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**A CASE STUDY IN UNIVERSITY-COMMUNITY COOPERATION  
TO IMPROVE LOCAL GOVERNMENT PERFORMANCE**

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*August 2002*

## ***Introduction***

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This study tells the story of how a university research program, the Community Benchmarks Program (CBP), simultaneously created a unique learning experience for undergraduates and provided technical research assistance to the 35 local government units in New York State's Onondaga County. A sizable grant from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation provided the support that allowed the CBP the luxury of experimentation. Procedures were developed to solicit projects from clients and to produce specific studies by an undergraduate upper division class offered every semester. These studies have attracted substantial local media coverage and, more important, demonstrate the value of having systematic and comparative data for making decisions and evaluating programs. The most significant accomplishment of the CBP is the educational value to students and the research value to local communities. The importance of the program has meant that the CBP is now institutionalized at The Maxwell School. This permanent status allows staff to dedicate their efforts towards student education and research and not on raising outside funds.

The reader will see that the initial plans to develop macro community indicators to be repeated periodically a la the Oregon Benchmark Project changed as a result of the failure of early attempts to form citizen-based committees and attract news coverage for such studies. Realizing that most citizens, politicians and government officials had little or no interest in community outcome measures and that the media had trouble warming up to comprehensive studies, the CBP moved to discrete studies for clients that request the information or those sought out by the CBP. The research projects focus on specific policy issues. This transformation also better serves the needs and capabilities of undergraduates.

## ***Background***

The Community Benchmarks Program (CBP) was founded in June of 1996 as part of the Alan K. Campbell Public Affairs Institute at The Maxwell School of Syracuse University. The program was initially supported by the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation through a three-year grant of \$579,000 and by direct and in-kind services from The Maxwell School Dean's Office, Public Affairs Program and Public Administration Department. Maxwell Dean John Palmer institutionalized the CBP in FY 2000, enabling the program to continue as part of the ongoing research and undergraduate educational activities of the Public Affairs Program.

Originally overseeing the program was Dr. William D. Coplin, chair of the Public Affairs Program, and Astrid Merget, former associate dean at Maxwell and chair of the Public Administration Program. Merget is now the dean of the School of Public and Environmental Affairs at Indiana University. Serving as program director and instructor of the undergraduate practicum in benchmarking is Carol Dwyer.

The CBP restricted program activities to local governments while receiving funding from Sloan. The mission of CBP has since been expanded to support local governments and nonprofits to measure and improve their performance and accountability. From the outset, project directors were committed to finding a model that would provide both a powerful educational experience for undergraduates and would have a demonstrable impact on the governments of Onondaga County beyond the traditional occasional event, newspaper article or establishment of an august committee.

Between 1996 and the fall of 2002, the CBP published 15 studies for nonprofit and local government organizations in Onondaga County and partnered with two area schools on projects. There have also been several unpublished research activities conducted on a wide range of topics, including vacant housing, Syracuse Community Court, fire services and EMS services. Copies of all published reports can be found on the CBP Web site at [www.maxwell.syr.edu/benchmarks](http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/benchmarks).

CBP has had an impact beyond Onondaga County in three ways.

1. Over 6,000 people from all over the world have viewed the Web site, [www.maxwell.syr.edu/benchmarks](http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/benchmarks), developed less than two year ago.
2. At the end of 2000, the CBP published, Does Your Government Measure Up? Basic Tools for Local Officials and Citizens, which has enjoyed both national and international sales.
3. The CBP experience has been the basis of an article in the *PA Times*, as well as several on-line columns. Both are products of the American Society of Public Administrators (ASPA). A paper, entitled "The Professional Researcher as Change Agent in the Government Performance Movement," is scheduled to appear in the September/October 2002 issue of *Public Administration Review*.

Initial studies focused on the 35 municipalities in New York State's Onondaga County, home to Syracuse University. In the process of conducting these studies, the CBP learned:

- ☞ While local government departments can spend a great deal of time on paperwork and/or record keeping, data are often stored in a manner that makes retrieval difficult—and in some cases—impossible.

- ✍ Departments that use data for reporting purposes often present findings without a meaningful context to aid elected officials in interpreting the information and in making decisions.
- ✍ Many appointed and elected officials view their municipality as unique and therefore they have little interest in comparative studies. The view held by many public officials in Onondaga County is that performance measures are useful for others—they knew what citizens wanted—therefore quantitative analysis is of little value.

At the outset, the plan was to educate elected and appointed local government officials in the value of using performance measures to make decisions and to introduce the groundbreaking program generically known as Oregon Benchmarks, which the CBP hoped to replicate. (For information about Oregon Benchmarks, see the Oregon Progress Board Web site at [www.econ.state.or.us/opb](http://www.econ.state.or.us/opb)).

Equally important to the CBP's work with local government is the development of a curriculum that would offer senior level undergraduates a chance to be involved in rigorous and relevant research while learning about the function of local governments and the demands of producing a professional publication. A copy of the spring 2002 syllabus is located in the appendix.

