

# The Pedagogy of Citizen Participation in Local Government: Designing and Implementing Effective Board Training Programs for Municipalities and Counties

Paul R. Lachapelle  
*Montana State University*

Elizabeth A. Shanahan  
*Montana State University*

## ABSTRACT

Although there are some general resources for citizens who are appointed or elected to local government boards, there is a clear need to develop comprehensive and context-specific training material to better prepare citizens for public service and board governance. This study details the development, delivery, and impact of a structured curriculum developed by the authors and used for citizen board training in Montana. The curriculum covers four key areas: (1) Foundations of governance (such as relevant statutes, including state constitutional provisions on the right to participate and right to know, and good governance principles); (2) effective meeting techniques, with a focus on procedural methods such as Robert's Rules of Order; (3) conflict management; and (4) leadership and team-building skills. Curricular materials include a detailed handbook, case study exercises, relevant handouts and worksheets, and Web-based resources such as podcasts. At the end of the training, we asked participants to self-evaluate their level of change in terms of knowledge and behavior, using both print and online surveys with Likert-scale items and open-ended questions. We used the responses to measure the impact of the educational program; analysis showed a positive change in participants' knowledge and behavior as a result of the training. Strengths, challenges, and implications of the current training curriculum, as well as further program refinement and its delivery in various contexts, are presented and discussed.

## INTRODUCTION

When students of public administration first learn about the New Public Service (NPS) perspective, which states that government should run like a democracy and not like a business (Denhardt & Denhardt, 2007), they typically are simultaneously energized and puzzled. Their excitement centers on linking the work of public service with normative democratic values; their bewilderment surrounds the age-old question of how to actualize democracy. Practicing democracy does not begin and end simply with the delivery of public services, but rather it involves the essential process of citizen engagement and participation as a critical means to an end. It is in this framework that we turn to training citizen boards as an example of practicing democracy and deepening such engagements through training.

### *Citizen Boards as an Integral Component of Local Government*

As asserted in NPS, democratic forms of government necessitate the active involvement of citizens. However, key challenges in achieving functional democracy include effectively inculcating citizens and encouraging public participation in all forms of government deliberations and activities. One avenue for such public engagement involves appointed or elected positions for citizens on local government boards. Citizen boards are those subunits of government authorized by law to perform a single function or a limited number of functions. For example, citizens participating in planning boards, conservation districts, or housing authorities (herein boards) are responsible for limited but important functions and decisions. Perhaps more significantly, serving on boards provides various ancillary benefits. While citizen boards serve a fiduciary role by advising on policy decisions—through direct administrative rule-making, or as quasi-judicial authorities—such boards can also provide a form of direct democracy by allowing intimate citizen-government interaction and increasing the approachability and responsiveness of various government personnel.

Citizens on local government boards begin to fulfill what Berger and Neuhaus (1977) refer to as a neo-Tocquevillian vision, where citizens serve as intermediaries between the populace and government. As such, local governments have higher levels of legitimacy as the public becomes more integrated in policy discussions and decisions. In addition, citizen board participation can provide deeper levels of practiced democracy, by affording opportunities to co-learn how to build relationships, enhance trust, foster community responsiveness and resiliency, and promote greater transparency and equity. Citizens engaged on boards may also better understand and thus support government policies and activities because of their board duties. Perhaps most importantly, board participation allows citizens to directly interact with each other in a formal setting of government rule-making, an increasingly critical function in contemporary democracies.

