

"YOU NEVER STOP LEARNING":  
INFORMAL AND INCIDENTAL WORKPLACE LEARNING AND  
WOMEN CITY MANAGERS' CAREER DEVELOPMENT

by

ILKA MARTA MCCONNELL

(Under the Direction of JANETTE R. HILL)

ABSTRACT

The face of city management in the United States is overwhelmingly male. Research suggests two key, interrelated barriers to the career development of women executives like city managers: (1) the process of learning organizational culture and (2) a lack of access to informal networks. This is especially true for the complex environment of city management. This qualitative study used critical incident technique to identify and explore informal and incidental learning experiences that current women city managers in the southern United States with five or more years experience attribute as helping them develop their careers, navigate organizational culture, and achieve their city management positions. Research questions guiding this study were: (1) What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career? (2) How do women city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy), politics (elected officials), and the public? (3) What are some of the barriers faced by women city managers to succeeding in city management?

Data analysis yielded two conclusions: (1) Social and experiential learning is central to women city manager's informal and incidental learning and career development. Their learning is dialectically shaped by the multiple social contexts of city management, which create a rich, complex learning environment, and (2) women city managers understand and value the continual learning required by their position, and tenaciously seek learning opportunities as a strategy to develop their careers and overcome barriers.

This study builds upon representative bureaucracy and gender discourse in public administration by using the lens of organizational learning to provide understanding of how individual women city managers learn their way through career development. Findings provide support to Watkins, Marsick, and Fernández de Álava's (forthcoming) update of social context as distinct from the larger element of context, refining the Marsick et al. (2006) model of informal and incidental workplace learning. I propose multiple social contexts to further enhance the Watkins et al. (forthcoming) model, reflecting the administrative, political, and public social contexts in which women city managers learn and navigate.

INDEX WORDS: City Management, Women, Informal Learning, Workplace Learning, Social Learning, Career Development, Organizational Culture

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DEDICATION

Learning the Trees

(Howard Nemerov)

Before you can learn the trees, you have to learn  
The language of the trees. That's done indoors,  
Out of a book, which now you think of it  
Is one of the transformations of a tree.

The words themselves are a delight to learn,  
You might be in a foreign land of terms  
Like samara, capsule, drupe, legume and pome,  
Where bark is papery, plated, warty or smooth.

But best of all are the words that shape the leaves—  
Orbicular, cordate, cleft and reniform—  
And their venation—palmate and parallel—  
And tips—acute, truncate, auriculate.

Sufficiently provided, you may now  
Go forth to the forests and the shady streets

To see how the chaos of experience  
Answers to catalogue and category.

Confusedly. The leaves of a single tree  
May differ among themselves more than they do  
From other species, so you have to find,  
All blandly says the book, “an average leaf.”

Example, the catalpa in the book  
Sprays out its leaves in whorls of three  
Around the stem; the one in front of you  
But rarely does, or somewhat, or almost;

Maybe it's not catalpa? Dreadful doubt.

It may be weeks before you see an elm  
Fanlike in form, a spruce that pyramids,  
A sweetgum spiring up in steeple shape.

Still, *pedetentim* as Lucretius says,

Little by little, you do start to learn;  
And learn as well, maybe, what language does  
And how it does it, cutting across the world

Not always at the joints, competing with  
Experience while cooperating with  
Experience, and keeping an obstinate  
Intransigence, uncanny, of its own.

Think finally about the secret will  
Pretending obedience to Nature, but  
Invidiously distinguishing everywhere,  
Dividing up the world to conquer it,

And think also how funny knowledge is:  
You may succeed in learning many trees  
And calling off their names as you go by,  
But their comprehensive silence stays the same.

*(The Collected Poems of Howard Nemerov, 1977, University of Chicago Press)*

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"No matter what accomplishments you make, somebody helped you."

(Althea Gibson)

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## **CHAPTER 1**

### **INTRODUCTION**

The profession of city management resembles an “Old Boy’s Network,” the embodiment of many of the barriers women face in the process of learning organizational culture. Rand and Bierema (2009) characterize Old Boy’s Networks as “informal, invisible...exclusive club[s] that affords inside information, facilitates advancement, and provides social and support networks to its members” (p. 2). They observe that membership is automatic for Caucasian, white collar males. Like an Old Boy’s Network, city management is predominantly male. The 2009 ICMA State of the Profession Survey indicated that of 2,000 United States city manager survey respondents, only 402, or 20.1%, were female. While this percentage has slowly grown from 1% of ICMA survey respondents in 1974, women remain grossly underrepresented in the profession.

A city manager is an appointed administrator who serves as chief administrative officer, directing staff and managing the functions and daily services that make a city operate. These municipal services include providing police services, supplying water and utilities, collecting the trash, offering parks and recreation programs, and maintaining roads and other public facilities in the community. The city manager is hired by and reports to an elected City Council and Mayor, and assists them in developing and implementing policy.

Watson and Hassett (2003, 2004) report that city managers who serve long tenures and who work in larger cities are overwhelmingly white, college-educated males. Their research sketches a profile of long-serving city managers who have served more than twenty years in the same city: a white male with at least a bachelor’s degree who has served for most of his career in

a municipality with fewer than 30,000 residents, located in the state where he grew up (Watson & Hassett, 2003). The typical city manager serving in a large city with a population of over 100,000 is a white male with a master's degree or higher who has been promoted from within the same city government (Watson & Hassett, 2004). Furthermore, within the municipal workforce, "the character of gender segregation among municipal-level administrative and professional workforces tends to pack women into redistributive agencies," which deal with health and public welfare (Miller, Kerr, & Reid, 1999, p. 226).