## ***Onondaga County Demographics***

Onondaga County is located in Central New York. The county sprawls over 780 square miles,<sup>1</sup> and is home to 19 towns, 15 villages and the city of Syracuse. There is considerable diversity in the size and composition of the local governments, which include rural, suburban and urban units of various economic scales. The population is just under 460,000 and approximately one-third of the residents live in the city of Syracuse while the remainder is dispersed to communities as small as the village of Fabius with 355 people to Clay, the county's largest township, which has close to 60,000 residents. Approximately two percent of residents have moved from the county over the past decade. The city lost nearly 11 percent of its population, while many of the towns in the county have experienced growth, some as high as 18 percent, during the same period.<sup>2</sup>

Per capita income has increased every year since 1990 to the 1999 level of \$27,097, giving the county a ranking of 15 out of the 60 counties statewide.<sup>3</sup> The median selling price of homes was \$80,000 in 2000 and 36 the median age.<sup>4</sup> Caucasians comprise close to 85 percent of the population and 75 percent of all minorities reside in the county's only city.<sup>5</sup>

County government operates under a home rule charter with separate executive and legislative functions. The part-time legislative body represents citizens in 19 districts. The 35 municipalities within the county each have an independent governing body. Most of the towns and villages are served by part-time elected officials. The Syracuse mayor serves full-time although members of the city's common council are part-time. The county is home to the Onondaga Indian Reservation, where 1,473 people reside.<sup>6</sup>

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<sup>1</sup> *Municipal Reference Guide: New York Western Edition 2002*, Neptune, NJ. p. CO-18.

<sup>2</sup> Central New York Regional Planning and Development Board, official repository for the US Decennial Census data, Web site: [www.cnyrpd.org/data](http://www.cnyrpd.org/data). July 23, 2002.

<sup>3</sup> Ibid.

<sup>4</sup> *Syracuse Fact Sheet*. Web site: [www.syracuse.ny.us/aboutSyracuse.asp](http://www.syracuse.ny.us/aboutSyracuse.asp). July 24, 2002

<sup>5</sup> *Municipal Reference Guide*, pp. CO-18 and 747.

<sup>6</sup> Central New York Regional Planning Board Web site. July 24, 2002.

The Central New York region is a center for higher education with the third largest concentration of colleges and universities in the nation. The cultural offerings available are unusual for an area of this size. A partial list includes the Syracuse Symphony, Syracuse Stage, Syracuse Opera Company and the Museum of Science and Technology. The annual Jazzfest brings in 80,000 people to hear nationally acclaimed recording artists. In the sports arena, the county is home to the Syracuse SkyChiefs, a Triple-A affiliate of the Toronto Blue Jays, the Syracuse Crunch hockey team and the Carrier Dome at SU. While 54 percent of residents are service providers or employed in wholesale/retail trade these jobs will burgeon with the expansion of Pyramid Companies Carousel Center which has been renamed DestiNY USA. The planned construction will increase the 1.5 million square foot shopping mall to a \$900 million, five million square foot entertainment/shopping complex. In addition to more stores there will be an aquarium, four hotels, tourism center and several entertainment/recreation facilities, including a 65-acre indoor park, 15,000-seat amphitheater and a six-story climbing wall. When completed, the mall is predicted to be the largest in the nation. Over the next four years, DestiNY is expected to employ 11,000 construction workers, create 9,000 permanent jobs at the mall and another 12,000 in the community. The economic impact is predicted to be \$2.2 billion annually.<sup>7</sup>

## ***Early Stages***

The CBP was originally charged with the task of establishing systematic measurements of six service areas using the Oregon Benchmarks project as a model:

- ✍ crime control
- ✍ fire protection
- ✍ solid waste collection
- ✍ street conditions
- ✍ parks and recreation
- ✍ childhood immunization

For a number of reasons the plan to follow the Oregon Benchmarks approach was abandoned even though this was the framework developed in the original grant proposal. In Oregon, the program is sanctioned by the state government and is marked by achievement goals that are established for governments as well as citizens. The CBP did not enjoy a similar partnership with a government entity, resulting in a reality check for this element of the program's strategy. Also, after publication of the first study, it became apparent that comprehensive research does not attract much interest from government officials, citizens or the media (This will be discussed later in more detail).

## ***Outreach***

### *Government Officials*

During the first year, the CBP was able to surmount many stumbling blocks, but two remained: getting buy-in from local officials and citizens. One of the early endeavors undertaken was an October 1997 workshop featuring David Ammons, author of Municipal Benchmarks, Assessing Local Performance and Establishing Community Standards and five other books that explore public governance issues. He is a professor at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill and former city manager. Elected and appointed public officials were invited to attend the workshop that raised

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<sup>7</sup>About Onondaga County. Web site: [www.ongov.net/About](http://www.ongov.net/About). July 24, 2002 and Peirce, Neal R. Syracuse Post-Standard. pp.C1-C5. July 28, 2002.

these questions:

1. Do existing government services meet the needs of the public?
2. How do local officials and citizens know if government performance is different today from yesterday?
3. What are the true costs of providing a government service?

Over 75 people participated. The purpose and services of the CBP were explained. Followup continued over the next several months, but public officials did not respond to the CBP's offer to collect data and provide support to municipalities for a benchmarking project.

### *Citizens*

Citizen participation was viewed as a critical component to the program and numerous activities have been undertaken to that end.

