

In Proximity to Professionalism: A Regional Analysis of Master of Public Administration Programs and Local Government Management

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ABSTRACT

Differences in the status of professionalism in local government management among U.S. states may be attributed to various cultural, regional, and institutional factors. The prominence of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree in the local government profession denotes the influential role of graduate education institutions of public administration and affairs in professionalization. This study examines the impact of municipal proximity to university-based MPA programs on the nature and occurrence of professional local government management in states of the West North Central Midwest region. The findings suggest that an increase in a municipality's physical distance from a state or regional MPA program is negatively associated with local government professionalism. Despite dissimilarities in composition and local government specificity among regional MPA institutions, the results support the proposition that university-based MPA programs may contribute to professional public administration within a geographic sphere of influence.

KEYWORDS

Professionalism, MPA programs, local government, regionalism

In the field of public administration, the label *professional* carries a distinct connotation, referring to both the individual occupying the position and the manner and structure in which related duties, responsibilities, and tasks are performed. In local government, managerial professionalism signifies the appointment or employment of a chief executive administering officer (CAO), in the figure of a city manager or administrator, who possesses the qualifications and expertise to oversee the daily functions of the modern city and embodies professional standards of practice. Throughout the United States, differences abound among cities, states, and regions in relation to the nature and occurrence of local government professionalism;

and, according to the literature, the reasons for these deviations may be due to various formative factors representative of the ambient setting. In other words, there is evidence that professional management may be viewed as a product, an amalgamation of stimulating dynamics that create a particular environment conducive to the reception and development of professional local government structures, managers, and administration.

One such factor that may be influential is education. The notion of a profession of local government administration has long been associated with the educational skills and training of managers, continuing White's (1927,

p. 282) identification of “recognized means of preparation” as a component of professional status. In particular, the International City/County Management Association (ICMA), the premier local government professional practitioner organization, advocates for education pertaining to the study and application of public service and administration, most notably in the form of the Master of Public Administration (MPA) degree.

The MPA degree represents advanced educational and academic attainment in the field, encompassing an array of public service knowledge and disciplines relating to public policy, organizational and personnel management, governmental operation, and budgeting and finance. University-based MPA programs may also offer further substantive educational and assistive contributions to the development, enhancement, and utilization of professional public administration within their geographic regions, as faculty, staff, and students participate in interactive and collaborative activities such as university extension and outreach, consultation and research, promotion and engagement, internships and volunteerism, and community board and committee involvement. As of the year 2000, approximately 60% of surveyed city managers say they possessed a master’s degree in public administration, business administration, or another related area (Renner, 2001). The ICMA 2012 State of the Profession Survey affirms that the MPA is the most common educational degree among practicing professional managers of U.S. local governments. In this way, the MPA degree has become the “de facto requirement for most positions in local government management” (Hansell, 2002, p. 184).

The purpose of this study is to assess the impact of municipal proximity to a university-based MPA program on the nature and occurrence of professional local government management. A basis for this research is the concept of political regionalism, a topic extensively examined by Elazar (1994) and others. This concept suggests that the governmental systems of states and local entities reflect the composition of specific

social, political, and environmental proclivities and sentiments of the associated populace and other influential institutions. The education provided by university-based graduate programs of public administration and affairs represents one of these influential institutions. In addition, according to ICMA (2015a), the actualization of professional local government management varies among U.S. states, even in contiguous states of similar cultural and regional dispositions. While researchers have identified many factors that may contribute to these differences, the aspect of education has been relatively underexplored. With the recent movement toward professionalization in the public administration field and among MPA programs, this research will assist in further understanding this important relationship.

This study is organized as follows: First, a review of the literature details the indicators and influencing factors of professional local government management and the role of MPA education. Next, I present the methodological framework for the study, followed by the results of the data analysis. Finally, a discussion investigates the implications and conclusions of the findings.

LITERATURE REVIEW

Indicators of Professional Management

Evidence from the literature identifies at least three primary indicators of professional local government management. The first is form of government, which affects the operations, authorizations, and responsibilities of local government managers. Historically, the council-manager plan has been endorsed as the archetypical structure for professional management in municipal governments (Stillman, 1974). Particularized features such as qualifications and experience, technical expertise, ethical standards, administrative discretion, and political neutrality demonstrate the normative criteria of professionalism assigned to the city manager position and, in turn, the council-manager structure (Ammons, 2008). Accordingly, the addition of CAOs, as city administrators, to other forms

of local government depicts a structural modification toward professional management (Frederickson, Johnson, & Wood, 2004; Nelson & Svara, 2012; Renner & DeSantis, 1999). The distinction of having a specialized chief administrator distinguishes the professional managerial model from other more political forms of local government such as the mayor-council structure.

