

## SYRACUSE, NEW YORK

### Background

In June 1996, the Maxwell School of Citizenship and Public Affairs at Syracuse University formally established the Community Benchmarks Program (CBP) as part of the Alan K. Campbell Public Affairs Institute. It is jointly supported by the faculty, staff, and students of the Public Administration and Public Affairs programs.

The CBP was born out of an initial idea that can be traced back to the experiences of two program directors in the early 1990s: Astrid Merget, director of the graduate-level Public Administration program, and William Coplin, director of the undergraduate-level Public Affairs program. Both began working together and Coplin requested that a senior Ph.D. student be identified to teach an upper-level undergraduate course on benchmarking government performance. Merget worked in the field of benchmarking during her tenure in government, and as a result of such experience, a strong commitment was made to develop a course in benchmarking.

The two were further alerted to a Request for Proposal (RFP) from the Alfred P. Sloan Foundation in the fall of 1995, entitled, *Results-Oriented Assessment of the Performance of Government Agencies and Programs*. Sloan was looking for universities or non-profit organizations that would develop projects that provided assessment of government agencies and programs. Such projects “must involve and be intended primarily for the use of outside stakeholders who intend to use it to encourage change within the target agency or program.” A negotiation with Sloan resulted in a proposal entitled, *Request for*

*Funding to Develop Long-Term University-Based Support for Citizen Evaluation of Local Government Performance* in February 1996. This proposal called for benchmarking government performance with an emphasis on getting citizens involved in the process. Six specific government areas were initially identified in the proposal, which includes the following: (1) police, (2) fire, (3) sanitation, (4) streets, (5) park service, and (6) immunization. The reputation of the Maxwell School, and the innovative approach of creating an undergraduate practicum course as an integral part of the project, made it unique and appealing enough for Sloan to fund.

The mission of the CBP is to collect and disseminate information that describe community conditions, encourage citizen participation, foster civic discourse, and provide a basis whereby the public, private, and non-profit sectors can improve the quality of life within Onondaga County.

Onondaga County, on which the project was based, consists of nineteen towns, fifteen villages, and the City of Syracuse. The City is governed by a Mayor and a Common Council, while the Towns are governed by a Town Supervisor and a Town Board.

What follow are the results of a series of studies conducted by the CBP. Four studies were undertaken during an eighteen-month period. They are:

- I. 1996 Syracuse Criminal Offenses and Calls for Residential Areas
- II. 1995-97 Syracuse Fire Incidents and Alarms for Residential Areas

- III. 1997 Syracuse Physical Community Conditions for Residential Areas
- IV. 1997 Citizen Survey Comparing Syracuse Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today (TNT) Sectors

The geographical focus of the first study differs from the other four studies. The first study is a Citizen Survey conducted via telephone comparing the City of Syracuse to Dewitt and North Syracuse. This comparison was necessary to help provide a framework for assessing the overall perceptions of citizens in Syracuse. The remaining studies looked at the City as a whole, as well as the Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today (TNT) sectors. In addition, the three remaining studies also looked at the breakdown of statistics by census tract. Comparisons are made so that readers can view the overall performance of the City along with the performance in the TNT sectors, and, where possible, census tracts. Variations of performance throughout the City were key in developing a benchmarking process, as it assumed that there should be as little variation as possible among different neighborhoods in the City.

The data presented in all studies establish a baseline for future studies and a framework for improving government services and societal conditions within the City.

### **What were the start-up costs?**

The Alfred P. Sloan Foundation awarded the Maxwell School a three-year grant totaling \$579,000. During this period, the benchmarking criteria were revised to assess local government performance in the following five areas:

- Crime Control
- Fire Protection
- Parks: Safety and Maintenance
- Solid Waste Collection
- Street Condition: Maintenance and Snow Removal

### **What is the citizen perception of local government?**

It is difficult to discern whether the responses of the citizens during the initial contact reflected their true perceptions of local government. What became apparent during this exercise was that most of the measures selected by the researchers were of little interest to the citizens. Regarding six predetermined measures, interest was expressed in only police services.