Coincident with the startup of the CBP were the formation of two citizen action groups: 1) A Syracuse mayoral initiative, Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today (TNT), which created advisory boards in each of eight geographic areas created by the city; and 2) Forging Our Community's United Strength (FOCUS), a countywide visioning process which was spearheaded by some citizens and supported financially by city and county governments. Rather than create a potentially competitive initiative, the CBP saw these two groups as an opportunity. Both TNT and FOCUS offered indigenous groups countenanced with local legitimacy to dovetail the applied research efforts of the CBP. A number of grassroots organizations also existed; some for many years. In one illustration of outreach, the CBP worked with residents in distressed areas and discovered that many people volunteering to participate were already committed to other organizations. Certainly arguable is the bona fide representation of these various groups. Yet any entity constructed by the CBP would have been dubious in its authenticity.

Information the CBP was able to gather from TNT and FOCUS jumpstarted and enriched the program. TNT and FOCUS discovered that most citizens wanted increased police protection, fewer vacant and rundown houses, improved school systems and economic development efforts that produced results. Only the first of these items appeared in the original charge from the Sloan Foundation. In the deliberations of both groups the CBP learned that most empirical evidence did not grab the attention of grassroots citizens; they retained their own perceptions of community conditions. At best, the data furnished by the CBP—such as high crime rates—confirmed what citizens already knew.

### *Lessons Learned*

The CBP was able to craft informal mechanisms for community participation by working with TNT, FOCUS and other groups with the following results:

1. CBP staff members were participating members in TNT and FOCUS. This provided the CBP with a forum to present and disseminate findings, both informally and through formalized reports. This experience enabled the CBP to develop a model that provides a limited amount of citizen training to accompany the information presented. An important lesson for applied research is how to educate citizens to understand and use information compiled in a rigorous fashion. Mere availability of data is not adequate.

2. Efforts to work with small but self-directed citizen groups at two ends of the economic spectrum challenged the civic intent of our research.
  - ✎ Members of an inner city neighborhood group dedicated to improving their environs agreed to work with the CBP on two committees formed after preliminary focus groups were held and surveys conducted to determine citizen concerns. Jobs and crime were the top two issues identified. The volunteers did not return phone calls or attend meetings scheduled at their community center. A crime report was produced specific to their area, but it did not stimulate action. Clearly competing claims on the time and priorities of the neighborhood groups preempted their embrace of the research.
  - ✎ The more affluent town of Manlius also demonstrated the dilemma of arousing citizen interest and investment in information. Here a group of concerned citizens banded together to successfully oust incumbent government leaders who ignored their objections to a proposed medical center. Following the election, the coalition remained intact—avowedly, to monitor government—yet, even these well-educated citizens with some common concerns did not support a comprehensive plan to encourage the town to use performance measures. From the perspective of these townspeople, the data, despite its practical appraisal of government performance, seemed too abstract.

The challenge of citizen education and participation is formidable. While there is much rhetoric about the public being left out of the equation when important decisions are made, the reality is that while local governments can do more to improve public accessibility to information, it is also true that most public meetings are often poorly attended which has the unintended consequence of giving public leaders the opinion that citizens are satisfied. Some examples:

- ✎ Governments can improve their accessibility by instituting evening and weekend office hours as many people are not home during the day. In the technological society of the 21<sup>st</sup> Century local governments should make the commitment of time and money to improve technology to enable staff and citizens to easily access records. Web sites must be developed that enable citizens to download code enforcement ordinances, minutes of board meetings and the ability to pay for some services over the Web. In a CBP study released in December 1999, findings revealed that only 74 percent of the 35 municipalities in Onondaga County had a Web site.
- ✎ Most semesters students in the CBP course PAF 410 are required to attend at least one village/town board meeting. In almost every case students report that there are rarely more than a handful of people at the meetings. Experiential evidence shows that those few citizens are often the same people each month. The few times that citizens pack a board meeting are always in reaction to a controversial decision. Once the issue is put to rest, mass public attendance is not repeated until the next controversy.

The message many elected officials have taken from this is that they have a public mandate to continue to make decisions in a vacuum because their constituents are satisfied. The typical comment made to the CBP staff is that *the important feedback comes at election time*. In actuality, voter enrollment in most municipalities in Onondaga County is so heavily weighted towards one political party that marginal candidates can rarely win. For this reason many incumbents run unopposed and some have been in office for over a decade.

- ✍ What elected officials fail to recognize is that lack of participation could be representative of the new paradigm for communication and government's failure to respond. Years ago citizens might write a letter to an elected official to express support or opposition to an issue. This evolved into people calling to make their opinion known and now for many, the telephone has been replaced by email—a method of interaction that is not always available at the local government level.

The number of female-headed households has increased, the number of households where both partners work is up and some people are holding down more than one job, a nationwide trend not unique to Onondaga County. These demographics have an impact on the amount of time people have available and most governments have failed to address this issue.

While the CBP has not found the *magic bullet* that will bring citizens into the public forum, it appears that governments must meet the public need for information by making it easier for citizens to access and to understand information. Part of the answer lies in the use of easily understood comparative data made available through a more sophisticated level of technology.

#### *Access to CBP Information*

As part of the CBP's effort to make information easily accessible, publications of the comparative research conducted are placed in branches of the county library, distributed to municipal offices, the media and posted on the CBP Web site. The Web pages include the major reports published by the program and provides relevant linkages. The CBP staff is also available via phone and email to respond to inquiries and to provide support to organizations and citizens.