City governments lag behind state and federal agencies in female representation at executive levels of leadership. At the state government level, research by Bowling, Kelleher, Jones, and Wright (2006) on national trends of gender representation among state agency executives evidences that 26% of state agencies are led by women. Female representation among federal government executives has continued to increase over the past twenty years. A 1992 study by the U.S. Merit System Protection Board (MSPB) reported that only 12% of federal Senior Executive Service positions were held by women, while a May 2011 study by the agency updated the percentage to 30%.

The organizational culture in which city managers work is very political (Watson & Watson, 2006). City managers are hired and fired at the will of elected officials. The role of the city manager is not purely administrative due to the manager's influential role in the policy process and participation in providing information and guidance to elected officials (Newell & Ammons, 1987; Fox & Schuhmann, 1999). Coyle-McCabe, Feiock, Clingermeier, and Stream (2008) note: "City managers were once viewed as neutral technicians with limited roles in the policy-making process, but scholars increasingly came to appreciate that, for managers, the separation between politics and administration often was more symbolic than factual" (p. 380).

This increasingly complex role creates a need for female city managers to be adept at the process of learning culture. Reaching and navigating the top levels of organizational leadership requires a nuanced understanding of the culture of an organization. Bierema (1999) observes: “both men and women have the challenge of learning organizational culture, but women have the distinct disadvantage of neither creating nor controlling it” (p. 108). The highly political culture of city management is evidenced by the average tenure of city managers, which is 6.9 years (Renner, 2001). Coyle McCabe et al. (2008) examined context-related push and pull factors that account for city manager turnover. Their research found that the likelihood of involuntary turnover increased in response to substantial change on a city council and short-term economic decline in the community.

What are some of the barriers for women in the process of learning and adapting to organizational culture? Understanding the political culture of the organization and what is going on politically between key executives is cited by women private sector executives as a factor that holds women back (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998). Women working in the Australian public sector cited gender as an impediment that impacted their careers, including their decision to not allow work to interfere with parenting responsibilities, subtle gender bias that was not addressed by managers, and working in a male-oriented department or function (McMahon, Limerick, Cranston, & Andersen, 2006). Another challenge in the process of learning culture is that women executives must adapt to male culture, including learning male managerial customs and rituals and shifting their own behaviors to create a level of comfort for male colleagues (Ragins et al., 1998; Rand & Bierema, 2009).

Due to the dearth of women city managers in the United States, women’s experiences are not adequately represented in research on city managers. The current body of literature on city

managers is based on quantitative data collected from overwhelmingly male respondents. The voices of female city managers are also missing from the literature related to executive women's career development and informal workplace learning because research efforts to date have focused almost exclusively on women in the private sector. This qualitative study will begin to fill these gaps in the research by exploring and documenting the informal and incidental learning experiences of female city managers in their journeys to becoming city managers.

### **Statement of the Problem**

The face of city management in the United States is overwhelmingly male. A city manager is an appointed administrator who serves as the chief executive officer, overseeing the functions and daily services that make a city operate. The city manager is hired by and reports to an elected City Council and Mayor, and assists them in developing and implementing policy. Only 20.1 % of the city managers responding to the 2009 ICMA State of the Profession Survey were female. While this percentage has slowly increased over the past several decades, women remain grossly underrepresented in municipal management.

Research suggests that two key barriers to the career development of women executives such as city managers are the process of learning organizational culture and a lack of access to informal networks. This is especially true for the complex and political environment of city management because city managers must learn the culture of both the administrative organization and the political organization of elected city officials. For city managers, developing networks is not only important to career development, but also necessary to fulfill their complex role in communicating information, coordinating efforts, and building partnerships with elected officials, staff, constituents, community partners, local groups, and the media. Based on their review of the research, Marsick and Watkins (1990) summarized informal learning as

intentional, initiated in response to a stimulus, part of daily routines, frequently haphazard or impacted by chance, linked to learning undertaken by others, not highly conscious, and shaped inductively through an ongoing process of reflection and action. Examples of informal learning in the workplace include mentoring, networking, coaching, unlearning, incidental learning, self-directed learning, and collective learning.

Much of the research related to executive women's career development has focused on women in the private sector. Existing research on city managers includes data collected from predominantly male participants and is largely quantitative rather than qualitative. Little appears to be known about the informal learning experiences that contribute to the career development of female city managers. An understanding of how successful female city managers have overcome barriers and developed their careers can help inform efforts to support women in entering and succeeding in the profession of city management in the United States.

### **Purpose of the Study**

The purpose of this study is to identify and explore the informal and incidental learning experiences that current female city managers in the Southeastern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management. The research questions guiding this exploratory qualitative study include:

1. What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that female city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career?
2. How do female city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy) and politics (elected officials)?
3. What are some of the barriers faced by female city managers to succeeding in city management?

### **Significance of the Study**

The underrepresentation of women in city management is a crucial human resource development issue, especially as demographics in the southern United States are shifting towards greater diversity, Baby Boomer male city managers are beginning to retire from city management, and women outpace men in completion of graduate degrees, creating a larger pool than ever of highly qualified women to serve in public sector executive roles. Beaty and Davis (2012) found that since the mid-1990s, women have earned over half of all the masters of public administration degrees granted by National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA)-accredited programs. The lack of female city managers is also an issue of representative bureaucracy, a concept outlined by Mosher (1968), which looks at not only the extent to which the demographic make-up of public sector employees reflects the

demographics of the public constituency being served (passive representation), but also how public sector employees represent and advocate for the interests of the various constituencies that they represent (active representation). Research indicates a positive relationship between passive and active representation of women (Keiser, Wilkins, Meier, & Holland, 2002). As women enter the culture of city government, their presence may facilitate entry by other women. Women mayors have a strong impact on gains in representation for women in non-clerical and municipal professional/administrative employment (Saltzstein, 1986). Fox and Schuhmann (2000) found that women city managers are more likely to work in political environments with greater numbers of women city council members than are male city managers.