Another ambiguity lies in the results of the initial Citizen Survey. They proved disappointing from the perspective of the project's goals. Results indicated high levels of satisfaction in the five, government service areas and extremely small variations across different geographical areas. The positive results were viewed by the Mayor's Office as evidence of success, while critics saw them as a whitewash. To the project staff, however,

the results indicated that little was done to measure anything that could serve as a catalyst to improve government performance, either directly, or through pressure by stakeholders. The results appeared to represent a lack of any real knowledge of government services by citizens.

This initial survey, however, did yield some interesting results in the five performance indicators selected, with respect to the questions of what local residents think of their government. The results were largely positive, although there were variations of opinion among the three municipalities polled. First, Syracuse citizens expressed a lower level of satisfaction than their counterparts in the other two municipalities. Second, in almost every instance in North Syracuse residents expressed a higher level of satisfaction than those of Dewitt. Third, for all three municipalities, fire protection and waste collection received the most positive ratings, while crime control and park safety and maintenance received the least positive ratings. Fourth, Syracuse residents felt more concerned about personal property and safety, and thought crime was more of a serious problem than either North Syracuse or Dewitt residents. Finally, Syracuse residents considered fires to be a more serious problem when compared to residents of North Syracuse and Dewitt.

### **Why was a particular service chosen for study?**

The initial plan for the Sloan project was built around the general idea of collecting and publishing benchmarks for police, fire, sanitation, streets, parks and, immunization services for the City of Syracuse and two towns in Onondaga County. However, this basic model was not followed except for an undergraduate course that was developed

and subsequently offered each semester. Although the initial goals and objectives of the proposal have been pursued, the learning curve has been much longer than expected, and the need to develop a more flexible and hybrid approach has become apparent.

The project underwent a major transformation between the summer of 1996 and the fall of 1997. The necessity of this transformation was confirmed when citizens and knowledgeable people in the community were contacted. Not only did it become apparent that the original six measures were not likely to be understood, but also most were of little interest to the populace. In fact, only the area of police services was of interest to them. Education and vacant lots (taken as a surrogate for economic development) were of much greater concern to both the public and community leaders.

It was concluded that, first of all the public should be involved in the study. As a consequence, a major research effort was made to survey public attitudes toward government services in five of the six areas. It was later decided to drop the sixth service area, immunization, since it was a countywide program that could not provide a basis for any comparisons between sub-units within the county. A research instrument was created, and, in 1996, a telephone survey of respondents was conducted in the City of Syracuse, the Village of North Syracuse, and the Town of Dewitt. Census tract locations where respondents resided were verified in order to provide comparisons between sections of the City, as well as with North Syracuse and Dewitt.

It was also suggested by the director of the mayoral initiative, Tomorrow's Neighborhoods Today (TNT), that there may have been opportunities for collaboration. This program divided the City into eight geographic sectors, each with neighborhood teams that would eventually offer recommendations on budget and planning services. These groups became the primary recipients of information from the survey and subsequent research.

**What indicators were used as measures of performance or to determine outcomes?**

As aforementioned, the project's goals were revised from addressing performance in six to only five areas of local government. These were: Crime Control, Fire Protection, Parks: Safety and Maintenance, Solid Waste Collection, and Street Condition: Maintenance and Snow Removal. Additionally, three types of indicators were used in subsequent reports to categorize collected data.

The *background indicators* provide socioeconomic information pertaining to each of the twenty municipalities. They should be considered when determining the appropriate level of performance for each governing body. Data for these indicators were taken from the U.S. Bureau of Census. The total number of background indicators was twelve. The second, *qualitative indicators* identify the exemplars municipal officials should strive to meet. Each indicator establishes a clear level or type of performance for local municipalities. For the purpose of this study, qualitative indicators were confined to types of goal-related activities, and are used as a tool to improve performance. Two examples are the use of customer surveys and clearly written guidelines that are readily

available to the public. Data for these indicators came from the municipal surveys. The total number of qualitative indicators was nineteen. Finally, *quantitative indicators* offer information on the amount and type of activity in addition to the resources required to support an activity. Citizens and officials in each municipality, can use the information to compare, over time, their respective municipalities' historic records, or to contrast their municipalities, with others. All but two indicators emanate from the municipal survey. The two indicators are: (1) assessment error/coefficient of dispersion and (2) assessor certification. Data for these indicators were provided by the New York State Division of Real Property Services. The total number of indicators in this area is also nineteen.