### ***First Publication***

After working with TNT for a year, the CBP decided that the program's initial publication would reflect the concerns expressed by TNT members and public officials. Aware that issues raised by citizens involved in TNT were crime and the physical conditions of public and private property within the city, a comparative study was conducted of the TNT geographic sectors. The study included data the CBP had collected since its startup and combined with available information obtained from the city. Data used:

- ✍ Criminal offense and call data
- ✍ Incidence of fire and alarm data
- ✍ Assessment of physical conditions\*
- ✍ Trash Collection
- ✍ Parks
- ✍ Citizen survey of government services

\* One semester was dedicated to a direct observation study conducted by students of the physical conditions of the city, i.e., sidewalk, street, building and parking lot conditions and the prevalence of litter.

The data were disaggregated and aggregated with a scoring methodology developed to designate the 'best' and 'worst' neighborhoods in the city. The June 1998 publication, Selected Government Performance Outcomes for the City of Syracuse: Comparisons of the Six Residential TNT Sectors in the Areas of Crime, Fire, Streets, Trash Collection and Parks, included maps of the city by census tract and by TNT sector using GIS technology. This work still stands as the most sophisticated research project the CBP has conducted. The result: no impact.

### *Lessons Learned*

- ✍ Despite the CBP's efforts to involve citizens and address issues raised, the information proved to be of little value. The report contained too much information. The CBP was politely informed that the study was *interesting*. The media also found it overwhelming and since the information was not easily translated into a 30-second sound bite, the report received no attention.
- ✍ The problem appeared to be a fundamental example of the tension between rigor and relevance. The CBP needed to regroup and scale back.

### ***Demonstration Study***

Following the workshop featuring David Ammons, many overtures were made over the year to public officials both individually and through their professional associations, but to no avail. It was decided to forge ahead with a demonstration study of six functional areas in the 19 towns and the city of Syracuse. Survey instruments were designed and distributed to department heads with copies to each town supervisor. The service areas were:

1. Property Assessment
2. Office of the Town Clerk
3. Code Enforcement
4. Financial Management
5. Highways/Dept. of Public Works
6. Parks and Recreation

One of the most consuming aspects of the study was the time spent calling departments—often multiple occasions—requesting that surveys be returned. Questionnaires were often sent two or more times when an official could not locate the original survey. All contacts and conversations were logged because of the difficulty encountered in obtaining the public information. It was decided that the final report would produce data on responsiveness.

The original request for information gave the local officials two weeks to return the one-two page questionnaire. At the conclusion of the study, three towns returned the survey on time and the mean response was 13 days late, ranging from one to 34 days late. Actually, some departments never returned the surveys, but the CBP stopped counting at 34. The mean number of times the municipalities were contacted was four, ranging from one to eight times.

In the final report, Benchmarking Local Government Services in Onondaga County: A Demonstration Study of the 19 towns and City of Syracuse (September 1998), the municipalities were graded in various areas.

Some examples include:

*Assessment*

Properties have been reassessed within the last five years.

*Clerk's Office*

Customer surveys are used and the results reported to the town board/common council.

*Code Enforcement*

Department completes the state-mandated fire safety inspections annually.

*Financial Management*

Department has written financial policies for investment

*Highways/DPW*

Department has written policy for the use of municipally-owned fuel.

*Parks and Recreation*

Department monitors park conditions through the use of written evaluations.

Departments were given individual grades that were then aggregated and a formula used to calculate municipal grades of A-F. Once the report was completed, copies were mailed to the chief elected officials and to the respective departments for review purposes. There was no reaction.

After a few weeks passed, the reports were distributed to the libraries and the media. Although it was anticipated that the research would have some appeal to the media—there was no apparent interest. One editor later commented, “We didn’t know how to wrap our arms around this.”

*Breakthrough*

Six months after the report’s release—and long forgotten by the CBP with other projects demanding attention—a reporter from the daily newspaper contacted Dwyer for an interview. Ultimately, the interview and findings ran on the front page of the *Syracuse Post-Standard* (circulation, 125,000). Several sidebar articles followed in the newspaper’s *Neighbors* edition, a weekly insert targeted specifically at different geographic locations around the county and the region. Television and radio coverage coupled with citizen feedback through the *Letters to the Editor* section of the newspaper was next.

This set off a chain reaction with public officials. They contacted the media to give responses, slammed the work of the CBP, frequently saying it was inaccurate. In most cases, the CBP was able to respond to complaints by turning to the original surveys that had been returned by the municipalities. Completed surveys were faxed to a number of chief elected officials to verify that in a representative of the respective department had provided the information. In every instance the person completing the survey was asked to sign their name and provide their title. Even in the cases where the CBP was in error, the response to the media was consistent: ample time was provided during the review period for department heads and elected officials to make the CBP aware of mistakes. It was apparent that any perceived errors were inconsequential to municipal officials until the report appeared in the newspaper.

*Lessons Learned*

☞ Although different from the first undertaking, the demonstration study was still too complex for public officials, citizens and the media to absorb. The CBP needed to continue to narrow the focus of the research projects.

- ✍ The philosophy of the CBP is that comparative data informs decision-making and because this is so, it was the right thing to do. The reality is that for most public officials, governance is reactive rather than progressive.
- ✍ The tension of rigor vs. relevance was coming to a head. The question was clear: *What value is rigor in the absence of relevance?*
- ✍ A new model was needed. The answer was found in the development of discrete projects, using easily understood visuals.