The second indicator involves the individual competencies and achievements of local government managers (Childs, 1965; Newell, 2004; Slack, 1990), including both formal means of university education (such as bachelor and graduate degrees, notably the MPA) and experiential and shared knowledge (e.g., through professional development and certifications). The council-manager form of government is predicated on the technical skills and administrative capacity of the city manager, which substantiates individual professional aptitude as a condition for employment (Nalbandian, 1991). For example, ICMA (2015b) endorses educational attainments toward professional proficiency, and the association has a voluntary credentialing program that assesses expertise and experience as part of an individual's commitment to career-long professional development and learning.

This relates to the third indicator, which includes memberships, professional recognitions, and standards promulgated through practitioner associations (Ammons, 1994). The status of *professional* connotes the existence of and adherence to regulatory criteria and norms that provide some discernible guidelines of professional conduct and integrity (Kline & Blanchard, 1973; White, 1927). ICMA and its state affiliates contribute to professionalism through promotion and sponsorship, education and training, the recognition of structural and individual professional attributes, and ethical enforcement. In this way, the professional associational affiliations of local government managers imply a tacit acknowledgement and fulfillment of the ideals represented by such organizations (Streib & Rivera, 2009).

Influences on Professional Management

While form of local government is typically the most visible indication of professional management, research suggests that the development of these indicators of professionalism may be affected by various factors, contexts, and relationships. Political culture may present an underlying paradigm in governmental operation that guides policies, actions, and institutions, such as state legislation and citizen expectations for local government management (Mouritzen & Svara, 2002). City politics produce a unique temperament emblematic of the disposition, diversity, and size of urban areas, which may promote or impede the reception of professionalism in local structures (DeSantis, Glass, & Newell, 1992; Nalbandian, 2005). Invariably, political representation has been an issue for council-manager cities, due to the allotted authority and discretion of the city manager position (Box, 1993; Skidmore, 2001). Political tensions may catalyze local governmental adaptation, a structural configuration approach that attempts to combine political and administrative qualities, such as the addition of CAOs to mayor-council governments (Frederickson & Johnson, 2001), which may assist in the negotiation of conflicts arising from cultural and representational concerns (Svara & Watson, 2010).

However, internal governmental procedures may likewise affect the inclination for professionalism. The inherent division of authority implied in the politics-administration separation, exemplified in the council-manager form, plays an important part in the scope of professional practice and discretion exerted by city managers and administrators (Saltzstein, 1974; Svara, 1999). The popular election of the mayor, most common in political forms of government, may influence the perception of professional management as well as the latitude afforded to the CAO (Kammerer, Farris, DeGrove, & Clubok, 1962). Moreover, the size and electoral processes of the city council can shape the political climate of the local government and the administrator-council relationship (Svara, 2002). In other words, governmental rubrics

may dictate the degree of intervention by elected officials in administrative affairs, as those structures that demonstrate more administrative attributes generally experience less political infringement in professional administration (Whitaker & DeHoog, 1991; Zhang, Yao, & Cheong, 2011).

Further studies have assessed specific attributes of regional and jurisdictional composition in relation to the prevalence of professional local government management. Certain socioeconomic and demographic variables, when assessed within regions, may be significant predictors of the form of local government, such as city size, population growth and density, median family income, median housing value, percentage non-white, education level, homeownership, and age of the city (Dye & Macmanus, 1976; Nelson, 2011; Schnore & Alford, 1963; Sherbenou, 1961; Wolfinger & Field, 1966). For example, reformed structures, most associated with council-manager forms of government, are more likely to be in municipalities of smaller populations with higher levels of educational attainment, owner-occupied homes, white-collar employment, and suburban locations (Frederickson et al., 2004; Lineberry & Fowler, 1967). Other related studies have yielded similar results, distinguishing the political affiliation, race, age, and education of city populations as potential determinants of local government structures (Berman & Merrill, 1976; Simmons & Simmons, 2004; Svara, 1977).

The Role of MPA Education in Professional Management

Overall, the findings of prior research suggest that professional local government management may be associated with multiple contributory factors. Notably, however, the impact of educational institutions on professionalism has not been amply examined within this context. According to the literature, education plays an important part in the primary indicators of professional management, relating to the training and qualifications of CAOs as well as in the public's receptivity to administrative structures of government.

The MPA degree is the most common educational attainment among U.S. local government managers (ICMA, 2012; Renner, 2001), and university-based MPA programs may contribute to the promotion and advancement of professional public administration within their geographic regions (Gabris, Davis, & Nelson, 2010). Scholars have identified certain features of MPA programs—such as educational approach (Wang, Bunch, & Stream, 2013), program design (Koven, Goetzke, & Brennan, 2008), core curriculum (Roeder & Whitaker, 1993), departmental status (Baldwin, 1988), internships (Reinagel & Gerlach, 2015), and program outcomes (Poister & Ingraham, 1991)—as instrumental in the quality of public service education and the development of professional public administrators. What is more, some studies have deemed university-based education integral to meeting the modern demands for professional training in the public sector (Mirabella & Wish, 2001) and have distinguished the MPA as fundamental to the future vitality of the local government management profession (Svara, 2010). Given the emphasis on educational aptitude in professional administration and management, the specific preparatory and outreach contributions of MPA programs, and the current predominance of the MPA degree among practicing city managers and administrators, the effect of the proximity and access to university-based MPA programs on local government professionalism compels further examination.