Since this was a demonstration project, it was not feasible to study all 35 sub-units of the County. The villages were not examined. After presenting basic demographic information, the report on which this study is based presents individual demonstration studies in the areas of *responsiveness to CBP requests for information* and *local property assessment*. The studies demonstrate the use of benchmarking through a presentation of qualitative and quantitative indicators and overall municipal grades. These two areas were chosen as demonstration studies because the comprehensive set of indicators were developed for each, and reliable data were collected. Municipal comparisons were then provided in the areas of: (1) clerk, (2) code enforcement, (3) financial management, (4) highways/streets, and (5) parks and recreation. These selected indicators for each of the five areas further serve as a framework to devise a more comprehensive list of measures.



### **What process (es) was initiated?**

The project's initial goal was revised to produce an annual report that would compare government performance in the five areas and publish them after the first year.

Following a June 1997 meeting convened by Sloan, it was decided to explore a variety of strategies to develop an approach that would use benchmarks to improve government services in a way that was comprehensible and supported by stakeholders. Customer surveys were used for select areas. The goal of using benchmarking for community problem-solving as the focal point of the project was postponed in order to concentrate on improving government performance. A dual approach was adopted by working with government officials in a total quality management framework, while involving the media and the public in certain instances as a way to pressure government for better performance. Data on benchmarks were collected for all of the towns in the county.

Given these changes, six activities were developed for 1997-98:

1. A direct observation study of streets and neighborhoods in the City of Syracuse
2. A compilation of data on police and fire operations in the City
3. A one-day series of events featuring David Ammons, including a seminar for government officials, as well as a presentation to the media and a civic organization
4. Attempts to work with a small neighborhood group
5. A benchmarking study of town governments throughout the county, pilot-tested with a volunteer municipality

6. As part of a project, the benchmarking concepts were introduced to a local high school in an effort to determine education measures

CBP was approached by Salina Town Councilwoman, Kathleen Rapp, to introduce the concept of benchmarking government services in Salina. The Salina project was used as a pilot study for the countywide effort. Focus group discussions were conducted with the municipality's elected and appointed officials. This effort resulted in the development of questionnaires for each of the following six departments:

- Assessment
- Code Enforcement
- Clerk
- Finance
- Highways/Streets
- Parks and Recreation

The questionnaires were mailed to the Salina Town Supervisors who, in turn, distributed them to the six department heads. The results of this pilot study enabled the CBP staff to refine the survey instruments for use countywide.

A preliminary report was presented to Salina. However, officials were cautioned that, without the inclusion of data longitudinally, and, in many instances, without comparative information, the pilot was of little value for use in making management decisions. The

report was, thus, the first step towards developing a process that would produce comparative data across municipalities.

Surveys were mailed to six departments of the Mayor of Syracuse and the nineteen Town Supervisors. Each municipal leader was, in turn, asked to distribute the surveys to the respective department heads and return the completed questionnaires to the CBP by a given date. Considerable time was spent by the CBP staff in making follow-up telephone and in calls re-faxing and/or re-mailing the surveys when they were not returned or were rendered incomplete. The survey responses rate varied. That is, the Salina Town Clerk returned its survey quickly, while others were returned either very late or not at all.

The collected data represent a partial picture of the government services studied. Its purpose was to begin the processes through which government officials and citizens could improve government services. Service improvement might require more specific data collection, which the project team could perform at another time or government officials might undertake with their counterparts in other municipalities. In addition, information was collected on each municipality. No attempt was made to look at different geographical segments within the towns. This is a serious limitation. However, a study of census tracts within the City of Syracuse has already been published by the CBP.