## **Success**

The next year two studies were produced:

1. Comparison of Cost and Selected Characteristics of Police Services in Onondaga County, April 1999
2. Residential Trash Collection in Onondaga County: A Study Comparing Cost and Type of Service, June 1999

These very specific research projects were clear, easy to understand and relevant. Because of the negative publicity public officials received following the coverage of the demonstration study, both appointed and elected officials were clearly more responsive even if they were not converted believers. The program continued to attract media coverage and positive feedback from a few citizens and government officials.

### *Lessons Learned*

- ✍ While the 1999 research projects were not overwhelming successes as far as garnering greater interest or involvement from public officials and citizens, they were a step forward.
- ✍ The CBP recognized that this change was not enough. The paradigm had to continue to shift.

## **A Working Model**

By this stage, the CBP had expanded its efforts to include identifying performance measurements for nonprofit organizations and educational institutions. Since 1999, the CBP has published the following reports. Most have garnered media attention and positive feedback from some local officials and citizens.

1. *Municipal Web Sites in Onondaga County: A Study Comparing Selected Characteristics*, December 1999  
The report indicates that only nine of the 35 municipalities in Onondaga County have Web pages. The existing sites were evaluated for content, ease of use and organization. A *How-To Guide* was developed for local officials interested in creating a Web site or improving an existing site.
2. *Comparison of Salaries and Benefits of Elected Municipal Officials in Onondaga County*, April 2000  
The salaries of the chief elected officials and board members are ranked on a per capita and per property basis. The study also reports which of the mostly part-time elected officials are eligible for health and/or retirement benefits and their cost.

3. *Comparison of Municipal Department Head Compensation in Onondaga County*, June 2001  
A comparative analysis of salaries and benefits of department heads, with information on vacation, sick and personal time and the availability of medical, dental and vision coverage.
4. *Comparison of Law Enforcement Contracts in Onondaga County*, January 2002  
An overview of contractual agreements of law enforcement bargaining units that looks at salaries and fringe benefits, including medical coverage and the availability of vacation, sick and personal time.
5. *A Report on Shea Middle School* is a series of four studies that looks at the issues facing students, parents and teaching and support staff, Spring 2002
  - o *Student Achievement at Shea Middle School*
  - o *Study of Family Involvement at Shea Middle School*
  - o *Communication between Shea Middle School and Community Agencies*
  - o *Shea Middle School Community Program Review*
6. *Nonprofit Compensation: A Comparison of the Salaries and Benefits of Nonprofit Executives in Onondaga County*, Spring 2002  
Researchers collected data contributed by local organizations as well as IRS income tax filings. The data were used to compare Onondaga County organizations against data collected in four similar studies of nonprofits across the country. Three of the studies were national in scope and the fourth examined nonprofit compensation in New York City.

Over the past three years over 45 news articles have been written about the various CBP research projects. All the reports can be viewed and downloaded from the CBP Web site.

### ***Continuous Improvement***

The CBP had veered from the original course established, reluctantly stepping back from attempting to gain citizen participation through educational opportunities. Given the experiences of prior years, inadequate staffing and few results, the CBP concluded that while citizen involvement is the ideal, dedicating limited resources to a targeted audience might not be the best choice. Instead, the CBP looked for citizen involvement through the introduction of direct user citizen surveys as the wiser course of action.

The program began advancing the concept of direct user surveys for the purpose of continuous improvement. The CBP's experience with early public opinion surveys of government services is that they have limited value unless there has been an interaction between the citizen and the provider. While general population surveys are useful to ascertain general impressions, the responses are often based on perceptions that come from the media, neighbors and others and not always from people who have experienced one-on-one contact with a service provider. For example, while everyone may have an opinion about police service, those who have called police for assistance, been stopped by an officer or encountered a law enforcement official in some professional capacity can make the most compelling assessments of the service provided.

The CBP devoted considerable time developing, implementing and analyzing the results of direct user surveys and convincing public officials to use them. Generally, the surveys are placed in the offices of town/village clerks, assessors and code departments. Users of parks and recreation were also targeted.

Employees and department heads in codes and assessment were the most concerned about the use of surveys in their departments since some of the people who use their services are not happy with the outcome. The purpose of the surveys was to learn if, regardless of the result, citizens and other users thought they had been treated courteously and fairly, provided with all the information they needed and that the information provided was clear.

Over time, the CBP came to be viewed as a resource for this service, which was implemented in departments throughout a number of municipalities. Even the most skeptical came to find some value in the information produced.

### ***A Guide to Continuous Improvement***

Because the CBP learned from the lessons imparted over the years and convinced that the program was closer to the mark than before, Coplin and Dwyer decided to co-author a book that would be distributed to a wider audience. The purpose of Does Your Government Measure Up? is to create a simple model that can be replicated by public officials and citizens across the country. The premise of the book is:

- ✍ basic measurable standards should be identified for every department/function
- ✍ simplified performance measures focusing on cost and accomplishment should be developed
- ✍ comparative studies using normalized data is critical to informed decision-making
- ✍ all direct service departments should implement user surveys and report the results to chief elected officials, staff and the public.