Given the challenges for women in the process of learning organizational culture and advancing to the top levels of organizations, this study will document key informal and incidental learning events and experiences identified by female city managers as critical to their career development. It will also explore how female city managers learn the complex administrative and political organizational cultures within the workplace. The information collected from this study can be used to raise awareness of barriers and to identify ways to support women working in city government to develop their careers and networks. While this study specifically focuses on women in local municipal management, the concepts and literature of organizational learning are also applicable and relevant to women's career development at state and federal levels.

## **CHAPTER 2**

### **REVIEW OF THE LITERATURE**

This chapter will review the academic literature relevant to this study. The purpose of this study is to identify and explore the informal and incidental learning experiences that current female city managers in the Southeastern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management. The research questions guiding this exploratory qualitative study include:

1. What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that female city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career?
2. How do female city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy), politics (elected officials), and the public (citizens and the media)?
3. What are some of the barriers faced by female city managers to succeeding in city management?

The first section will outline the profession of city management and the lack of women's voices in existing research on city managers. The next section will describe and review relevant theories of informal and incidental learning. The third section will examine women and workplace learning, including the process of learning organizational culture, executive women and career development, and examples of informal learning interventions often proposed as methods to help women advance.

Literature was identified via online academic database searches of Education Research Complete (9 results), ERIC (117 results), Political Science Complete (9 results), PsycInfo (93 results), Public Administration Abstracts (4 results), and Public Affairs Index (6 results). Google Scholar was also utilized. Multiple databases and a variety of descriptors were employed because of the paucity of literature directly addressing the topic. Descriptors used in Boolean combination searches included informal learning, incidental learning, city government, city manager, women, public sector, top-level managers, career development, and learning. Roughly 238 results from the academic database searches noted above were examined for relevance to the topic. Several hundred more results from Google Scholar were assessed for relevance. The searches identified a variety of sources, including journal articles, conference papers, books, book chapters, unpublished dissertations, working papers, government reports, and online documents. Other relevant literature was identified from reference lists and recommendations from colleagues, fellow graduate students, and faculty.

An understanding of how women city managers overcome barriers, learn organizational culture, and build their careers through informal and incidental learning can help inform efforts to support women in entering and succeeding in city management. A goal of this dissertation study is to provide a new language and literature, that of organizational learning, to the dialogue within public administration to further our understanding of executive women's career development in the public sector. The lens of organizational learning has the potential to move the field towards identifying specific actions to better support women's learning and advancement.

## **Review of Informal and Incidental Learning Literature**

A common visual image of workplace learning is the dreaded professional development day-long classroom training session, depicted and mocked in popular media such as Dilbert cartoons and the sitcom “The Office.” In reality, the vast majority of the learning that occurs in the workplace is informal or incidental, rather than formal. A large-scale, multi-method qualitative study by the Center for Workforce Development (1998) involving 1,000 employees of seven organizations reported: “We observed informal learning to be ubiquitous. It was present in all observed workplace environments, emerging in day-to-day production environments” (p. 178). Several scholars (Center for Workforce Development, 1998; Livingstone, 2001; Marsick & Watkins, 1990) have reported on research suggesting that between 70 to 90 percent of workplace learning is informal.

Informal learning is defined by Marsick and Watkins (1990): “Informal learning, a category that includes incidental learning, may occur in institutions, but it is not typically classroom-based or highly structured, and control of learning rests primarily in the hands of the learner” (p.12). Based on their review of the research, Marsick and Watkins (1990) summarize informal learning as intentional, initiated in response to a stimulus, part of daily routines, frequently haphazard or impacted by chance, linked to learning undertaken by others, not highly conscious, shaped inductively through an ongoing process of reflection and action. Informal learning can, and often does, occur simultaneously with formal learning (Center for Workforce Development, 1998). Examples of informal learning include mentoring, networking, coaching, unlearning something, self-directed learning, and collective learning.

Schugurensky (2000) posits three forms of informal learning: self-directed learning, incidental learning, and tacit learning, or socialization. Other scholars make a distinction

between informal learning guided by teachers or mentors, individual self-directed learning, and the collective learning of groups (Livingstone, 2001). The “embedded nature” of informal learning in adults’ daily activities makes it difficult to recognize as learning (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 35). This embeddedness can make informal learning a challenge to study because researchers “have to engage in an initial orienting process precisely because most people do not recognize much of the informal learning they do until they have a chance to reflect upon it” (Livingstone, 2001, p. 23). Informal learning is ongoing throughout our lives as we interact with others and our environment.

Incidental learning is a form of informal learning that is an unintentional byproduct of a different activity like accomplishing a task, interacting with others, developing an understanding of organizational culture, experimenting through trial-and-error, or formal learning (Marsick & Watkins, 1990). Often unconscious, incidental learning often occurs by chance without the learner realizing it, although it can later be explored (Marsick & Watkins, 2001). Callahan (1999) highlights the role of reflection and self-awareness in helping learners apply incidental learning to future problem-solving. Learning from a mistake, discovery through trial-and-error, adapting to change, trouble-shooting, and discerning the subtext of a policy are all examples of incidental learning. Table 1 shows some of the informal and incidental learning literature relevant to this study.