Although the information that the CBP attempted to collect was fairly basic, the staff was still unable to obtain 100% of the data for all twenty municipalities. Data were frequently

not available for the three years of this project. Some municipalities could not supply the existing data or refused to do so.

**Who have been involved in initiating, developing, and using performance measurement?**

For the initial Citizens' Survey, a total of 781 residents in three municipalities were surveyed. Telephone interviewers were undergraduate students enrolled in the practicum course; *Community Benchmarks*. Knowledge Systems and Research, Inc. developed the questionnaire.

A total of twenty municipalities were surveyed, representing 116 departments; (four municipalities do not have parks and/or recreation departments). As of April 20, 1998, the survey response rate was 97%, meaning that surveys were returned by 112 of the 116 departments. However, only 64% of the 112 departments filled out the surveys completely.

The CBP staff conducted an extensive literature review of performance measures in order to create the indicators presented in this study. In addition, the staff attended seminars, contacted those municipal professionals and organizations considered to be the best exemplars in the area of benchmarking, and consulted with David Ammons, a nationally recognized author and expert in the field of government benchmarking.

In October, 1997, the CBP sponsored a workshop featuring David Ammons, and extended invitations to more than 300 elected and appointed officials in Onondaga County. Over seventy officials, representing fifteen governing bodies and thirty different departments, participated in the free workshop led by Ammons.

Following the workshop, the CBP, as previously noted, was approached by Salina Town Councilwoman, Kathleen Rapp. This introduction led to the use of the Salina survey as a pilot for subsequent research regarding other municipalities within the County. The Mayor and nineteen Town Supervisors were involved in the survey process. In some situations, CBP requested additional information, as it became apparent that most municipalities could not provide the data in the format requested.

Pages of the draft report, based on the data provided by the municipalities, were returned to each municipal supervisor and the Mayor. Municipal leaders were asked to review the information and forward the appropriate pages to the respective department heads. Municipal officials were encouraged to call or fax changes to the CBP staff within two weeks if errors were discovered. In order to ensure that each municipal and department head had adequate time to review the materials, CBP staff contacted every municipal office to determine whether the Town Supervisor/Mayor would be in the office the week the draft would arrive, and whether the draft pages should be mailed to the Supervisor's office or home. In those cases where the Supervisor was to be absent during the week of the prepared draft, two copies of the draft were mailed so that department heads would not have to wait for the Supervisor to return in order to review the information.

In select instances, respondents made suggestions, corrected inaccurate data, and revised questions. This, in some ways, was the most productive period of the study. A window of opportunity enabled CBP to explain the rationale for the study, why there was support for some recommendations proposed (i.e., surveys), and what was the objective for the future. CBP received what they considered to be excellent feedback during this period, as well as offers of expert support for the future.

**What obstacles were encountered throughout the process?**

**What were the lessons learned?**

The first disappointment encountered, as already mentioned, had to do with the results of the Citizens' Survey, which indicated high levels of satisfaction in the five government service areas and extremely small variations across different geographical areas. While these results were viewed positively by the Mayor's office, critics believed it to be a whitewash. To CBP, the results were an indication that little had been done to measure that which could have served as a catalyst to improve government performance, either directly or through the pressure of stakeholders. It appeared to represent a lack of any real knowledge of government services by citizens.

Other difficulties during the study, proved to be lessons learned for the future.

First, CBP learned that relating community perceptions through general public surveys on performance measures is difficult, if not impossible. It makes little sense to ask people how government is doing in the five general areas, as most people do not directly use, for example, fire and police services. Even those services citizens use regularly, such as

garbage collection, the public is unlikely to have a viewpoint regarding such services. The conclusion is that there is a role for citizen surveys, but only with respect to individuals who are direct clients of specific services. This could include applicants for zoning permits, or individuals who have called their police or fire departments for service. It seemed as though the focus group discussions, similar to those conducted by the Fund for the City of New York, also a Sloan Foundation recipient, is a viable approach. It is one, however, that CBP had chosen not to follow given resource constraints.