The book was released in the fall of 2000 and has enjoyed modest success across the nation and through some international sales. Does Your Government Measure Up? had the highest sales for Syracuse University Press in 2001. Although elected and appointed officials tend to be the largest audience (particularly newly elected officials), the book has been purchased by a wide variety of readers. Many consumers seeking information beyond the text have used the CBP Web site and the authors as a resource. Several organizations have purchased hundreds of copies for the members and others have endorsed the book, including the U.S. Chamber of Commerce.

The book expands the audience for the CBP philosophy of good government and is frequently used as a tool for classroom instruction.

## ***CBP in 2002***

The philosophy of the program has changed since 1996 as staff went through a learning curve to discover what works and what does not and to determine where to invest limited resources for the highest return. The CBP is more directed and has developed a strategic plan, which continues to reap benefits.

One of the outcomes is that the CBP has redefined the term 'benchmarking.' The common explanation narrowly means the identification and replication of a 'best practice.' The CBP has learned that most local governments do not have the time or the resources to conduct the research required to identify a best practice. Instead, the CBP suggests that local governments use the mean in the comparative data to represent the benchmark they should strive to reach—upwards in the case of performance—down when contrasting costs. This is a simplistic approach, but by implication those meeting or surpassing a standard are in effect establishing a best practice. This is more attainable goal for local governments and has been successfully put to the test locally as evidence in the next example.

The 1999 study on trash collection compared the three methods of trash collection commonly used by citizens.

1. A property owner individually contracts with a commercial hauler for service.
2. Trash collection is a government service provided using municipal employees.
3. A municipality contracts with a private hauler on behalf of the entire community or a designated area in the community where residents have requested this action.

A fourth method mentioned in the study, but not used in the comparison due to the difficulty in obtaining accurate data, is the individual who brings their trash to the collection station and pays a per bag charge.

The CBP research discovered that—across the board—the most economical method is for municipal leaders to contract with a commercial hauler on behalf of their constituents. The most expensive practice is for each homeowner to contract individually with a private hauler.

Because of the results of this study, one township is now providing this service to residents, two more will soon be awarding bids with commercial haulers and four rural townships are in the process of forming a regional district and plan to let bids for municipally contracted service this fall.

Other examples exist demonstrating that the use of comparative data has informed decision-making. More municipal leaders request assistance from the CBP in the development and implementation of user surveys in their communities and now contact staff with ideas for future studies. Again, the CBP recognizes that these are small steps, but what is important is not the stride but that the direction represents progress and a shift in the paradigm.

## ***PAF 410: Practicum in Public Policy Evaluation***

By redirecting research efforts, the CBP improved the learning experience for undergraduates who typically have no knowledge of local government operations and have limited research skills. Change began with a public opinion survey. Students telephoned close to 800 residents to ask their opinion of police, fire and trash collection services and the physical conditions of the streets and parks. Students did have an opportunity to interact with citizens and local officials, learn research and survey techniques and how to display, analyze and present data.

Yet it was ultimately decided that this project had limited educational value because most of the time spent by students was taken up on completing a telephone survey and producing only preliminary results. The practice of using students as “free labor” to get 800 responses raised a question about what they were learning after their first five hours of phone calls. Since the research payoff was limited, it made sense to shift the educational focus.

While students are always the primary source used to collect data, the data sets are now smaller. This has allowed for learning in other areas. The course has multiple goals for students:

1. Appreciating the value of setting and meeting standards and using comparative data to inform decisions.
2. Instruction of basic but scientifically grounded research techniques.
3. Comprehension of the nuances relevant to conducting an accurate analysis of the data collected.
4. Importance of a clear visual presentation.
5. Discernment of the purpose and function of the research subject.
6. Production of a professional report.

### ***The Future***

Our goal is to continue to produce studies that will help local governments in Onondaga County improve their services and lower their costs. The next study to be undertaken by the fall 2002 class is a technology audit that will look at the adequacy of software and hardware found in municipalities, the amount of money allocated for training and IST support to staff. This will be combined with a return to the 1999 Web study to determine if improvement has occurred over the last three years. The payoff to our students and to government officials will continue to be enormous and require little or no additional program funding.

The CBP staff believe that the program is a viable model of collaboration for any college or university with a faculty inclined to offer a similar course and a willingness to work to form partnerships with local governments and nonprofits. This is not a call for other public administration and political science departments to create programs that will promote benchmarking, but we are encouraging greater collaborative efforts to foster town/gown relations while enabling undergraduates to produce relevant research for the local governments and nonprofits in their communities. There are enormous institutional barriers to the creation of such programs, especially the lack of faculty reward when compared to the recognition given for discovering and testing new theories. It is clear that Maxwell undergraduates have benefited from this course of action; first, learning how local governments and nonprofits function, and second, learning how to evaluate performance. In the end, of fundamental significance is whether the CBP has contributed to the vision of George Maxwell by teaching “good citizenship.”