Table 1

*Select Informal and Incidental Learning Research Cited in This Dissertation*

<b>Citation</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>Design &amp; Method</b>
Callahan, 1999	Reflection and self-awareness are key to a learner making use of incidental learning for future problem-solving	Qualitative
Center for Workforce Development, 1998	Primary drive for workplace informal learning is to meet organizational and individual goals. The main setting for informal workplace learning is organized work activities. Contextual factors influence the overall frequency and quality of workplace learning	Qualitative; multi-method
Livingstone, 2001	Review of informal learning literature, analysis of knowledge gaps, and suggestions for future research	Literature review
Marsick & Watkins, 1990	Overview of informal and incidental and presents model of informal and incidental learning	Conceptual article
Marsick, Watkins, Callahan & Volpe, 2006).	Update to model of informal and incidental learning	Conceptual article
Schugurensky, 2000	Uses categories of intentionality and awareness to proposes taxonomy of 3 forms of informal learning: self-directed, incidental, and socialization (or tacit learning)	Conceptual article
Straka, 2004	Critique of informal learning as a concept that lacks systematic and empirical evidence of why, where, when, how, and what is learned informally	Critical analysis

**Theories Underlying the City Management Context of Informal and Incidental Learning**

There are several theories related to informal learning and the context of city management that are relevant to my study. These theories are self-directed learning, situated cognition, feminist theory, social learning, and the model of informal and incidental learning initially developed by Marsick and Watkins (1990) that has since gone through several revisions

(Marsick, Volpe & Watkins, 1999; Marsick, Watkins, Callahan & Volpe, 2006). This section will explore each of the approaches, including their underlying roots in adult learning theory, and compare and contrast them.

**Self-Directed learning.** Scholars concur that self-directed learning is one of the best-developed, most visible bodies of research in informal learning and in adult education (Merriam & Brockett, 2007; Merriam, Caffarella & Baumgartner, 2007; Livingstone, 2001). Self-directed informal learning “is most simply understood as learning that is undertaken on the learner or learners’ own terms without either prescribed curricular requirements or a designated instructor” (Livingstone, 2001, p. 3). Self-directed learning is grounded in one of Knowles’ (1970) original assumptions of andragogy, which asserts that as a person matures, their conception of self shifts from dependency to increasing self-directedness.

Knowles described self-directed learning as an ongoing process of identifying learning needs, locating resources for learning, selecting learning strategies, and assessing learning outcomes. Tough’s (1971) foundational work in this area proposed an initial description of what he called self-planned learning, which he characterized as highly deliberate and widespread among adults. His findings, which have since been supported by multiple studies, indicated that more than two-thirds of learning projects are planned, carried out, and evaluated by learners themselves. Caffarella and Merriam (2000) note that Knowles and Tough originally formulated the process of self-directed learning as linear, but that as theory has been developed, the process is now conceptualized as “much more of a trial-and-error activity, with many loops and curves,” and that the importance of context has also been increasingly recognized (p. 57). Reflection is a core component of self-directedness.

Garrison (1997) suggests that one of the gaps in self-directed learning theory is a means to integrate both the individual cognitive and social aspects of the approach. He identifies a need for a comprehensive model of self-directed learning and proposes one that incorporates contextual (self-management), cognitive (self-monitoring), and conative (motivational) dimensions. Self-management refers to the “social and behavioral implementation of learning intentions” (p. 22). The process through which a learner takes responsibility for constructing their own meaning and reflecting upon their learning is self-monitoring, which reflects both a cognitive and constructivist approach. Motivation includes both the interest in entering a learning process and the persistency to continue the process.

Self-directed learning is intentional and can be either formal or informal. Its philosophical orientation is humanism, which emphasizes learning as a process of self-actualization (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007). It can include “intentional job specific and general employment-related learning down on your own, collective learning with colleagues of other employment-related knowledge and skills, and tacit learning by doing” (Livingstone, 2001, p. 3). This definition evidences the diversity of informal learning activities that can be classified as self-directed learning. Livingstone (2001) observes that the distinction between self-directed learning and informal learning can be difficult to make in certain contexts. This concern may not be unique, as Straka (2004) argues that a severe limitation of informal learning theory is ambiguity in definitions and criterion.

Ellinger (2004) reviews the literature and notes that while self-directed learning is a well-developed body of research, little had been done to examine its potential within the context of human resource development (HRD). As organizations work to become more efficient and they spend training resources strategically, Ellinger advocates self-directed learning as a method to

stretch training budgets and develop employees' feelings of self-determination. She also identifies a number of promising avenues for further research to extend existing knowledge of self-directed learning within the context of HRD. Some of the areas for future research relevant to this study are include how socio-cultural contextual factors such as gender, race, and class influence or impede self-directed learning, whether the self-directed learning process differs among various public versus private organizational settings, and how issues of power, control, and access to resources can influence self-directed learning.

**Situated cognition.** Situated cognition addresses one of the gaps in self-directed learning theory by emphasizing the connection between individual cognition and the social and contextual aspects of learning. From the perspective of situated cognition, the learning process is inextricable from the context or situation where the learning takes place. The context includes the physical and social experiences as well as the physical and conceptual tools used by learners, such as language, technology, equipment, concepts, and skills (Merriam et al., 2007).

Situated cognition is rooted in “the idea that what we know and the meanings we attach to what we know are socially constructed” (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 156). This perspective builds upon Dewey’s (1938) idea of experiential learning and self-directed learning by emphasizing the importance of interactions and relationships with other learners and using tools related to learning. It is considered a constructivist rather than a cognitive approach because it views learning as something that is constructed through participation and interaction within a specific context or situation rather than within the mind of an individual learner (Fenwick, 2000).