METHODOLOGY

Research Question

The research question that guided this analysis is, What is the impact of municipal proximity to a university-based MPA program on the nature and occurrence of professional local government management in regional U.S. states, controlling for other state and municipal characteristics?

Acknowledging the prominent role of the MPA degree and programs in the promulgation of professional local government management, the

primary research hypothesis is that an increase in the distance of a given municipality from a state or regional university-based MPA program will have a negative impact on the nature and occurrence of local government professionalism.

Units of Analysis and Sample

Using regional delineations of the U.S. Census Bureau (2013) and Elazar (1994), I selected the West North Central Midwest region for the sample. Reasons for selecting this particular region are relative similarities in population demographics and distribution, geographic and cultural traits, and patterns of urbanization. The units of analysis of the sample included all municipalities in the states of Iowa ($n=139$), Kansas ($n=104$), Minnesota ($n=228$), Missouri ($n=211$), Nebraska ($n=50$), North Dakota ($n=15$), and South Dakota ($n=27$) with populations of 2,500 or more ($N=774$). I selected municipalities as units of analysis based on the general representation of professional forms of local government, which suggests that professional management is most likely to occur in municipal governments of populations above 2,500, as opposed to smaller local government entities or other types, such as counties (ICMA, 2014).

Research Design

An ordinary least squares (OLS) multiple regression analysis was used to test the stated hypothesis; this provided a method to isolate the effect on local government professionalism of proximity to MPA program while holding constant other state and municipal variables. Previous studies have identified a range of factors representing cultural, structural, economic, institutional, and political forces that may concurrently influence the nature and occurrence of professionalism in local government management. As such, assessing the individual impact of a specific contributor necessitated a statistical method capable of distinguishing the predicted variation in the dependent variable while controlling for other factors and mitigating issues of omitted variable bias (Kennedy, 2003).

The dependent variable *Local government professionalism* was represented by an indexical composite score of characteristics derived from the literature determined to be indicative of the nature and occurrence of professional local government management. The indexical composite included five elements: (1) the structural form and ICMA professional recognition of the municipal government; (2) the number of CAOs on the municipal staff; (3) the number of full ICMA members on the municipal staff; (4) the number of ICMA-affiliated state association members on the municipal staff; and (5) the number of ICMA-credentialed officials on the municipal staff. To address issues of exclusivity and correlation, the five dependent variable elements were weighted through a principal component factor analysis.

The primary independent variable *Proximity to MPA program* was defined as the closest distance (in miles) of a municipality from a state or regional university-based Master of Public Administration/Affairs program. This study defines a university-based MPA program as an institution of higher learning that awards graduate degrees in public administration/affairs and that meets the membership criteria of the Network of Schools of Public Policy, Affairs, and Administration (NASPAA). While this definition includes MPA degrees offered in both traditional and online formats, the limitation of a physical location was intended to illuminate possible educational and assistive contributions as well as aspects of political culture and regional/state presence that may not be evident with Web-based programs. The justification for the limitation of NASPAA member institutions pertains to the distinction of NASPAA as the principal membership association among MPA degree programs. Full NASPAA membership signifies curricula that contribute to professional graduate education in public administration/affairs, eligibility for NASPAA accreditation, and adherence to the missions of the association (NASPAA, 2015). However, this limitation may preclude some state and regional university-based MPA programs from the analysis for

TABLE 1.
Variables of the Operational Model

Variables	Data definition
Dependent	Local government professionalism: Indexical composite score of structural designation, CAOs, ICMA membership, state association membership, and ICMA credentialing of municipality
Primary independent	Proximity to MPA program. Closest distance (in miles) of municipality from a state or regional university-based MPA degree program
Independent control	<p>Population: Number of residents of municipality</p> <p>Population growth: Change in municipal population since 2000</p> <p>Age of city in years since official incorporation of municipality</p> <p>City classification: U.S. Census statistical definition of municipality—rural, micropolitan, metropolitan</p> <p>Education level: Percentage of municipal population with bachelor’s degree or higher</p> <p>Median family income of municipality in 2012 dollars</p> <p>Rate of homeownership: Percentage of owner-occupied housing units in municipality</p> <p>Median housing value of municipality in 2012 dollars</p> <p>Percent nonwhite: Percentage of municipal population identified as a race other than white</p> <p>Median age in years of residents of municipality</p> <p>Political orientation: Affiliation of congressional district representative of municipality—Republican or Democrat</p> <p>Mayoral election: Electoral process of mayor of municipality—popular election or selection by council</p> <p>Council election: Electoral process of city council of municipality—by district or at-large</p> <p>Size of council: Number of designated city council seats of municipality</p> <p>Nature of MPA programs: Ordinal state composite value of MPA program characteristics—MPA degree, local government concentration, or NASPAA accreditation</p> <p>State culture: Ordinal state measure of represented political subcultures by Elazar (1994)—individualistic, moralistic, traditionalistic</p>

various institutional reasons, namely budget constraints toward membership dues or other NASPAA membership restrictions. These issues are acknowledged within this limitation.