# ***APPENDIX***

PAF 410: Practicum in Public Policy – Community Benchmarks  
Section 2 - #33718

**Syllabus**

**SPRING 2002**

***TUESDAYS and THURSDAYS: 2:30-3:50 p.m., 108 Eggers***

***Access to MaxPal available***

INSTRUCTOR Carol Dwyer, Director, *Community Benchmarks Program (CBP)*  
102 Maxwell Hall ? x3934 ? [cdwyer@maxwell.syr.edu](mailto:cdwyer@maxwell.syr.edu)  
Office Hours: Wednesdays: 2-4 p.m. Tuesdays, 11-noon and by appointment

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Lisa Mueller, teacher assistant ? 425-7366 ? [limuelle@syr.edu](mailto:limuelle@syr.edu)  
Office hours by appointment

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Web Page: <http://www.maxwell.syr.edu/benchmarks>  
M Drive/PAF 410 for class materials and shared data by teams

COURSE OBJECTIVES To introduce benchmarking as a tool to improve the performance of government and nonprofit organizations. This will be accomplished through assigned readings, case studies, class discussion, project meetings and the hands-on activity of collecting and analyzing data and the production of a professional report. Students will be involved in classroom presentations and learn team building skills, policy/program development and the process and value of developing benchmarks by the culmination of their research project.

<i>Date</i>	<i>Week</i>	<i>Class Activities</i>	<i>Readings and Assignments</i>
01-15-02 Tuesday	Week 1	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✍ What is benchmarking?</li> <li>✍ Examples</li> <li>✍ Moving from 315 to 410</li> <li>✍ Previous reports</li> <li>✍ Student expectations</li> <li>✍ IDs for MaxPal</li> <li>✍ M drive</li> <li>✍ Transportation issues</li> <li>✍ Personal Benchmarks</li> <li>✍ Participation</li> <li>✍ Syllabus</li> <li>✍ Research projects</li> <li>✍ Skills assessment</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>✍ Read Part 1 of <i>Does your Government Measure Up?</i> by <b>Thursday</b>.</li> <li>✍ Assignment #1: Personal Benchmarks: <b>Due every Monday by 11 a.m. throughout the semester.</b></li> </ul>

<i>Date</i>	<i>Week</i>	<i>Class Activities</i>	<i>Readings and Assignments</i>
01-17-02 Thursday		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☞ Discussion of reading</li> <li>☞ Peter Gray, assoc. dir., Evaluation &amp; Research, Center for Teaching and Research, to discuss UBE data</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☞ Read Part 2 of <i>Does your Government Measure Up?</i> by <b>Thursday</b>.</li> <li>☞ Assignment #2: Prepare graphs displaying UBE information. <b>Due by 4 p.m. Feb. 7</b></li> </ul>
01-22-02 Tuesday	Week 2	☞ Catherine Gerard <i>Basics of Team Building</i>	☞ Read information found on the 2020 Web site cited on p. 3 of the syllabus by <b>Thursday</b>
01-24-02 Thursday		<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☞ 20/20 panel</li> <li>☞ Discussion of Part 2 of book</li> <li>☞ Project selection</li> </ul>	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☞ Assignment #3: Projects will be assigned and student teams formed. Students will be notified about their team designations via email on Friday. <b>Research project due March 25 by EMAIL (floppy or zip disk).</b></li> </ul>
01-29-02 Tuesday	Week 3	☞ Catherine Gerard <i>Working as a team</i>	
01-31-02 Thursday		Team Meeting	☞ Prepare agenda and executive summary <b>Due Feb. 7</b>
02-05-02 Tuesday	Week 4	☞ Yvonne Young, asst. superintendent, Syracuse School District, and David Cecile, principal, Shea Middle School	
02-07-02 Thursday		Team Meeting w/Carol or Lisa	
02-12-02 Tuesday	Week 5	☞ UBE benchmarks presentations	
02-14-02 Thursday		Team Meeting	☞ Update agenda and revise executive summary <b>Due Feb. 21</b>
02-19-02 Tuesday	Week 6	☞ Project planning	
02-21-02 Thursday		Team Meeting w/Carol or Lisa	☞ Each team should be prepared to provide the class with an overview of their project, including problems encountered as well as progress made on <b>March 5</b> .
02-26-02 Tuesday	Week 7	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> <li>☞ Lisa Mueller <i>Lessons Learned</i></li> <li>☞ Team evaluation</li> </ul>	
02-28-02 Thursday		Team Meeting	

<i>Date</i>	<i>Week</i>	<i>Class Activities</i>	<i>Readings and Assignments</i>
03-05-02 Tuesday	Week 8	✍ Mid-course evaluation ✍ Project discussion	
03-07-02 Thursday		Team Meeting	
03-12-02 Tuesday	Week 9	Spring Break	
03-14-02 Thursday		Spring Break	
03-19-02 Tuesday	Week 10	✍ Catherine Gerard <i>Are we working together?</i> ✍ Teams for critiques	
03-21-02 Thursday		Team Meeting	
03-26-02 Tuesday	Week 11	✍ Discussion of final paper ✍ Presentations of projects	✍ Assignment #4: Project critiques assigned <b>due April 9</b> . Please read assignment carefully.
03-28-02 Thursday		Team Meeting	
04-02-02 Tuesday	Week 12	✍ Case Study ✍ Mid-Course evaluation report	
04-04-02 Thursday		Team Meeting	
04-09-02 Tuesday	Week 13	✍ Critiques	✍ <b>Final report is due April 16</b>
04-11-02 Thursday		Team meeting	
04-16-02 Tuesday	Week 14	✍ Ken Mokrzycki, Syracuse city administrator, and Tony Ilacqua, DPW commissioner, to discuss CitiStats	✍ Assignment #5: Final paper: Write a policy paper for Shea Middle School <b>Due April 30 for Teams 1-3, May 7 for Team 4.</b>
04-18-02 Thursday		Team Meeting	
04-23-02 Tuesday	Week 15	✍ Importance of continuous improvement/client satisfaction	
04-25-02 Thursday		✍ TBA	
04-30-02	Week 16	✍ Wrapup	