Two types of learning communities that model situated cognition are communities of practice and cognitive apprenticeships. Communities of practice will be described below in the section on social learning. Cognitive apprenticeships help learners become enculturated to the

social context and relationships within a field of practice through such phases or stages such as modeling, approximating, self-directed learning, and fading (Hansman, 2001). Brown, Collins, and Duguid (1988) argue that it is important for cognitive apprenticeships to take place within groups of practitioners because learning is a process of becoming accustomed to the culture of a group via social interaction, collective problem solving, understanding and attempting various roles, identifying and re-examining misperceptions or ways of doing things, and developing skills for collaboration.

Hansman (2001) reflects that “theories of context-based learning provide a powerful and egalitarian way of viewing knowledge production” (p. 49). However, Hansman and Wilson (2002) have also identified several ways they believe the field of adult education has not fully engaged with situated cognition. They observe that the field has continued to focus on individual cognitive processes, resulting in a view of context as simply a background stage upon which learning occurs rather than an integral part of the learning process. This relegates context to a static setting for learning rather than a dynamic and changing part of how knowledge is constructed. Several scholars have identified and taken issue with the lack of political analysis by adult educators to examine how the learning communities and relationships that are central to situated cognition may reinforce and reproduce existing structures of power, inequality, and hegemony (Fenwick, 2000; Hansman & Wilson, 2002; Niewolny & Wilson, 2006, 2009). Offering a review of situative perspectives, Fenwick (2000) suggests that approaching situated cognition from a critical cultural perspective can challenge its apolitical stance, examine the positionalities of individual learners within systems of relationships, and explore relationships of power and dominance.

Niewolny and Wilson (2006, 2009) also advocate looking at other theoretical approaches to reorient the field of adult education toward more holistic understandings of situated cognition. Their work is driven by the question of what “a (re)situated theory of cognition [would] look like if it actually incorporated a cultural view within relations of power” (2006, p.277). By reviewing the key insights of Lave’s (1988) cultural theory of practice and Vygotsky’s cultural-historical activity theory (CHAT), they attempt to illustrate the potential of situated cognition to analyze relations of power and privilege within contexts of learning.

Niewolny and Wilson (2006, 2009) argue that adult education has not fully considered Lave’s (1988) dialectical view of learning contexts. Lave argues that people learn within and from a specific context, which shapes and is shaped by social, political, and cultural structures. Lave draws on Bourdieu’s (1977) concept of cultural reproduction, which proposes that education and learning serve as a powerful means of enculturating learners into existing social, political, and cultural structures and hierarchies, thus contributing to the reproduction of those structures. Another influence on Lave’s work is Giddens’ (1979) theory of structuration, which asserts that human agency and social structures are interconnected and mutually influence and constrain one another. Vygotsky’s cultural historical activity theory is also highlighted by Niewolny and Wilson (2006, 2009). CHAT underscores the importance of human language and tools in mediating human activity within contexts shaped by social, cultural, and political systems. As Niewolny and Wilson (2009) explain: “The evolution of CHAT is essential to the field of adult education for providing ways to examine learning and cognition as recursive social and cultural processes, which necessarily moves the dialectical nature of human activity to the forefront (p. 39). Using the lenses of critical cultural perspective, cultural theory of practice, and cultural historical activity theory to better inform situated cognition is useful for this study

because of the complex social, cultural and political aspects of the contexts in which female city managers work with and interact in relationships with city employees, elected officials, and the public. A discussion of social learning theory is found in the next section.

**Social learning theory.** Marsick et al. (2009) note: “Informal/incidental learning at work is increasingly understood as socially situated and socially constructed” (p. 587). A third theory related to informal and incidental learning is social learning theory, which emphasizes the social nature of learning. Developed by Wenger (1998), social learning theory asserts that learning occurs in the ongoing interplay between our socially defined competence and our experience. Social learning theory is rooted in experiential learning and its philosophical orientation is constructivism, evidenced by its focus on practice and the active process of how knowledge is socially constructed.

One way social learning occurs is within communities of practice, groups of people united by common interest who make meaning through practice. Wenger (2000) proposes that participation in communities of practice serves to “define with each other what constitutes competence in a given context” (p. 229). The concept of communities of practice draws on situated cognition, which views the process of learning and the situation or context in which the learning occurs as inextricable (Merriam et al., 2007). Communities of practice are distinct from informal networks, which are more oriented towards maintaining social connections and sharing information based on mutual needs. However, members may become part of each other’s informal networks as they develop personal relationships over time. Bierema (2005) has suggested that informal networks are not always as beneficial to women’s career development as the discourse has suggested.

Wenger (2000) outlines three core modes of belonging that anchor social learning: engagement, imagination, and alignment. Engagement with others and the environment creates and maintains community. Imagination describes how learners construct images of themselves, others, the community, and their environment in order to orient themselves, reflect, and explore social engagement. Finally, alignment is a mutual social process of lining up perspectives, interpretations, and engagement for the greater social good. Marsick et al. (2006) incorporate these factors into their model of informal and incidental learning, positing that they enhance the model with “(1) an understanding of how valuing difference enriches social learning, (2) a deepened appreciation of the social context for learning, and (3) respect for the challenges involved in aligning viewpoints as meaning is negotiated within the social context” (p. 797).

Social learning theory is a potentially useful framework for this study because of the highly visible roles city managers play in communities and their need to develop professional competence within the social and political contexts of their work. Membership in communities of practice may be more beneficial to the career development of female city managers than networking alone because of the focus on mutually building specific areas of expertise, including developing implicit understandings that can help a female city manager navigate a highly gendered, political workplace.