The basis for the limitation of Master of Public Administration/Affairs programs relates to the

prevalence and stature of the MPA (in assorted forms) in the local government management profession. While there are programmatic deviations between master’s degrees of administration and affairs, the inclusion of MPA programs in this analysis was based foremost on the NASPAA membership of graduate public ser-

vice education programs in the selected regional states of the sample, which accommodated a few alternate degrees. Of the four MPA programs included in the analysis that offer other than a Master of Public Administration degree, three maintain NASPAA accreditation.

The 16 other independent variables used in the operational model, designated as control variables, were selected from previous studies as being found to have a significant association with the nature and occurrence of professional local government management (see Table 1). The statistical research for this study was observational and cross-sectional. Data collection for all variables occurred from 2012 through 2013 and involved secondary data sources and online information from the U.S. Census Bureau, ICMA and affiliated state associations, Rand McNally mapping tools, state governments, municipalities, universities, and NASPAA. (See the Appendix for summary statistics of variables of the operational model.)

To supplement the statistical results, a comparative content analysis was conducted for the university-based MPA programs within the selected regional U.S. states, which included the categorization and coding of data to sort the attributes and themes of units into organized classes to facilitate comparability and interpretation (Berg, 2009). This information provided the general complexion and differences of the MPA programs as they related to local government education and outreach. Using evaluation criteria from MPA literature, the comparative analysis focused on the composition and local government scope of university-based MPA programs in the selected regional states. This included NASPAA accreditation, metropolitan location, a freestanding department of public administration/affairs, the offering of a local government concentration, requirement of internship and capstone project, online availability, admission standards, breadth of the core curriculum in local government competencies, and extent of local government faculty specializations, scholarship opportunities, certifications,

and outreach/extension research. Based on the inclusionary conditions at the time of data collection, there were 19 regional university-based MPA programs identified for the analysis.

DATA ANALYSIS

Regression Analysis

The OLS multiple regression analyses included two primary independent variables: proximity to MPA program in the state and proximity to MPA program in the region. The purpose for including two measurements was to delineate a potential difference of state and regional influence, particularly across state boundaries. Due to the inclusion of two state-level control variables, representing the nature of MPA programs and state culture, separate analyses were conducted for each independent variable. Robust standard errors were used due to indicate heteroskedasticity of residuals. Table 2 displays the results for proximity to MPA program in the state; Table 3 displays the results for proximity to MPA program in the region.

The results of the OLS multiple regression analyses exhibited a negative association between the proximity to MPA program variable and local government professionalism, suggesting that the nature and occurrence of professional local government management decreases as the distance (in miles) from a state or regional university-based MPA program increases. Specifically, on average, holding other variables constant, for every 1 unit change in proximity to an MPA program there is a $-.002$ change in local government professionalism. With the range of the indexical composite dependent variable being approximately 0–5, the estimated coefficients indicate that the sample municipality with the farthest distance from a university-based MPA program of 471.7 miles may experience approximately a 1 unit decrease in local government professionalism. The estimated coefficients of the proximity to MPA program variables, in both the state and region, were found to be statistically significant at the $p < .001$ level.

TABLE 2.
Regression Models for Proximity to MPA in State (Robust SE)

Regressors	Coefficients	Coefficients
Proximity to MPA state	-.002 ^c (.000)	-.002 ^c (.000)
Population	3.27E-07 (2.22E-06)	4.61E-07 (2.22E-06)
Population growth	5.35E-05 ^b (2.02E-05)	5.38E-05 ^b (2.01E-05)
Age of city	.002 ^a (.001)	.002 ^a (.001)
City classification	.137 ^b (.045)	.141 ^b (.045)
Education level	.025 ^c (.005)	.024 ^c (.005)
Median family income	4.70E-06 (5.09E-06)	3.16E-06 (5.11E-06)
Rate of homeownership	-.012 ^b (.004)	-.012 ^b (.004)
Median housing value	-1.92E-06 ^a (9.62E-07)	-1.38E-06 (1.03E-06)
Percentage nonwhite	.005 (.003)	.005 (.003)
Median age	.009 (.007)	.008 (.007)
Political orientation	-.112 (.073)	-.131 (.072)
Mayoral election	.880 ^c (.115)	.829 ^c (.114)
Council election	-.121 (.085)	-.095 (.082)
Size of council	-.004 (.026)	-.008 (.025)
Nature of MPA programs	-.011 (.007)	— —
State culture	— —	.036 (.018)
Intercept	-.524 (.447)	-.654 (.432)
F statistic	15.14^c	15.25^c
Adjusted R²	.286	.287
SER	.845	.844

Note. $N = 774$

TABLE 3.
Regression Models for Proximity to MPA in Region (Robust SE)