Serving on or interacting with the boards, districts, commissions, and committees in local government offers opportunities to practice and nurture many democratic ideals. According to Ostrom (1997), citizen interactions are “fundamental conditions for establishing and maintaining the viability of democratic societies ... person-to-person, citizen-to-citizen relationships are what life in democratic societies is all about” (p. 3). Such participation has the potential to challenge and change the traditional roles of citizen as outsider, public administrator as expert, and legislator as representative of elite interests (Box, 1998). Boards offer a dynamic avenue for citizens to become part of the community governance. However, as Carver (2006) explains, board failures are a result not of people but of our approach to governance. Providing training programs for citizen boards is therefore critical to maintaining and promoting *effective* public participation in local governance. Effective training programs can ensure that boards will function properly, members will be well informed, the public will be better able to interact and engage with peers, and quality public participation will increase both through more efficient meetings and more citizen recruitment for vacant board positions. Misunderstandings or a lack of knowledge regarding the authority, responsibility, and jurisdiction of boards can lead to conflict, bad press, potential for litigation, and ultimately can decrease overall government function and legitimacy.

The purpose of this study is to detail the development, delivery, and impact of the citizen board curriculum in Montana, to present various pedagogical strengths and challenges, and to outline future program refinement. We begin by describing the current situation for local governments across the state, assessing needs within this context. Next, we describe in detail our four-part curriculum and provide examples of program implementation. Then we describe our methods and results in order to analyze the relative effectiveness of different teaching methods and materials. Last, we suggest curriculum refinements and discuss the implications of a similar program implemented both within the United States and internationally.

### *Effective Citizen Board Training as a Public Affairs Issue*

There is growing evidence that citizens are increasingly apathetic toward and disengaged from the day-to-day business of governance, as well as civic and social activities, particularly in the last half century (e.g., King & Stivers, 1998; Putnam, 2000; Skocpol, 2003). Although there are competing perspectives to explain such a decline, there is general agreement that citizen participation in governance and public affairs is important to democracy and the situation is growing more critical. In tandem with lower levels of engagement, there has been a steady decline in citizens’ trust that the federal government will “do what is right most of the time,” from 75% in the mid-1960s to just over 25% in the 1990s (Putnam, 2000, p. 47). The attacks on September 11, 2001 prompted a

slight upsurge in citizens' political consciousness, trust in government and the police, and interest in politics. However, the civic behaviors of citizens are little changed (Putnam 2002 and 2005a).<sup>1</sup> We are, according to Putnam (2005b), "less trusting, less civic-minded, and less participatory in the affairs of public life" (p. 7). Unquestionably, civic engagement in the United States—including active involvement in local governance—continues to lack both in terms of quality and quantity. As Kemmis (2001) observes in the context of the United States, "our way of being public is a deepening failure" (p. 56).

Concerns about public apathy toward civic responsibility are not new and were forewarned by French historian Alexis de Tocqueville, who predicted that modernity would result in the atomization of the citizenry and eventually lead to apathy and oppression.<sup>2</sup> Deficiencies in the quantity or quality of citizen participation can in part be due to a lack of educational opportunities regarding the roles and responsibilities provided to citizens by local government and educational institutions. Yet citizen demand for educational opportunities, although not well understood, appears to exist. According to Putnam (2000), the appeal for opportunities to interact publicly is real:

We tell pollsters that we wish we were living in a more civil, more trustworthy, more collectively caring community. The evidence for our inquiry shows that this longing is not simply nostalgia or "false consciousness." Americans are *right* that the bonds of our communities have withered, and we are *right* to fear that this transformation has very real costs (p. 402).

Poorly run public boards increase apathy toward and mistrust in government, thereby decreasing effective public participation. Effective citizen boards offer an opportunity to increase public participation, dissuade apathy, enhance trust, and create more robust and well-functioning democracies.

Generally, there is a paucity of training materials available to citizens who may want to engage with and serve on local government boards. Although there has been considerable scholarship on the pedagogy of citizen leadership (Jacobson & Warner, 2008), and service learning opportunities with local governments through formal institutions (e.g., Reinke, 2003; Koliba, 2004; Imperial, Perry, & Katula, 2007), there is a dearth of research on the perceived and real needs of local governments for effective citizen board training programs, and few studies have assessed the outcomes of various pedagogical approaches to citizen board members. Although there are some general resources for local government training (e.g., Torp 1994; Bianchi, 1997; Kirlin 2003; Hurd, 2004; Fisher 2007), there is a clear need to develop comprehensive and context-specific training material to better prepare citizens and public officials for public service and board governance (Rebori, 2007). Some scholars (Cook, 1996; Denhardt &

Denhardt, 2007) assert that to effectively merge public service and democratic values, the role of the public administrator must be one of a facilitator and public educator. It is in this context that we developed the citizen board curriculum presented here.

