" (CP $M = 2.75$, MCP $M = 2.48$), and "enhance the understanding and responsibility of local officials in relation to ethics and conflict-of-interest issues" (CP $M = 2.84$, MCP $M = 2.45$).

Ordinal regression revealed significant differences ($p < .05$) in perceived impact between CP program participants and MCP program participants for eight of the 10 program impact goals (Table 1). In all eight instances, the MCP participants rated the impact significantly higher. Those eight program impact goals were "increase satisfaction of serving on local boards and commissions," "improve continuity/institutional memory at the local level regarding land use and decisions," "increase lengths of time served on local boards and commissions," "enhance the understanding and responsibility of local officials in relation to ethics and conflict-of-interest issues," "improve working relationships and citizen involvement within and among communities," "provide locally focused, current, and ongoing land-use education," "improve land-use decision making," and "nurture alumni to promote 'good practices' in land use." The two program goals for which there was not a significant difference between the two groups were "increase awareness of existing land-use tools" and "reduce local litigation and liability through improved risk-management practices."

Table 1.
Study Participant Perceptions Relative to Program Impact Goals

Impact goal	<i>M</i>		No. of responses		<i>SD</i>		Sig. (<i>p</i>)	Wald
	MCP	CP	MCP	CP	MCP	CP		
Increase satisfaction of serving on local boards and commissions	2.53	3	104	198	1.19	1.166	.001**	10.945
Improve continuity/institutional memory at the local level regarding land use and decisions	2.69	3.125	105	200	1.153	1.056	.001**	10.839
Increase lengths of time served on local	3.06	3.52	104	195	1.29	1.211	.003**	8.704

boards and commissions								
Enhance the understanding and responsibility of local officials in relation to ethics and conflict-of-interest issues	2.45	2.84	105	198	1.110	1.102	.003**	9.067
Improve working relationships and citizen involvement within and among communities	2.72	3.05	105	198	1.131	1.107	.015*	5.956
Provide locally focused, current, and ongoing land-use education	2.75	3.06	104	200	1.153	1.011	.018*	5.570
Improve land-use decision making	2.48	2.75	105	201	1.03	1.05	.027*	4.880
Nurture alumni to promote "good practices" in land use	2.88	3.16	104	199	1.217	1.145	.038*	4.322
Increase awareness of existing land-use tools	2.40	2.65	105	202	1.04	1.059	.060	3.527
Reduce local litigation and liability through improved risk-management practices	3.12	3.22	104	195	1.28	1.179	.534	0.387

Note. MCP = master citizen planner program. CP = citizen planner program.

p* .05. *p* .01.

A 2005 participant survey had explored opinions about how many hours of required continuing education per year is appropriate for planning officials. The question was repeated in the 2015 survey (Table 2). Response options ranged from 1 (*1–5 hours/year*) to 5 (*more than 20 hours/year*). Responses indicated a shift toward an increase in required continuing education hours, from just under 6–10 hr per year (2005 CP *M* = 1.8) to just over 6–10 hr per year (2015 CP *M* = 2.1, MCP *M* = 2.0). The 2015 modal response was 1–5 hours/year, and the 2015 modal response was 6–10 hours/year for both CP and MCP respondents.

Table 2.

Opinions About Appropriate Requirement for Annual Training Hours

**Response-
option**

number	Response-option text	2005 CP	2015 CP	2015 MCP
1	1–5 hours/year	49.0% ^a	32.0%	36.1%
2	6–10 hours/year	33.4%	43.8% ^a	42.3% ^a
3	11–15 hours/year	10.0%	11.8%	11.3%
4	16–20 hours/year	4.7%	8.3%	6.2%
5	More than 20 hours/year	2.8%	4.1%	4.1%
<i>M</i>		1.8	2.1	2.0

Note. CP = citizen planner program. MCP = master citizen planner program.
^aModal response.