Regressors	Coefficients	Coefficients
Proximity to MPA region	-.002 ^c (.000)	-.002 ^c (.000)
Population	3.71E-07 (2.21E-06)	4.69E-07 (2.21E-06)
Population growth	5.14E-05 ^b (2.01E-05)	5.43E-05 ^b (2.01E-05)
Age of city	.002 ^a (.001)	.002 ^a (.001)
City classification	.147 ^b (.045)	.151 ^b (.044)
Education level	.025 ^c (.005)	.024 ^c (.005)
Median family income	4.40E-06 (5.07E-06)	2.97E-06 (5.11E-06)
Rate of homeownership	-.012 ^b (.004)	-.012 ^b (.004)
Median housing value	-1.82E-06 ^a (9.61E-07)	-1.32E-06 (1.04E-06)
Percentage nonwhite	.005 (.003)	.005 (.003)
Median age	.009 (.007)	.008 (.007)
Political orientation	-.112 (.074)	-.127 (.073)
Mayoral election	.879 ^c (.115)	.836 ^c (.114)
Council election	-.085 (.085)	-.082 (.082)
Size of council	-.006 (.025)	-.009 (.025)
Nature of MPA programs	-.011 (.007)	— —
State culture	— —	.032 (.018)
Intercept	-.606 (.443)	-.709 (.429)
F statistic	14.62^c	14.74^c
Adjusted R²	.282	.284
SER	.847	.846

Note. Significant at the 5%^a, 1%^b, or 0.1%^c level

However, the estimated coefficient of the variable representing city classification—using U.S. Census Bureau definitions of rural (1), micropolitan (2), or metropolitan (3)—was statistically significant at the $p < .01$ and $p < .001$ levels in the state and regional regression models, respectively. This result indicates that an increase in the statistical definition of a given sample municipality may be positively associated with local government professionalism. Correspondingly, the estimated coefficient of the variable for population growth, defined as change in population since the year 2000, was also statistically significant at the $p < .01$ level in both models. This result indicates that an increase in municipal population, which may be most likely to happen in suburban or metropolitan areas, may also be positively related to the nature and occurrence of local government professionalism. These findings coincide with previous research that reveals an increased likelihood of professional management with suburban location and city growth (Frederickson et al., 2004; Nelson, 2011). Approximately 90% of the university-based MPA programs included in this study are located in metropolitan areas, which may suggest a presupposed incidence of local government professionalism.

Yet, the estimated coefficient of the variable for age of city, defined as age in years since official incorporation, was statistically significant at the $p < .05$ level in both regression models. This result indicates that increased age of a municipality is positively associated with local government professionalism. While this finding may contradict previous research that connects decreased city age and probability of administrative forms of government (Dye & Macmanus, 1976), it may lend substantiation to the significance of proximity to MPA programs. In effect, for the sample municipalities, a more brief tenure of incorporation, which is more likely in suburban or metropolitan jurisdictions, may not necessarily translate to a higher propensity for professional local government management.

The estimated coefficient of the variable for mayoral election, defined as popularly elected (0) or selected by the council (1), was statistically significant and considerable in magnitude of effect. This result indicates that the appointment of the mayor by the city council, which is most practiced in council-manager forms of government, is positively associated with the nature and occurrence of local government professionalism. This finding is consistent with prior studies that associate this process of mayoral election with the tendency for and structural dynamic of professional local government management (Svara & Watson, 2010; Whitaker & DeHoog, 1991). The estimated coefficients of the variables for education level, rate of homeownership, and median housing value were also statistically significant. However, regression diagnostic tests revealed issues of multicollinearity among these socioeconomic variables, which limited interpretation of their significance. The regression diagnostics included tests for variance inflation factor (VIF) as well as tolerance and correlation tests of coefficients. The VIF measures and correlations among the other variables of the operational model were within the acceptable values for social science research.

Comparative Analysis

As shown in Table 4, the 19 university-based MPA programs analyzed display differentiations in program features and local government specificity, which suggest divergences in institutional nature and contribution to local government professionalism. Only 7 of the MPA programs offer a local government field of concentration; the focus on local government in the curriculum, certifications, scholarships, faculty specializations, and outreach/extension research varies considerably between programs. Potentially, these programmatic distinctions may manifest in the influence of university-based education on the nature and occurrence of professionalism, implying that municipal proximity to MPA programs with a more developed focus on local government may translate to a higher propensity for professional management.