#### CITIZEN BOARD CURRICULUM

In Montana, there are 1,127 distinct local governments.<sup>3</sup> These entities include municipalities, counties, school districts, and special districts; each contains multiple boards with potentially thousands of citizen participants. Citizens are either elected to local government boards or appointed by the local governing authority. There is a largely unmet need to provide materials and training to citizens, elected officials, and public employees on the authority, responsibility and jurisdiction of the thousands of boards and their members meeting in countless public forums in the state.

We created the citizen board curriculum to address numerous requests to the Montana State University (MSU) Local Government Center (LGC) to provide a means of citizen board education.<sup>4</sup> Requests to train the numerous boards that exist across the state began in early 2004 in the form of emails, phone calls, and direct appeals from elected municipal and county officials present at various LGC trainings. These officials noted that local government legal counsel and the governing authority itself were either too busy or not adequately prepared to deliver necessary training on both the legal requirements and practical realities of serving on boards. In late 2006, we met with staff at the LGC and select public officials to begin planning the board curriculum. The curriculum evolved and now consists of four distinct pedagogical areas: (1) Foundations of governance, (2) effective meeting techniques, (3) conflict management, and (4) leadership and team-building skills. These four areas were identified as a result of a comprehensive Web-based inventory of public board resources across the United States.

We use a variety of techniques and materials to deliver the training curriculum. In most cases, the program is delivered in person by MSU faculty and LGC staff to citizen boards across the state. The material is delivered on a first-come, first-served basis, and distribution depends on the availability of teaching faculty or staff. Great demand from boards and the geographic reality of delivering the program in Montana, the country's fourth-largest state, make it difficult to meet every request. However, to date, approximately 2,200 citizens have undergone the training.

The content is based on the participation of specific board members, and generally the trainings take place as all-day sessions or two consecutive half-days. The materials include a 45-page handbook with summary information on the curriculum, presentation handouts, copies of statutes, and case study exercises that contain detailed scenarios tailored to the boards that are present. The case study exercises are meant to be participatory and deliberative, allowing users

the opportunity to break into small groups and discuss in detail how they would address a particular situation, such as a potential open meetings violation, code of ethics indiscretion, conflict with the public, or poor board leadership. The groups then report back to the entire class and further discuss and debate the scenarios.

Board information in the handbook specifically references the Montana Code Annotated (MCA) and relevant information about case law and attorney general opinions. An electronic version of the handbook contains Web links to the online MCA, with updates to the handbook after each legislative session. The curriculum is also offered as an online Web conference, which generally produces positive results. However, in such presentations the group exercise is not used because of the difficulty of group interactions on a Web conference. The Web conferences have been archived and are available as podcasts for public viewing. We developed, implemented, and evaluated the curriculum between November 2007 and May 2009, specifically for county- and municipal-level public boards. However, the classes have also been open to those who serve on state and private boards. Trainings are also open to the general public, for those who may be interested to serve on a board or learn more about board governance. Each educational subset of the curriculum is presented and discussed below.

### *Foundations of Governance*

The foundations of board governance are understood as twofold: (1) Statutory information and (2) principles of good governance (e.g., matters of participation, responsiveness, transparency, and equity). The first area focuses on relevant state statutes, including explanations of Montana's constitutional provisions that detail the public's right to know and right to participate.<sup>5</sup> Course content includes relevant excerpts from the MCA such as the Open Meetings Law, Code of Ethics, and board liability.<sup>6</sup> An introduction of good governance principles follows material on state statutory provisions. As former United Nations Secretary-General Kofi Annan remarked in the context of global economic prosperity, (as cited in Birner, 2007), "Good governance is perhaps the single most important factor in eradicating poverty and promoting development" (p. 1.)