Second, technical government performance measures developed and used over the past few decades are valuable but seldom used by stakeholders. Police clearance rates and even crime rates of a given area, which should be of general interest to the public, often require extensive definition, elaboration and qualification. This limits their value to the public when used as a means of improving government performance. The NYPIRG Straphangers campaign was able to demonstrate that limited and specific measures can be used by groups with a vested interest to pressure government for better performance. CBP might be able to develop a campaign, but it does not have the grassroots capacity or the position in the community to lobby on behalf of stakeholders for better government services.

Third, the tension between improving government performance and improving community conditions became apparent. The initial motivation for the CBP project was to measure community conditions in order that all three sectors – public, private, and non-profit – could work together as problem-solvers. Yet, the Sloan Foundation was

more interested in measuring government performance. CBP then had to decouple the two. Their primary focus was to identify ways to improve government performance in accordance with Sloan's interests, but it was also important for the project to establish a strong base for action. This made the goal of involving stakeholders more difficult, as community conditions are more familiar than government performance measures.

Finally, the inherent conflict between the rating game approach and the Total Quality Management (TQM) approach must be addressed. The former relies on publicity about how a government agency compares to other agencies over time. This assumes government agencies/municipalities will improve because the element of competition is introduced. The TQM approach requires government officials to continuously improve in the direction identified by the benchmarks. The latter approach appears to be successfully employed by David Ammons. It makes a great deal of sense, assuming that local government officials have the inclination and resources to participate responsibly in such an approach.

Taken together then, these four conclusions required CBP to step back from their initial idea of producing an annual report that would compare government performance in the five areas. A general survey could not be used along with many of the traditional government performance measures suggested by the literature if the goal was to empower citizens.

**Has the community recognized any immediate benefits?**



### **What were determined to be the long-term benefits?**

As a direct result of the series of workshops conducted by author and consultant, David Ammons, several elected officials made inquiries about working with the CBP project in order to use benchmarks as a means of improving their government services. This gave impetus to our efforts during the 1997-98 academic year to develop a series of benchmarks on key government areas, and to gather data with respect to the nineteen towns and the City of Syracuse. One town Councilperson organized a meeting with the entire Town Board and department heads to develop a series of benchmarks used to measure performance regarding the highway, parks and recreation, and assessment and code enforcement departments. Standards are also being established for the offices of the Town justices and the clerk. The outcome of this collaboration is the January 1998 *Benchmarks Report for the Town of Salina*. The Salina study was, in turn, used as a pilot for *Measuring City and Town Services in Onondaga County*.

During the summer of 1997, the suburban Jamesville-Dewitt High School agreed to initiate a pilot study in which outstanding seniors formed teams to conduct focus group discussions, and develop a research design to benchmark the performance of the high school. William Coplin, the director of the undergraduate Public Affairs program at Syracuse University, approached the school superintendent with the idea, even if earlier attempts to work with another school had not materialized. Although only minimal resources had been allocated to the task, the students completed an excellent job, producing a report that can be marketed to other districts and organizations interested in educational issues. Coinciding with the release of the report, the high school principal

and some of the students leading this project will make a presentation at Thursday Morning Roundtable, a prestigious civic organization with a membership of over 200 people. This forum normally attracts considerable media coverage.

Progress by the CBP towards the general goal of improving local government performance through a university-based research program is on target. The exploration of a variety of formats has helped determine where the greatest impact can be made in a project reliant upon undergraduate students to collect and analyze data. CBP has since moved to a formula for the course that will lend itself to permanence once funding ends. The evolution of this course from a traditional approach of lectures and readings to one in which students participate in an in-house internship through group projects will increase the feasibility of institutionalizing the course.

**What one thing should be recommended to a community that is considering this process?**

**If given the opportunity to conduct a similar study, what one thing could be accomplished differently?**

While no specific recommendations were made, it is evident that CBP's review of the literature was not only extensive, but also they have tailored previous research to coincide with the methodologies employed. They have also recognized that success in one municipality may not mean success in others. Furthermore, given the obstacles encountered in this project, the lessons learned are likely to be marked for the benefit of future projects.