TABLE 4.
Comparison of Regional University-Based MPA Programs by State

Evaluation criteria	States						
	Iowa	Kansas	Minnesota	Missouri	Nebraska	N. Dakota	S. Dakota
Number of programs	3	3	4	6	1	1	1
NASPAA-accredited programs	1	3	1	5	1	1	1
Metropolitan location	2	3	4	6	1	1	0
Public administration department	0	2	2	4	1	0	0
Local government concentration	0	1	1	3	1	0	1
Require internship	0	2	1	4	0	1	1
Require capstone	2	1	4	3	1	1	1
Online availability	Low	Low	High	Moderate	High	High	Low
Admission standards	Low	Moderate	Low	High	High	Moderate	High
Local government curriculum	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
Local government faculty	Low	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate
Local government scholarships	Low	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate	Low	High
Local government certificates	Low	High	Low	High	Moderate	Low	Moderate
Local government outreach	Low	High	Moderate	Moderate	High	Low	Moderate

TABLE 5.
Percentages of ICMA-Member CAOs of Recognized Municipalities Who Hold MPAs

State	MPA from program within state	MPA from program within region
Iowa	20% (12)	36% (22)
Kansas	46% (33)	54% (39)
Minnesota	16% (16)	23% (23)
Missouri	24% (17)	37% (26)
Nebraska	20% (6)	30% (9)
N. Dakota	0% (0)	0% (0)
S. Dakota	20% (1)	40% (2)

For instance, Table 5 appears to support this assertion, comparing ICMA-member CAOs of ICMA-recognized municipalities (ICMA, 2015a) who hold MPA degrees from state and regional university-based programs. States containing MPA programs with local government specialties, such as Kansas, have a higher proportion of professional CAOs who hold MPAs from within the state. This may also augment the geographic impact of MPA-granting institutions. Thus, despite contrasts in institutional composition and local government specificity, the features of the university-based MPA programs—in combination with the negative association of municipal proximity and local government professionalism—may illustrate the contribution of regional MPA programs within a geographic sphere of influence.

DISCUSSION AND IMPLICATIONS

The purpose of this study was to assess the impact of municipal proximity to university-based MPA programs on the nature and occur-

rence of professional local government management, recognizing the potential influences of cultural regionalism and educational institutions on professionalism. Because much prior research on this topic is relatively dated, and because the impact of physical proximity/access to MPA programs has not been amply examined in this context, addressing this gap was an objective of this study. The primary research hypothesis was that an increase in the distance of a given municipality from a state or regional university-based MPA program would have a negative impact on local government professionalism. The results of this analysis suggest that the nature and occurrence of professional local government management decreases as the distance (in miles) from such an MPA program increases. This lends support to the proposition that university-based MPA programs may contribute to professional public administration within a geographic sphere of influence.

An intention of this study was to add to the literature about possible state and regional

disparities in the institutionalization of professionalism in local government management. Previous research substantiates several factors that may affect such professionalism. Studies suggest that state statutes (Nelson, 2011; Ostrom, Bish, & Ostrom, 1988), structural adaptations (Frederickson & Johnson, 2001; Nelson & Svava, 2012), political representation and politics (Box, 1993; Skidmore, 2001), and city dynamics (DeSantis et al., 1992; Svava, 2002) may influence the propensity for professional local government management. Moreover, specific situations and relationships have revealed other contributing factors, such as socioeconomic composition and demographics (Schnore & Alford, 1963; Simmons & Simmons, 2004), population size and city classification (Lineberry & Fowler, 1967; Wolfinger & Field, 1966), political affiliation and electoral structures (Berman & Merrill, 1976; Kammerer et al., 1962; Zhang et al., 2011), and cultural setting (Mouritzen & Svava, 2002). The statistically significant association between a municipality's proximity to a university-based MPA program and professional local government management identifies an additional factor: the proximity of graduate public service programs may affect local government professionalism at a municipal, state, and regional level. This finding raises further prospects for the role of public affairs educational institutions in the promulgation of professional public administration.

However, research that directly addresses the reasons for state and regional differences in local government professionalism is relatively limited. This is particularly true for research on the impact of public service education; inconsistencies in the results and measures of these studies suggest a need for further examination. While multiple factors have been deemed consequential in the institutionalization of professional local government management, conflicting outcomes imply an incomplete understanding of contributors. For instance, the findings of this study exhibited the negligible effects of population size, political

orientation, median age, race, city council election processes, and size of city council on local government professionalism; but prior research found all these factors to be significantly associated with such professionalism. This may indicate that context and scale—such as local, state, regional, or national levels of analysis—may intensify or diminish the effect of certain factors, which may similarly be extrapolated to the development of professionalism in various capacities and settings. As this analysis shows, additional unknown factors may influence these phenomena, substantiating the need for further study in this area.

It may also be useful to revisit the definitions and measurements of *professionalism* within the field of public administration. The literature defines professionalism in local government management as exemplifying several distinct properties. While government structures that involve the appointment or employment of CAOs, namely the council-manager plan, are said to indicate professional management (Nalbandian, 1991; Renner & DeSantis, 1999), other attributes have likewise been associated with professionalism. Specifically, education and technical training (Childs, 1965; Slack, 1990), adherence to standardized and ethical practices (Kline & Blanchard, 1973; Streib & Rivera, 2009), and membership in professional associations (Ammons, 1994; Stillman, 1974) may also be representative of professional local government management.

Yet, much of the previous research in this area posits municipal structural configuration as the primary indicator of professional management, taking into account aspects such as legalized form (council-manager or mayor-council) and/or qualities of reformed or unreformed governmental models. These dichotomous classifications, however, may be inherently limited in scope, failing to reflect adaptations in organizational arrangement and the individual professional merits of city managers, administrators, and staff (Carr & Karuppusamy, 2008; Frederickson et al., 2004; Nelson & Svava, 2010).