There are varying models of good governance (e.g., Box, 1998; Carver, 2006). This particular curriculum is based on initiatives developed through the United Nations Development Programme and expanded on by Graham, Amos, and Plumptre (2003). We chose this model for its strategic convergence of both structural and procedural aspects of functioning boards. Table 1 is a course handout that details the principles of good governance based on Graham, Amos, and Plumptre (2003).

This material is presented and compared with applicable MCA and Constitutional provisions to allow board members to reflect on foundational elements of democratic government as described in statutes. A central tenet of this course content is understanding the need for transparency and providing

Table 1.

*Board Curriculum Handout on Good Governance Principles*

<b>Good Governance Principle</b>	<b>Application and Description</b>
Legitimacy and Voice	Participation—Individuals should have a voice in decision making, either directly or through legitimate intermediate institutions that represent their intention. Such broad participation is built on freedom of association and speech, as well as capacities to participate constructively. Consensus Orientation—Good governance mediates differing interests to reach a broad consensus on what is in the best interest of the group and, where possible, on policies and procedures.
Direction	Strategic Vision—Leaders and the public have a broad and long-term perspective on good governance and human development, along with a sense of what is needed for such development. There is also an understanding of the historical, cultural, and social complexities in which that perspective is grounded.
Performance	Responsiveness—Institutions and processes try to serve all stakeholders. Effectiveness and Efficiency—Processes and institutions produce results that meet needs while making the best use of resources.
Accountability	Accountability—Decision makers in government, the private sector, and civil society organizations are answerable and responsible to the public, as well as to institutional stakeholders. Accountability differs depending on the organizations and whether the decision is internal or external. Transparency—The free flow of information, with processes, institutions, and data is directly accessible, sufficient, and applicable.
Fairness	Equity—All have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being. Rule of Law—Legal frameworks are fair and enforced impartially.

*Note.* Adapted from Graham, Amos, and Plumptre (2003)

information to the public who participate in board discussions and decisions. Constitutional language is presented in tandem with the right to know provisions in the MCA with the understanding that “information is the currency of democracy.”<sup>7</sup> Interpreted broadly, good governance principles presented at the board trainings provide participants with discussion points for case study exercises and the rest of training.

### *Effective Meeting Techniques*

The second educational area involves techniques and resources that board members can use to create more efficient and productive meetings. These approaches include material on the creation and use of bylaws, role-playing exercises applying Robert’s Rules of Order, and various methods to effectively engage the public during public meetings. There are several key questions presented to board members on the topic of the creation and use of bylaws, including the following:

- Does your board have formal bylaws?
- Do you have a copy of/have you read your board’s bylaws?
- Do your bylaws describe a formal orientation for new members?
- Do your bylaws address what to do in case of attendance problems?
- Do you have rules about taking minutes in executive session and who controls the agenda?
- Do your bylaws address procedures for providing public records and posting your meeting notices?

These questions and others motivate class participants to ask about, discuss, and apply knowledge toward procedural issues that may make meetings more efficient and accessible to the public.

A related component of this area of the curriculum focuses on how effective communication can enhance meetings, whether spoken (i.e., allowing for and encouraging public comment and deliberations), written (i.e., taking effective meeting minutes), or through body language (i.e., gestures, mannerisms, and other forms of visual communication). Role-playing exercises are used to illustrate the importance of different forms of communication in various scenarios.

### *Conflict Management*

The topic of conflict management is the third area of the curriculum. Although there is a rich literature base to draw from, the existence of materials specifically for board members and the situation they may encounter is limited. Discussion in the trainings begins with definitions of conflict based on Kelsey and Plumb (2004) and how conflict can be manifested within boards or the public. Sources of conflict are explored based on four key areas presented in Table 2.