**Watkins and Marsick model of informal and incidental learning.** Marsick and Watkins and colleagues have done much to develop our understanding of informal and incidental learning. They developed (Marsick & Watkins, 1990) and continue to revise (Marsick et al., 1999; Marsick et al., 2006) a theoretical framework of informal and incidental learning in the context of work that has guided inquiry over the past several decades. Their model “demonstrates how learning grows out of the workplace context, is triggered by something in

that context, proceeds through identifying and trying solutions, and is enhanced by critical reflection throughout the process” (Marsick et al., 2006, p. 794). Like situated cognition and social learning theory, the importance of context to learning is also emphasized. However, the Marsick et al. (2006) model focuses specifically on the workplace context while social learning theory approaches context more broadly.

This theoretical model of informal and incidental learning is rooted in Dewey’s (1938) theory of learning from experience. In this framework, learning occurs through experiences that exhibit two key principles, continuity and interaction. By continuity, Dewey explained: “every experience both takes up something from those which have gone before and modifies in some way the quality of those which come after” (p. 27). The principle of interaction underscores the importance of the experiential transaction that occurs between a person and the environment.

Dewey’s (1938) orientation to learning can be described as constructivist due to his interest in how individuals construct knowledge and make meaning of their experiences (Merriam et al., 2007). From Dewey’s (1938) perspective, learning from experience is an ongoing process of transaction between the learner and the environment, in which the learner can connect what they are learning in the present to both past experiences as well as future ones. The learning process is triggered when a mismatch occurs between an expected and an actual outcome and reflection and reframing of the issue is required to achieve the expected outcome. These principles are evident in the Marsick et al. (2006) model, with its depiction of informal and incidental learning as a continuous cycle of reflection and problem-solving that is heavily influenced by the context in which the learning occurs.

The Marsick et al. (2006) model is also influenced by Lewin (1935, 1947). Lewin’s field theory asserts that behavior is a reflection of the interplay between an individual and their

environment, which he termed the 'life space.' He used this interplay to develop action research, characterized by systematic cycles of defining problems, gathering data related to the problems, reflecting on the data, learning, and then planning for action based on the learning.

Whereas Dewey's (1938) philosophical approach to learning is constructivist, Lewin's (1935, 1947) is cognitivist because of his focus on the internal cognitive process of learning, or "how the mind makes sense out of stimuli in the environment" (Merriam, Caffarella, & Baumgartner, 2007, p. 297). As Marsick et al. (2009) note, one of Lewin's key contributions is that he extended Dewey's cycle of learning by applying it to organizations, shifting it from the individual level to the collective level. Wenger's (2000) communities of practice examine informal groups of people who come together around common interests, often cross-cutting organizational boundaries, while Lewin's work (1935, 1947) focuses on individuals who work and learn within formal organizations. From a social learning perspective, the successful outcome of learning is the development of socially defined competence. In contrast, action research considers the successful adaptation of the organization to its environment to be a positive result of learning.

The Marsick et al. (2006) model of informal and incidental learning also utilizes Argyris and Schon's (1974, 1978) framework of action science and single and double loop learning, which built on the foundation of Lewin's action research. Argyris and Schon developed Lewin's focus on learning within organizations, exploring the dynamic of individuals who use their learning to benefit the organization in responding to the environment (Merriam et al., 2007). Single loop learning occurs when a mismatch between an expected and an actual outcome takes place. This disjuncture is described by Dewey (1938) as a trigger for learning: an event that spurs an individual to identify potential corrective options. When a corrected action still does not result

in the expected outcome, a learner undertakes double loop learning by reflecting upon underlying assumptions and values and reframing the issue. The Marsick et al. (2006) model conceptualizes informal and incidental learning as occurring through an active process of ongoing single and double loop learning.

### **Theoretical Framework for This Study**

For this study, I use the Marsick et al. (2006) model of informal and incidental learning as a theoretical framework. The model's emphasis on the context in which learning takes place will be useful to inform the political and gendered environment in which female city managers work. From reviewing the literature and my personal knowledge of city management, much of the informal learning necessary for a city manager to be successful involves informal learning to be able to navigate organizational culture and politics as well as trouble-shoot day-to-day municipal operational and management issues. The political and social environment is filled with internal and external potential triggers for learning, as city managers are tasked with a wide variety of responsibilities such as solving day-to-day operational issues, researching potential policy and procedural issues for elected officials, managing city employees, evaluating programs, and interacting with the citizens and the media.

Marsick and Watkins (2001) note that their work emphasizes three conditions to enhance informal and incidental learning: "critical reflection to surface tacit knowledge and beliefs, stimulation of proactivity on the part of the learner to actively identify options and to learn new skills to implement those options or solutions, and creativity to encourage a wider range of options" (p. 30). These areas of emphasis align well with the daily job requirements of a city manager. I am interested to find out how these conditions align with the informal learning critical

incidents that my study participants identify as contributing to their decisions to pursue city management and to their success in their roles.

This study also uses a feminist perspective to examine existing political, social, and cultural structures of oppression and domination. Feminism's inclusiveness of a diversity of perspectives has created difficulty in forging a common definition. Noted feminist scholar bell hooks (2000) explains: "A central problems within feminist discourse has been our inability to either arrive at consensus of opinion about what feminism is or accept definition(s) that could serve as points of unification" (p. 18). Instead of framing the conversation around social inequality, which hooks views as emphasizing the individual rather than the collective good, she focuses on the long-term, inclusionary goal of ending sexist oppression. Hooks (2000) reflects that defining "Feminism as a movement to end sexist oppression directs our attention to systems of domination and the interrelatedness of sex, race, and class oppression" (p. 33). While the focus on dismantling systems of sexist domination and oppression is narrower than the broader social, political, and cultural contextual approach of situated cognition, feminism also includes multiple voices and perspectives.