The indexical composite measure of local government professionalism utilized in this study may provide a framework for future research that moves beyond the traditional dichotomy of council-manager/mayor-council structural distinctions vis-à-vis professional local government management.

For future study, it may be useful to expand the dimensions of professionalism to include other descriptive indicators that reflect the role of educational training and field-related development. For instance, the ICMA recognitions of individual managers' professionalism that extend beyond structure, such as associational membership and credentialing, may provide a more inclusive and accurate portrayal of professional institutionalization in local government management. The growing functions and duties performed by CAOs and the increasingly blurred boundaries between administration and politics signal the importance of individual professional development (Nalbandian, O'Neill, Wilkes, & Kaufman, 2013); these trends also suggest the need to broaden what *professional* means in local government management and public administration in general (Fox, 1992). Further indicators of individual professionalism and proficiency may be warranted, such as attainment of a graduate degree, specific areas of training or expertise, years of experience, certifications, and levels of authority and performance.

A premise of this analysis was the concept of regionalism or sectionalism, which, as Elazar (1994) contends, demarcates the geographical character of regional political subcultures that influence governmental systems, social ideals, and societal institutions. For example, previous research suggests that MPA programs tend to reflect regional predilections and practices (Gabris et al., 2010), thus generally institutionalizing the culture and necessities of the area. In other words, the very existence of an MPA program within a state may indicate elements of political culture such as regional demand and institutional preference. The results

of this analysis reveal that local government professionalism may be affected by the accessibility, composition, and dispersion of university-based MPA programs within a state or region, all of which symbolize manifestations of sectionalized culture. Previous research has likewise identified several sociocultural characteristics that may influence the nature and occurrence of professional local government management. Thus, there is evidence supporting the relationship between public administration and political culture and, referring to this analysis, the impact of political culture on public administration institutions such as education and professionalism. As these connections may portend a further understanding of regionalism in professional public administration and public service education, the implications and contingencies of this potential association require additional investigation.

Although there were commonalities among the 19 university-based MPA programs analyzed, the overall finding was that the programs possessed several differing features and scopes pertaining to institutional composition and local government specificity. This may imply that municipal proximity to MPA programs that have more focus on local government may translate to a higher propensity for professional management. However, the state-level variable representing the nature of MPA programs—which included gradations for the MPA degree, local government concentration, and NASPAA accreditation—was not statistically significant in either the state or regional analysis. Thus, aside from content, the mere provision of professional graduate education programs and degrees by proximate universities may contribute to occupational professionalism in local government (Renner, 2001). For instance, all the universities in this analysis likewise offer a Master of Business Administration (MBA) degree. While this may suggest a similar relationship between municipal proximity to MBA programs and professional local government management, a much smaller proportion of local government managers possess

other graduate degrees compared to the MPA (ICMA, 2012).

Furthermore, the findings of this analysis may indicate a reciprocal or complementary effect. As most all the universities in this study were in a metropolitan location, the predominance of professional management exhibited among metropolitan local governments (Frederickson et al., 2004) may denote the offering of an MPA program *subsequent* to the establishment of local government professionalism; in other words, proximity to the nature and occurrence of professional local government management may have created a demand or justification for MPA programs. While the mean age of sample municipalities in this analysis is 122 years, the average length of operation for the regional MPA programs is only approximately 45 years. Certainly, the five elements of the indexical composite score representing local government professionalism may change and evolve over time; membership and recognition by professional associations varies, and cities may adapt or alter their structure of government (Svara & Watson, 2010). Hence, the nature and occurrence of professional local government management may have transformed since a city's official incorporation, as has the stature and role of MPA programs intensified within the local government management field over the last several decades. Nevertheless, this potential effect could signal additional evidence of the impact of regionalism, as the cultural environment may be more conducive to such professional institutions.

In the public administration literature, the role of MPA programs in preparatory education and professionalization has been researched from many perspectives, including characteristics of degrees and universities, the extent of outreach and engagement, and related outcomes and effects. Pertaining to professional local government management, the MPA maintains a prominent status as a developmental educational attainment and a critical tool in the continued growth and advancement of the profession (Hansell,

2002; Svara, 2010). The results of this analysis provide support for the geographic influence of MPA-granting institutions on professional public administration. However, there is cause for further attention to how and why MPA programs may be affecting professionalization—such as through education, research, and community engagement—and what actions could be undertaken to enhance their spheres of influence.

A comparative analysis of the 19 university-based MPA programs showed that individual institutions implement MPA education differently. Despite these dissimilarities, the standards and processes of the MPA programs included in this study could indicate institutional factors that contribute to a geographic influence on professional public administration, such as the range of outreach/extension research, accreditation, and curriculum. For example, university coordination through internships and scholarships with state-level practitioner associations, such as the city/county management association or municipal league, could prompt interest among MPA students and faculty and lead to future affiliation with these organizations. The NASPAA accreditation and membership of MPA programs could likewise be influential, as these distinctions may promote more awareness and appeal. Program features such as certifications, online availability, faculty outreach, and capstone research may represent differing modes for the expanded delivery and reach of MPA programs. Future study should focus on the attributes of these connections, exploring further the impact of program characteristics, the extent and nature of partnerships and associations, and the channels of geographic influence.