Table 2.  
*Board Curriculum Handout on Conflict Management*

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<b>Source of Conflict</b>	<b>Manifestation of Conflict</b>
Miscommunication/ Misinformation	Through lack of information, inaccurate, or assumed information, misunderstood information, inaccurate encoding or decoding of communication, and differing analyses of information
Real or perceived differences in needs and priorities	Expressed often by competing demands for fiscal, material, or time resources; different priorities and methods for accomplishing tasks; or psychological needs (such as security, competence, social acceptance, or creativity)
Real or perceived differences in values, perceptions, beliefs, attitudes, and culture	Includes the totality of culture, personality, social norms, values, and belief systems that form the lens through which we perceive and make meaning of the world
Structural conditions	Physical, organizational, or legal situations; lack of clear task definition; unclear or missing descriptions of the role of board members; physical distance between parts of an organization
Fairness	Equity—All have opportunities to improve or maintain their well-being Rule of Law—Legal frameworks are fair and enforced impartially

*Note.* Adapted from Kelsey and Plumb (2004).

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Board members explore methods of negotiating conflict, including viewing conflict as a positive outcome of process. In this more positive light, discussion focuses on how conflict can help to define issues, introduce new perspectives, make boards consider a wide range of options, energize creative thinking, and

keep boards alert to the interests of members and the public. A set of statements based on Fisher and Ury (1981) is introduced to help board members negotiate conflict:

- Separate the people from the problem: Encourage careful listening, and don't allow personal attacks.
- Focus on interests, not positions: When someone states a position, ask "Why?" to learn about their underlying interests.
- Invent options for mutual gain: Use brainstorming to generate multiple options that meet everyone's interests.
- Insist on objective criteria: From the outset, establish criteria that will be mutually acceptable.

Small group activities help facilitate this program area. Participants are asked to describe in detail common sources of conflict that arise during board meetings (personality traits, limited resources, etc.) and pose the questions, "What have you done to address the conflict, and what was the result?" as well as, "In hindsight, what could you have done differently that would have resulted in a different outcome?" Participants are encouraged to share experiences with the group, and discussions are centered on resolving and learning from conflict in a public setting.

#### *Leadership and Team-Building Skills*

The fourth educational program area involves exploring and evaluating the leadership potential within the board and understanding team-building skills. Although there is a growing literature base on the need for and application of leadership and team-building skills in local government settings (e.g., Gabris, Grenell, Ihrke, & Kaatz, 2000; Fisher 2007; Svara, 2008), we chose to apply the Strengths, Opportunities, Aspirations, and Results (SOAR) method for this area of the program. SOAR is used as a heuristic to understand the potential for board action related to meeting process and outcome. The method has been applied in many settings and diverse disciplinary areas, from community planning to nursing practice and patient care (Stravos, Cooperrider, & Kelly, 2003; Havens, Wood, & Leeman, 2006).

The SOAR analysis is based on a process called Appreciative Inquiry, which provokes reflection and action focused on the positive attributes of a process and outcome, instead of the problems. For example, rather than posing questions such as the following—"What's wrong with the people on this board?"; "Why isn't this board doing better?"; and "What's causing this conflict, and who is responsible?"—inquiries are phrased using the following questions. "Think of a time for this board when performance was high—what were you and the others doing?"; "What external factors supported these moments?"; and "How might this board function if we could expand the conditions that led to past successes?"

The former set of questions assigns blame and encourages the demonization of government, as well as the disengagement of citizens; the latter set of questions embraces citizen obligation and responsibility to be a part of the process and solution. The SOAR method allows board members to focus on the positive attributes of the process and outcome, to assess how the board functions as a cohesive team, encourages introspection on effective communication and execution, and ultimately develops leadership skills within the board.

