

ICMA Student Chapters

Partnering with the Next Generation

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The experiences of Grand Valley State University’s ICMA Student Chapter always extend beyond the classroom—the deck of a small cruise liner, a dimly lit music bar in downtown Nashville, a city hall abuzz with collegial chatter. Each of these settings proved to be unique learning and networking opportunities for students. While these locales are not traditional classrooms, they allow students to develop their understanding of the local government management profession in ways that often aren’t possible on campus. ICMA Student Chapters provide valuable inroads for students to learn about local government, connect to mentors and career opportunities, and deepen their understanding of the important work that managers do for their communities.

Student Chapters: A Launching Point for the Next Generation

ICMA has a rich history—over a century—of providing support and guidance for its members, while advocating broadly for the advancement of the profession it represents. A group like this does not, however, remain vibrant and viable by only focusing on its past or immediate present. It is also vitally important to look to the future of the field by attracting talented and passionate individuals into the fold.

ICMA’s Next Generation Initiatives represent a multi-pronged approach to attracting and preparing future local government leaders. The outflow of local government management professionals through retirement stands to outpace the inflow unless efforts are taken to change the trend. We can think of no better place to address these dynamics than in the educational programs through which future managers are being trained.

Enter the Student Chapter Program. The ICMA Student Chapter program began in 2010 as a logical outgrowth of the Next Generation Initiatives. What began as a handful of chapters has grown to 102 such groups at colleges and universities around the United States, plus another 10 internationally. Combined, these chapters serve more than 650 student members, each of whom gains access to invaluable ICMA content and programming. While each student chapter determines its own structure and activities, they all are provided excellent background support from ICMA’s career advancement staff. Perhaps most importantly, chapters benefit from the ongoing support of active city and county administrators who are willing to get involved with the student groups in many ways.

Attracting and Supporting the Next Generation. Effectively attracting students to careers in local government requires an understanding of two crucial factors: (1) their



awareness of local government professions; and (2) their commitment to the local level as a context within which to pursue the ideals of public service. The approach needed to help channel people to the field can be guided by an understanding of where students may fall within the table below.

Figure 1. Targeting the Student Audience

	Unaware	Aware
Uncommitted	(4) Expose and Educate	(2) Nudge Forward
Committed	(3) Provide Direction	(1) Encourage and Support

Group 1 consists of those individuals who are both aware of and committed to careers in local government. These individuals simply need continued encouragement and support as they move forward toward their goals. They tend to embrace participation in the student chapters, particularly when doing so provides meaningful networking and mentoring opportunities.

Group 2 consists of those individuals who are generally aware of local government careers, but not yet committed to the field. Their involvement with the student chapters is often exploratory in nature. With this group, opportunities to experience how local government professionals positively shape their communities can become a significant nudge towards further career exploration.

Group 3 consists of those individuals who are less aware of local government professions, but who are committed to the types of values and ideals found within public-serving

CONNECTING WITH STUDENT GROUPS CAN HELP YOU TELL YOUR STORY AND INSPIRE UP-AND-COMING PROFESSIONALS ALONG THE WAY.

(federal, state, local) or sector (public or nonprofit). Hearing from and interacting with local government professionals can help these students see just how many opportunities exist in this field.

Group 4 consists of those individuals who are neither aware of nor committed to local government career opportunities. In this case, exposure and education are necessary first steps. Our experience suggests that this group is the most expansive. To attract these individuals to our student chapter requires programming that is widely appealing, coupled with purposeful outreach across many disciplines—political science, business administration, geography, criminal justice, engineering, social work, and the humanities, to name just a few.

Opportunities for Managers

Partnership and collaboration with local municipalities and their leaders are a cornerstone of ICMA's Student Chapter program, allowing students to meaningfully network and engage with managers as they look for pathways into the profession. However, students are not the only ones who stand to benefit from these collaborations. Managers have much to gain as well, including:

- Opportunities to partner with students (or even entire classes) on projects that benefit a municipality.
- Access to interns and early career applicants who have already shown interest and dedication to the profession.
- The ability to give back to the profession by mentoring the next generation of managers.

While relationship-building is at the core of the student chapter experience, many students, even in public administration programs, have never stepped foot in their local municipal offices, let alone interacted with local managers and their staff. Efforts to facilitate these interactions can begin to illuminate a path for students, and help them develop their interest in and understanding of the field.

We turn now to some examples of our student chapter programming at Grand Valley State University to illustrate

fields more generally. For example, we find many service-oriented students are attracted to public administration programs though they may not have settled on a particular setting

how manager involvement enhances the impact of these student organizations.

Serve as a Guest Speaker or Presenter. One effective way to reach students is to have managers come into the classroom as guest speakers. Nearly every semester I invite managers from surrounding communities to speak to my classes, and without fail, I always have two or three students who subsequently express interest in learning more. Our student chapter has also invited professionals to participate with a panel of speakers geared toward a broader university audience. We have hosted forums on economic development, water quality, and an event called “Small Town Stories,” where managers told about unexpected (and often humorous) experiences that you just can't find in textbooks. As a professional manager, you do not have to wait to be contacted. You can initiate opportunities to engage by connecting with your local colleges or universities, and even high schools, expressing your willingness to discuss career possibilities with students. You may even look for ways to become more actively involved in your alma mater's alumni groups.