This study demonstrated the effect of proximity to university-based MPA programs on professionalism in local government management, which may be accentuated by the local government specificities of the MPA-granting institutions. Certain states, such as Kansas and Nebraska, possess MPA programs with a more developed attention to local government,

which is corroborated by the 2012 *U.S. News and World Report* graduate school rankings of in-state programs (University of Kansas and University of Nebraska–Omaha) in the areas of city management and urban policy. In this regard, municipalities located farther from MPA programs that have a local government orientation may face special challenges in the nature and occurrence of professionalism, strengthening the importance of professional associations such as ICMA. For instance, the Great Open Spaces City Management Association is the ICMA state affiliate for Idaho, Montana, North Dakota, South Dakota, and Wyoming, a region with relatively limited access to university-based services. This may also relate to the expanded delivery and reach of MPA programs, including ways to extend their geographic influence to municipalities in remote or underserved locations.

While this study displayed a negative association between municipal proximity/distance to MPA programs and local government professionalism, this finding raises additional prospects by which to examine this relationship. For this analysis, distance (in miles) of a municipality from a university-based MPA program was a proxy for accessibility, yet there may be other measures to assess the geographic influence on professional local government management. Potential alternatives may include the regional demand for MPA degrees with a local government concentration, the state retention rates of MPA program graduates in local government professions, and/or municipal affiliations with MPA programs through internships and civic groups. This may also apply to further study of other MPA program characteristics, including specific research contributions and related grants of faculty and students, career outcomes of graduates, and recruitment procedures used by MPA programs and universities. In addition, other types of MPA educational programs may be included in future research. The proliferation of exclusively online degree programs should be considered as well as other non-NASPAA member schools and alternative master's programs related to local government and public administration, such as urban studies, nonprofit management,

and business administration. Most importantly, the continued study of connections between MPA programs and professionalization will benefit both the local government management profession and the field of public administration.

CONCLUSION

This study aimed to address the relationship between university-based MPA programs and local government professionalism within a regional context. The findings suggest three main conclusions. First, the results indicate that the nature and occurrence of professional local government management decreases as the distance (in miles) from a university-based MPA program increases. Second, a comparative analysis of the 19 university-based MPA programs within the studied region reveals several notable contrasts in institutional composition and local government specificity. These findings support an association between the accessibility, composition, and dispersion of MPA programs within the state and region and the local government professionalism exhibited among municipalities.

Third, study results may provide evidence of a geographic sphere of influence of university-based MPA programs on professional public administration. Within the West North Central Midwest region, the physical distance of a municipality from an MPA-granting institution may affect the nature and occurrence of professional local government management. A comparison of MPA program characteristics likewise supports this association. These findings lend credence to the proposition that university-based MPA programs may offer substantive educational and assistive contributions to the development, enhancement, and utilization of professional public administration within their geographic regions.

As this study has shown, the effects of regional settings and educational institutions can influence local governmental and administrative systems. However, the increasing complexity of management in the public sector and the growing need for professional acumen in public administration provide cause for additional research in this area. Moving forward, the

importance placed on the MPA degree in the fields of local government management and public administration supplies an impetus for continued examination of the role of MPA education, programs, and applications in expanding the proximity to professionalism.

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APPENDIX

Summary Statistics of Variables of the Operational Model

Variable	Obs.	Mean	Std. Dev.	Min.	Max.
proxmpast	774	78.32687	82.13114	0	471.7
proxmpareg	774	70.39199	75.58494	0	454.3
pop	774	17205.66	39115.87	2501	454876
growth	774	1280.16	3560.003	-29380	29441
agecity	774	122.1615	38.92526	4	226
class	774	2.308786	.8505384	1	3
educ	774	25.59186	13.79046	3.4	88.2
faminc	774	63815.23	22458.43	24825	250000
homeown	774	70.06047	11.63767	28.2	100
housval	774	147641.3	94142.11	39600	864100
nonwhit	774	13.50594	14.27227	.2	98.4
medage	774	37.1376	5.460987	22.2	55.6
political	774	.7118863	.4531771	0	1
mayor	774	.1098191	.3128663	0	1
council	774	.4392765	.4966199	0	1
counsize	774	5.70155	1.945592	2	28
mpa	774	9.939276	5.813192	3	19
stcult	774	3.260982	2.1319	1	7
govt	774	1.44832	1.314381	0	3
cao	774	1.042636	.6266949	0	3
icma	774	.5994832	.7174049	0	4
state	774	.873385	.930712	0	9
credent	774	.1485788	.383882	0	2
profmgmt	774	8.28E-10	1	-1.350204	5.321032