<b><i>GRADING</i></b>	
<b><i>Participation</i></b>	<i>10 pts</i>
<b><i>Assignment #1: Personal Benchmarks</i></b>	<i>10 pts</i>
<b><i>Assignment #2: UBE Graph Project</i></b>	<i>10 pts</i>
<b><i>Assignment #3: Research Project</i></b>	<i>40 pts</i>
<b><i>Assignment #4: Project Critiques</i></b>	<i>10 pts</i>
<b><i>Assignment #5: Final Paper</i></b>	<i>20 pts</i>

## READINGS

*Coplin, William D. and Dwyer, Carol. Does your Government Measure Up? Basic Tools for Local Officials and Citizens. 2000. SU Press – ISBN #0-9702864-0-6 available at Follett's Orange.*

[www.syracuse2020.com](http://www.syracuse2020.com) \* Task Force Reports \* Overview \* Education provides information about Syracuse 2020.

Additional readings, as appropriate

## ASSIGNMENTS

Some assignments require an oral presentation. This does not mean you have to plan a formal speech. While you must be prepared, your presentation can be informal. Whenever possible, you should plan to use one or more overheads to present your points. Overheads are available from 102 Maxwell. Be sure to use a font that will be large enough for everyone to see. Plan ahead and run the overheads well in advance of class time. The primary purpose of the presentations is to enable students to learn from one another by providing an interactive forum for sharing ideas. Students may use Power Point. Any student or team interested in using Power Point should email me three days before class to allow sufficient time to reserve a teaching cart.

Spacing for all papers is 1½ lines. Unless stipulated, the number of pages for written reports is optional. Most assignments are due at the beginning of class. Assignments that must be submitted in 102 Maxwell can be left in the space identified for 410 located on the left side of the counter in the office reception area.

**Assignment 1:** Personal benchmarks: Students will each identify a benchmark that they can report weekly. Lisa or Carol must approve the benchmark. Your grade will be dependent upon meeting our benchmark that you report the results by the deadline each week.

This is an individual assignment that will be reported via email to Lisa every Monday morning by 11 a.m.

**Assignment 2:** Students will be provided with data collected for Undergraduates for Better Education (UBE). Use as a model the book, *Does Your Government Measure Up?*, or any of the reports found on the Community Benchmarks Web site identified at the top of the syllabus. The purpose of this assignment is to tell a visual story with the data that will be clear to even the most uninformed viewer and to familiarize you with the style that you will be expected to use for your research paper. Criteria and the selected data sets will be given to students.

This is an individual assignment due by 4 p.m. Thursday, Feb. 7, in 102 Maxwell. Students will turn in a hard copy and transmit their assignment electronically. Students will present the graphed data in class on Tuesday, Feb. 12.

**Assignment 3:** Students will be assigned to work in teams on one of four projects. The projects will be the focus of your attention for most of the remainder of the semester. Attention to detail is very important. Criteria will be provided. Students will meet with their teams and/or Lisa or Carol on Thursdays for the rest of the semester. Although the reports will be due in March, students will have an opportunity to obtain feedback on style and content from their colleagues and instructors. Some additional time will be provided to make improvements to the reports. In addition to findings, students will identify benchmarks for their projects. Where relevant, students may also develop recommendations.

**This is a team assignment due by 4 p.m., Monday, March 25 in 102 Maxwell.** In addition to the written report, each team will give an oral presentation of their project methodology and findings, including visual displays.

**Assignment 4:** Each student will receive a copy of a report completed by another team. Students will work in teams to evaluate the quality of the report based on the criteria that will be provided.

This is a team assignment. Copies of the reports will be distributed in class Tuesday, March 26. Students will be able to write notes on the reports, but a memo must also be drafted detailing suggested changes as well as positive feedback. Each team will bring six copies of the memo to class (copies can be made in 102 Maxwell). Any reports with notations and the memos will be turned over to the team that prepared the report. Teams will also give an oral presentation that includes visuals. The critiques and presentations will occur April 9. The authors of each report will then have until April 16 to make revisions. **Teams must submit their final report by April 16<sup>th</sup> by email or on a disk (zip or floppy).**

**Assignment 5:** Each student will prepare a final paper that develops a policy or looks at a

program for a community school. Your choice can be related to any of the four research projects or any other educational area as long as it is directed at issues related to Shea/community schools. You will create a comprehensive plan for a continuous improvement system. Your paper should address methodology, obstacles and/or barriers to implementation, identification of five benchmarks (minimum) and a communications plan. Students will identify the person(s)/group(s) that will be responsible for approving and implementing the policy or program and should also include a literature review of best practices.

This is an individual assignment due April 30 for teams 1-3 and by May 7<sup>th</sup> for team 4.

#### PARTICIPATION

This is an important requirement in this class. You are expected to be fully involved in all aspects of each team project. In addition, you should be actively involved in class discussions and interactive during presentations. Participation includes attending all classes, team meetings, submitting all work by the required deadlines and reading all materials assigned. Points will be deducted from any paper submitted after the deadline.

*The syllabus is subject to change*