Include Students in Networking Events. The backbone of our student group programming has come from an ongoing partnership that we have fostered with the West Michigan Municipal Executives group, a subchapter of the state ICMA affiliate (Michigan Municipal Executives). Each month, these professionals host a lunch and learn meeting at which area city and county executives gather to eat while discussing topics of common interest and concern. For the past four years, we have had a standing invitation to bring students to these lunches for opportunities to network and learn more about the profession. We owe this partnership to Al Vanderberg, county administrator for Ottawa County, Michigan (also an adjunct instructor in our MPA and undergraduate programs), and Keith Van Beek, city manager of Holland, Michigan (an alum of our MPA program), for helping us get our foot in the door with the group. The outcomes for our students have been phenomenal—job shadows, internships, class projects, access to guest speakers and site visits, to name just a few. Earlier this year, our student organization had an opportunity to return the favor by hosting over 40 city and county managers on campus. As a practitioner, if you belong to a professional group, consider inviting a student chapter to join in on events.

Host Tours and Site Visits. Over the past few years, our student chapter has enjoyed excellent site visits and guided tours led by professional administrators, including at such places as water, wastewater, and solid waste/recycling facilities. One very unique site visit was a downtown walking tour of Muskegon, Michigan, led by City Manager Frank Peterson. We learned about many innovative development initiatives happening in the city, including a public-private redevelopment of the city-owned ice hockey arena (home to a semi-professional team), incubator pop-up shops and kitchens, public space for sand volleyball courts and outdoor





fireplaces, and several integrated mixed-use buildings. Later we boarded a small liner for a beautiful sunset cruise along the shores of Muskegon Lake and Lake Michigan. This part of the experience was led by our student chapter president, who had interned with the city and was familiar with waterfront development initiatives. Thanks to our willing and enthusiastic guides, the event proved most insightful and memorable to everyone who participated. You have initiatives going on in your communities that would be very valuable to share. Connecting with student groups can help you tell your story and inspire up-and-coming professionals along the way.

Encourage Outreach to Underrepresented Populations. Student groups can provide an effective way to reach out to underrepresented populations in city and county administration. The key is that participants must be able to “see themselves” in the field. This requires finding managers, especially from underrepresented groups, to engage with students and to share their experiences. For example, our student chapter partnered with the Michigan Municipal League to host an event on campus to promote the League’s 16/50 Project. This is a concerted effort to draw more women—who make up more than 50 percent of Michigan’s population—to executive-level roles in municipal government, where women currently occupy only 16 percent of such positions across the state. The League organized a panel of female city managers from different parts of the state who talked about their experiences and led participants in several decision-making exercises. As a result, a number of attendees not only joined our student organization, but found themselves increasingly drawn to opportunities in local government management. Again, the key was helping students see themselves in the field.

Connect Student Groups to Service Learning or Volunteer Opportunities. Volunteering in the community has been a great way for our student group to both learn about and experience different aspects of public service. Working with the local county parks department, our student group organized a trail clean-up project involving brush removal and trash pick-up. In our orientation to the clean-up project, we had opportunities to learn about parks management issues and about the efforts to reclaim former mining extraction sites into space for public recreation.

Other service projects have given us a chance to understand cross-sector partnerships. This past fall, we reached out to an area nonprofit organization, the Kids’ Food Basket, which works with local school districts in west Michigan to pack and deliver over 6,000 daily meals to students experiencing food insecurity. We were able to tour their recently constructed expansion facility and urban farm in Grand Rapids, Michigan, and afterward spent time packing sack suppers. Experiences like this bring public service to life. Because of their networks and their awareness of needs, city and county administrators are in a unique position to connect student groups with service-learning opportunities.

Conferences. Attendance at the ICMA regional, international, and annual conferences has become a highlight for many of our student chapter participants. Our students were blown away at this year’s conference in Nashville, where they made more connections with managers in a few days than one can expect from months of our usual programming. The chance to learn side-by-side and network with managers from around the country (and the world!) helps students understand the true strength and breadth of the profession. Most conferences will include programming designed with students in mind, such as speed-networking sessions and space and time for chapter meetings. Next time you are at an ICMA conference, ask about what student chapters will be in attendance and how you can support their experience while there. The relationships forged in the conference setting can be extended into the future as advances in communication technologies make geographic separation less of a hindrance.

Conclusion

While the resources and capacity of every student chapter is different, it is important to note that these partnerships need not depend too much on the time of managers and municipal resources. Chapters have student leaders, faculty advisors, and access to university and ICMA resources. And while student interests may vary, they all benefit from learning from current managers and from deepening their connections in their chosen profession. Many of these opportunities require only your cooperation and willingness to share your experiences and expertise with students! **PM**



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