#### *Measuring Training Program Outcomes*

There were two methods used to evaluate and measure impact of the training materials and educational program. Program delivery took place between November 2007 and January 2009. Evaluations took place on two separate occasions. First, an evaluative survey with eleven 5-point Likert-scale items and two open-ended questions was provided on-site to program participants ( $N=601$ ) at the completion of each training. Second, several months after the trainings, program organizers (including county commissioners and municipal clerks) were asked to choose participants representing new and long-term members, and those with varied kinds of experience serving on the board. The respondents are not a random sample, but they do represent the varied longevity and experience of board members. These program participants ( $n=34$ ) were asked to self-evaluate the training's level of impact using an online survey with 11 Likert-scale items and two open-ended questions. Data analysis for both surveys involved statistical analyses to generate the frequency, mean, and standard deviation for responses to the numerical survey items and content analysis of the responses to the open-ended questions.

The sample responding to both surveys included a broad representation of boards (i.e., Fair Board, County Solid Waste Board, County Health Board), councils (i.e., Human Resource Council, County Council on Aging), districts (i.e., County Soil Conservation District), and committees (i.e., Local Emergency Planning Committee, Growth Policy Committee) across the state. We distributed the on-site survey at the completion of the trainings, and respondents gave a consistently positive overall program evaluation, with scores averaging 4.73 on a 5-point scale. For the online survey, over half the respondents (51.4%) had 10 years or more of board experience, indicating the great need for delivering the material. The Likert scale is a 5-point measurement where 5=*Strongly Agree* and 1=*Strongly Disagree*. Responses from the online survey report an increase in knowledge of applicable statutes and positive changes in behavior as a result of the educational programs (see Table 3).

The measurement questions focused on knowledge and behavior of citizens serving on their boards. The premise of the evaluation is to gauge changes in knowledge and their connection to changes in behavior. The results illustrate the self-reported changes after the training in both knowledge and behavior (see Table 3).

Table 3.  
*Likert-Scale Scores Measuring Impacts of Board Trainings*

<b>Changes in Knowledge of Statutes</b>	<b>Strongly Agree or Agree (%)</b>	<b>Mean Score</b>	<b>Standard Deviation</b>
I have a better understanding now of the Open Meetings Law.	94.3	4.4	0.61
I have a better understanding now of the Code of Ethics.	88.6	4.3	0.68
I have a better understanding now of liability issues for board members.	85.7	4.2	0.63
I have a better understanding now of what constitutes nepotism.	80.0	4.2	0.72
<b>Changes in Procedures</b>			
I have a better understanding now on how to use motions in a meeting.	62.8	3.8	0.72
Our board is implementing or following adopted policies or rules of procedure (such as bylaws).	55.9	3.6	0.74
We are now using a form of parliamentary procedure, such as Robert's Rules of Order.	45.7	3.6	0.66
<b>Changes in Behavior</b>			
I am more likely to follow the requirements prescribed in the Open Meetings Law.	80.0	4.3	0.76
I think about how to address conflict at board meetings more constructively.	74.3	4.0	0.76
I feel more comfortable participating in my board meetings.	71.4	3.9	0.75
Our board minutes are taken more effectively.	51.4	3.6	0.78
Our board meetings are more efficient.	48.6	3.6	0.70

*Note.* Judgments were made on a 5-point scale (5=Strongly Agree, 1=Strongly Disagree).

In the open-ended section of the survey, respondents were able to comment on the specific changes that took place as a result of the board training. The vast majority of these responses (84%) were positive and reflected specific changes in knowledge and behavior. Examples of the responses are provided in Table 4.

Responses to both the Likert-scale items and open-ended questions show a positive change in both knowledge and behavior after trainings. The change in knowledge is primarily reflected in improved understanding of statutes and procedures associated with ethics, open meetings violations, and issues of board liability. Changes in behavior are reflected in methods of addressing conflict at board meetings, the application of various statutes such as noticing meetings agendas, and the application of procedural adjustments to make board meetings more efficient.