Discussion

In an era of increasing complexity, the majority of local land-use decisions in the United States are made by volunteer citizen planners. Often these elected or appointed volunteers enter their positions because of a passion for their communities but have minimal background training. The Michigan Citizen Planner Program was developed to address this gap. In broad strokes, the program goals address personal satisfaction, understanding of role and working relationships, and quality of decision making. The program can be considered a success, with participants perceiving the impacts on their communities as medium to high relative to all of the 10 program impact goals. Given the positive response to the original entry-level CP program, an advanced MCP program was created. According to the findings reported here, participants in both programs felt that the highest impacts were associated with an understanding of the tools available, leading to a better understanding of responsibilities and better quality decision making.

The MCP program participants perceived slightly greater impacts in their local communities than did the CP program participants. This finding leads to the following question: Did the additional training of the MCP program significantly increase perceived impacts? Based on responses from the set of participants in the study described here, the answer is a resounding yes. Eight of the 10 program impact goals were rated significantly higher by the MCP participants than by the CP participants. The additional training was associated with increased satisfaction in serving, improved continuity of local-level knowledge, increased durations of service, enhanced understanding of responsibilities in relation to particular issues, improved working relationships with other officials and community members, provision of effective land-use education, improved decision making, and promotion of good land-use practices. Both CP and MCP participants' perceptions of impact were highest relative to the program impact goal of increasing awareness of existing land-use tools, and there was no significant difference between the groups relative to this intended outcome. This finding could indicate that the entry-level CP program provided the needed knowledge in this area but that it took the MCP level of training to actualize the higher order impacts expressed relative to eight other goals. A surprising finding was that the training did not reduce local litigation through improved risk-management practices, according to participants' perceptions. This outcome could be related to the comparative economic downturn in Michigan during the period represented by the participants. This area requires further investigation to pull apart the influencing factors and explore whether the programming content needs to be adjusted.

Previously collected data allowed for a comparison across the 10-year span of the Michigan Citizen Planner

Program related to opinions about the hours of training that should be required for planning officials. The increase in what respondents deemed as appropriate, from just under 6 to 10 hours per year to just over 6 to 10 hours per year, could be attributed to the increasing complexity of land-use decision making required at the local level. Specific to the study described here (the 2015 study), participants' responses could be associated with the improving economy and higher levels of development activity in their local communities.

It is important to note that a constraint of these findings is that all the participants joined the training voluntarily, possibly leading to higher perceived impacts due to self-selection and desire for training. The voluntary participation in the survey also could have led to higher reporting of impacts, resulting from the likelihood that those willing to complete the survey attached a higher sense of value to the CP and MCP programs.

Conclusion

In conclusion, the entry-level CP program resulted in positive perceived impacts at the local level, and the advanced MCP program led to significant increases in those perceived impacts. Although both groups attributed the highest perceived impacts to how they function and awareness of land-use tools, the MCP group showed significantly higher perceived impact gains. These gains related to foundational skills for any citizen planner: knowing the tools available to them and having the ability to function in their working group. The MCP program participants were able to build on a foundation and show increased impacts across a broader spectrum of potential impacts.

The results have implications at the national level as states contemplate appropriate mechanisms for training citizen planners. The results of the Michigan Citizen Planner Program evaluation support the concept of core competency training for newly appointed planning officials. Moreover, given the increased perceived impacts of master citizen planners, the findings suggest that there can be increased impacts when an initial core competency examination is coupled with annual continuing education requirements. A new initiative from the eXtension Land-Use Planning Community of Practice—the American Citizen Planner (ACP) National Exam and 20-hr ACP course (eXtension, 2012)—is based on the Michigan Citizen Planner Program training model and will provide a national platform for testing these assumptions. The legislative action of those *quiet revolution* states that, over the past dozen years, have adopted training requirements for planning officials to address gaps in planning knowledge, functions, and procedures appears to have merit, according to the findings in Michigan. With over a million elected and appointed planning officials nationwide, training conducted as the result of collaboration by university Extension, other state agencies, and nonprofit groups is essential to realizing the positive community development impacts expected by citizens and local officials.

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