According to Smith (2005), there are three distinctive features of a feminist approach. The first is that it assumes the standpoint of women and our experiences and sense of self. This is reflected in this study's emphasis on exploring the lived informal and incidental learning experiences of female city managers. The sample of participants for this study will be purposively selected, with representativeness of the diversity of female city managers and municipalities in mind rather than the ability to compare the women's experiences with those of male city managers. Secondly, Smith (2005) notes that feminism works to oppose and deconstruct structures that oppress women. These structures might include municipal HRD policies and

programs that reproduce existing organizational hierarchy or political structures. Finally, feminism recognizes sisterhood and the interrelationships between women, and the defining experience of becoming open to the experiences and oppression experienced by other women. This shift into what Smith (2005) describes as the experience of sisterhood is relevant for this study because it engages female city managers in reflecting upon their own experiences, recognizing and relating to the experiences of others, and analyzing and acting upon the implications.

A liberal feminist theory perspective is also relevant to this study. Liberal feminist theory approaches gender inequality in the workplace as a result of women being denied equal access to resources (Saulnier, 1996). Differences between men and women are denied as invalid for denying women access to the same resources that are afforded to men (Burnier, 2003). Liberal feminist theory focuses on political, structural, and legislative reform as a means of dismantling barriers to gender equity. Anti-discriminatory hiring policies, affirmative action policies that require public sector employers to target job recruitment to attract qualified women for the applicant hiring pool, and efforts to end job gender segregation are examples of efforts that might be supported by a liberal feminist theory approach. A mail survey (Slack, 1987) of 290 city managers found that respondents indicated strong support for the principles of affirmative action such as opposing expressions of sexism, supporting government enforcement of fair treatment for women, and giving hiring preference to women when they are underrepresented in the workforce and of equal ability to male applicants. One critique of a liberal feminist theory perspective is that it seeks incremental changes to existing structures rather than more radical restructuring or dismantling (Saulnier, 1996). Another is that reforms result in the creation

hegemony by measuring the success of female city managers according to the values of the existing patriarchal system.

Finally, feminist perspectives can be used to interrogate existing theories to examine the intersections of gender, race, and class, and how they dialectically shape the context of management learning (Swan, Stead, & Elliott, 2009). For example, Swan et al. (2009) argue that social learning theory, organizational theory, and management theory have not adequately engaged issues of gender, race, and class. Including feminist perspectives of gender in the social and contextual dialogue of management learning and social learning theory can serve to position gender as an analytic category and a core systematizing element of organizations.

### **The Process of Learning Organizational Cultures**

Organizational culture is a concept within organizational theory with roots in cultural anthropology, sociology, organizational behavior, social psychology, business, and public administration. Organizational culture is the underlying assumptions, beliefs, and perceptions shared and transmitted by the members of a group or organization that shapes individual and group behavior. Ott (1989) describes organizational culture as the shared assumptions that are so fundamental, widespread, and part of the daily life of the organization that no one thinks about or remembers them. Organizational culture underlies a group or organization's mission, formal and informal operational procedures, human resource development strategies, decision-making, attitudes towards risk, perception of the organization's environment, and reaction to uncertainty.

Schein (1992) expands upon Ott's concept of culture as an organization's core underlying assumptions by adding two additional outer layers to the model, artifacts and espoused values. In Schein's model of organizational culture, artifacts are the outermost observable aspects of an organization. Language, ceremonies, customs, behavioral rituals, documented policies and

procedures, hierarchy, branding imagery, and physical organization are all examples of artifacts. An organization's espoused values are less observable than artifacts. Espoused values include an organization's mission, philosophies, code of ethics, and ideology.

### **Overview of City Management and the Culture of Public Organizations**

Citizens' perceptions of government are often shaped by their interaction with the levels of government that impact them on a daily basis. For most people, local government is the most familiar face of government, providing police services, supplying water and utilities, collecting the trash, offering parks and recreation programs, and maintaining roads and other public facilities in their community. A city manager is an appointed administrator who serves as chief executive officer, managing the functions and day-to-day services that keep a city running and leading the city staff that makes it happen. The city manager is hired by and reports to an elected City Council and Mayor, and assists them in developing and implementing policy.

The face of city management is male. The 2009 ICMA State of the Profession Survey indicated that of 2,000 United States city manager survey respondents, only 402, or 20.1%, were female. While this percentage has slowly grown from 1% of ICMA survey respondents in 1974, women remain grossly underrepresented in the profession. This study focuses on women in municipal management, but the concepts and literature of organizational learning are also applicable and relevant to women's career development at state and federal levels. At the state government level, research by Bowling et al. (2006) on national trends of gender representation among state agency executives evidences that 26% of state agencies are led by women. Female representation among federal government executives has increased over the past twenty years. A 1992 study by the U.S. Merit System Protections Board (MSPB) reported that only 12% of

federal Senior Executive Service positions were held by women, while a May 2011 study by the agency updates the percentage to 30%.

The organizational culture in which city managers work is not only traditionally male-dominated, but also very political (Watson & Watson, 2006). City managers are hired and fired at the will of elected officials. The role of the city manager is not purely administrative due to the manager's influential role in the policy process and participation in providing information and guidance to elected officials (Fox & Schuhmann 1999; Newell & Ammons, 1987). Coyle McCabe et al. (2008) observe: "City managers were once viewed as neutral technicians with limited roles in the policy-making process, but scholars increasingly came to appreciate that, for managers, the separation between politics and administration often was more symbolic than factual" (p. 380). This increasingly complex role creates a need for women city managers to be adept at the process of learning culture.