Table 4.  
*Responses to Open-Ended Survey Items on Changes in Knowledge and Behavior*

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<b>Changes in Knowledge</b>
“The training raised my awareness regarding ethics.”
“I have a better idea of what should be included in our board minutes.”
“I’m now less concerned with personal liability, knowing my board is bonded.”
<b>Changes in Behavior</b>
“I’m inspired to serve; more confidence in my ability.”
“I’ll take my board duties much more seriously.”
“I will be more careful about handling problems with the board members.”
“I have been examining the MCA more often (online).”
“More diligent about posting meeting notices.”
“More careful about discussion with multiple board members outside of official meetings.”
“Minutes are taken more accurately.”

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*Implications for the Board Curriculum*

Although the responses to the board trainings have been positive, alterations to the curriculum are now in progress. For example, because participants reported the usefulness of the case study exercises, future curriculum will increase and improve the use of such studies, with more specific and relevant scenarios for each board training. A request for more detail has led to the development of additional materials that include legal briefing handouts describing recent relevant case law and attorney general opinions. Due to requests that come to the LGC for these trainings, an expanded Web-based curriculum is also being developed to reach a wider audience across the state. Future research will test whether there is a difference between learning on-site and learning from Web-based training efforts. In addition to archived recordings (podcasts) of previous Web conferences, a series of case scenarios is being developed in which online training participants will be able to watch an array of situations at a board meeting and choose appropriate responses to questions about the situations. A formal certification program is also being discussed with representatives of municipal and county associations. The certification program would not guarantee an increase in board effectiveness, but it would serve as a formal acknowledgement of training that can be put on a citizen's resume for future participatory opportunities.

There is great potential for application of this board curriculum both in Montana and beyond. Although the specific statutes related to Montana municipal, county, and state jurisdictions may not be directly applicable in other states or countries, the general principles are transferable and can be applied in other states and countries that utilize citizen boards. In particular, the principles of good governance, effective meeting strategies, conflict management techniques, and leadership skills are all directly applicable in other contexts and regions. The strength of the program is the use of case studies which may have to be altered to be directly applicable in other contexts. However, using the current curriculum as a template, significant changes would not be necessary, and application would be relatively simple. There is currently an effort underway to communicate with outreach centers in all of the land-grant universities in the United States to network and share information on this and related local government programs. Working with colleagues from six other states, the strategy is to expand this current program and create a national board curriculum that will be more useful in a variety of local government contexts.

CONCLUSIONS

The development and implementation of the citizen board curriculum and training program has led to a better understanding of the challenges faced by local governments in effectively practicing democracy. Specifically, the evaluation of this program has led to five key findings. First, there is a

great unmet need in Montana to provide a coordinated training program to educate citizens on their roles, responsibilities, and best practices related to local government boards. Second, there is currently a lack of training material, not only in Montana but also more generally across the United States, specific to citizen board governance. Third, the implementation of a coordinated training program can have measurable and considerable positive impacts, particularly when the training process is deliberative and participatory and uses case study exercises. Fourth, there is a need to expand this current curriculum and develop more comprehensive materials for specific boards and other contexts, not only in other parts of the United States, but also internationally. Last, there is a great need to create mechanisms for educators to network with other educators and share similar training materials. This will lead to the development and implementation of a national citizen board curriculum that is based on general principles related to local governance and specific context-relevant case studies. In summary, our evaluation shows that the board training curriculum benefits participants in a variety of areas, in particular with regard to an increase in knowledge of statutes and to changes in behavior concerning board procedures and methods of addressing conflict. In this sense, we feel that the curriculum has tremendous potential not only in the present context but also in more widely applicable situations, including other states, private boards, and international settings.

Public administration theorists advocate that public servants include citizens at the center of strategic planning and decision making, but achieving effective and active participation is often a challenge. As such, this board training program is an excellent opportunity for MPA students to understand and experience the nexus of democratic theory and praxis. By arming citizens with knowledge of effective and efficient governance, as well as behavioral techniques and ethics to guide processes, participation is thus based on democratic principles of equity, transparency, and inclusiveness. These efforts are an example for Public Administration students of the ongoing process and work involved in actualizing the democratic principles of fostering and building citizen engagement. Students in MPA programs or related fields need examples such as this one to be better informed on the various practices of democracy.

Naturally, there are challenges in designing and implementing board training programs. For example, providing the material in a comprehensive fashion is time-consuming, particularly considering the diverse needs of boards and the legalistic overtones that tend to consume many citizen boards. However, the strengths of the program include a curriculum that covers a wide variety of governance principles that are broadly applicable. Further study on the impact of the educational program, as well as exploration of additional resources to include and modify, should serve to strengthen the current curriculum and lead to better board governance and improved citizen-government relations.

## *The Pedagogy of Citizen Participation in Local Government*

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FOOTNOTES

- <sup>1</sup> For more evidence, see Kirlin & Kirlin (2002).
- <sup>2</sup> Read (2003) wrote the following:

Tocqueville equates public participation with liberty; he argues that strong communities foster civic mindedness, while atomization of the population causes apathy and facilitates oppression. The public disinterest in politics which, on his view, grows in parallel with the developing sophistication and specialisation of the state, caused him to experience a specific type of unease; this was confirmed when he noted that the process of popular depoliticisation, begun by Louis XVI, actually accelerated under the rule of the revolutionaries. Hence, he saw the roots of his own present predicament in the course of the historical pre-Revolutionary regime, and observed that both administrations had discouraged ground level self government. This, Tocqueville observes, is a characteristic of modernity (p. 51).
- <sup>3</sup> U.S. Census Bureau. 2002. Government Organization Publication GC02(1)-1. Washington, DC. Available at <http://www2.census.gov/govs/cog/gc0212mt.pdf>
- <sup>4</sup> The mission of the Montana Local Government Center, as set forth in Montana state law, is to “strengthen the capacities of Montana’s local governmental units to deliver essential services efficiently and to provide training, technical assistance, and research to local officials” (§20-25-237, MCA).
- <sup>5</sup> Montana Constitution, Article II, Section 8. Right of participation. The public has the right to expect governmental agencies to afford such reasonable opportunity for citizen participation in the operation of the agencies prior to the final decision as may be provided by law. Available at <http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca/Constitution/II/8.htm>

Section 9. Right to know. No person shall be deprived of the right to examine documents or to observe the deliberations of all public bodies or agencies of state government and its subdivisions, except in cases in which the demand of individual privacy clearly exceeds the merits of public disclosure. <http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca/Constitution/II/9.htm>
- <sup>6</sup> The entire text of the Montana Code Annotated is available in a searchable format at [http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca\\_toc/index.htm](http://data.opi.mt.gov/bills/mca_toc/index.htm)
- <sup>7</sup> While many believe this phrase is attributed to Thomas Jefferson, there is no evidence to confirm he ever said or wrote the phrase. For more information, see Carnaby & Rao (2003).

AUTHOR'S NOTE

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Please direct correspondence to

Paul R. Lachapelle, Ph.D.  
Assistant Professor  
Department of Political Science  
Montana State University, Bozeman  
406-994-3620  
paul.lachapelle@montana.edu

Paul R. Lachapelle is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, Montana State University. His current research interests include community development, local governance, public participation, and deliberative democracy. Specifically, he provides educational programs through the Extension Service on many topics, including community strategic visioning, governance, leadership development, and planning facilitation.

Elizabeth A. Shanahan is an Assistant Professor in the Department of Political Science, Montana State University. Her research interests center on policy conflict and the role that public officials, media, interest groups, and citizens have in developing political narratives to influence policy change or status quo. She teaches courses in public administration and policy.