City managers must learn to navigate the administrative culture of city employees, the political culture of the mayor and council, and the culture of the local community, citizens, and media outlets. The highly political culture of city management is evidenced by the average tenure of city managers, which is approximately 6.9 years (Renner, 2001). Coyle McCabe et al., (2008) examined context-related push and pull factors that account for city manager turnover. Their analysis of city manager turnover patterns in 143 United States cities with populations of at least 75,000 and a council-manager form of government found that the likelihood of involuntary turnover increased in response to substantial change on a city council and short-term economic decline in the community.

Stivers (2002) critiques public organizations as being culturally masculine, asserting: "our commonsense notions of the administrative state are deeply dependent on traditions that

privilege men and the pursuits considered typical of them over women and their work” (p. 6). She suggests that the field’s roots in administrative science create a system that values efficient objectivity over emotion and hierarchical bureaucracy over less culturally masculine organizational forms. Burnier’s (2003) review of gender in public administration writing and research found that gender-related scholarship has been slow to be integrated in public administration graduate coursework, journal articles, and textbooks. She advocates for more scholarship that holistically explores how women in the public sector experience their lives in administration. This study will begin to address this gap identified by Burnier (2003) by documenting the informal and incidental learning experiences that have influenced the career development of female city managers. Table 2 summarizes research on city managers relevant to this study, noting the scant inclusion of female voices in the city manager literature.

Table 2

*Women Participant Inclusion in City Management Research Cited in This Dissertation*

<b>Citation</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>Design &amp; Method</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>% Women</b>
Coyle McCabe, Feiock, Clinger-mayer, & Stream, 2008	Political conflict and economic development can influence the likelihood of city manager turnover, but the effects can be complex.	Quantitative; empirical model with time-series panel data	143 cities	N/A
Crewson & Fisher, 1997	Early-career and small jurisdiction city managers are more likely to prefer the science of administration, while later-career and larger jurisdiction managers are more likely to need the art of administration.	Quantitative; systematic random survey	314	10%
Fox & Schuhmann, 1999	Women city managers are more likely to incorporate citizen input, facilitate communication, and encourage citizen involvement than men city managers.	Quantitative; mail survey	524	47%
Fox & Schuhmann, 2000	Women managers are more likely to focus on community relations and include citizen input in decision-making than men city managers.	Quantitative; mail survey data	151	36%
Fox & Schuhmann, 2001	Mentoring in city management is characterized by factors that slow the inclusion of women into the profession.	Quantitative; mail survey	524	47%
ICMA, 2009	Multiple; state of the profession survey	Quantitative; mail survey	2,000	20%

Table 2 (continued)

<b>Citation</b>	<b>Findings</b>	<b>Design &amp; Method</b>	<b>Sample</b>	<b>% Women</b>
Nalbandian, 1999	City managers are increasing called upon to build community, facilitate participation, assume a process orientation, and add value.	Qualitative; written responses to questions	26	Unreported
Newell & Ammons, 1987	Provides evidence of a marked increase in the perceived importance of the policy role of city managers.	Quantitative; questionnaire	527	Unreported
Slack, 1987	City manager attitudes towards affirmative action indicate they are supportive in principle but oppose some of the mechanisms for implementation.	Quantitative; questionnaire	290	7%
Watson & Hassett, 2003	Long-serving city managers are more likely to be found in smaller cities that are less diverse and politically stable.	Quantitative; analysis of national survey data	107	2%
Watson & Hassett, 2004	Career paths for city managers in the United States' largest cities are more complex than they are depicted in the literature.	Quantitative; analysis of national survey data	113	11.5%

Like public organizations, corporate culture and associated HRD practices have been noted by scholars to reflect and perpetuate existing power structures and traditionally masculine values such as competition, hierarchy, and autonomy (Bierema, 1999; Howell, Carter, & Schied, 2002; Rand & Bierema, 2009). These differ from women's values and ways of knowing, which have been described as collaborative rather than competitive, encouraging affiliation rather than autonomy, and connected, or seeking to understand multiple viewpoints and ideas (Belenky, Clinchy, Goldberger, & Tarule, 1997; Hayes, 2001).

Fox and Schuhmann (1999) conducted a national survey of 524 male and female city managers to investigate gender variations among city managers' approaches to politics and leadership, the policy process, and decision-making. Their results indicated that female city managers were more likely than male city managers to take public feedback into account in their work. They also found that female city managers "were significantly more likely than men to state that communicating with citizens, communicating with elected officials, and motivating the staff are primary responsibilities of a city manager" (p. 236). As both Fox & Schuhmann (1999) and Hassett (2004) caution, it is important not to over-emphasize gender differences in management, but it is also important to recognize that gender does play a role in the careers of female city managers.

### **Challenges for Women in the Process of Learning Culture**

Reaching and navigating the top levels of organizational leadership requires a nuanced understanding of the culture of an organization. Bierema (1999) observes: "...both men and women have the challenge of learning organizational culture, but women have the distinct disadvantage of neither creating nor controlling it" (p. 108). The "Old Boys Network" is the embodiment of many of the barriers women face in the process of learning organizational

culture. Rand and Bierema (2009) characterize it as an “informal, invisible...exclusive club that affords inside information, facilitates advancement, and provides and social and support network to its members” (p. 2). They also observe that membership is automatic for Caucasian, white collar males. Radin (1980) posits that women who aspire to top executive positions in state and local government require both “inside” and “outside” skills. Inside skills refer to organizational, technical, and interpersonal know-how, while outside skills include political savvy and an outside network of contacts. Radin asserts that the higher in the organizational hierarchy a women wishes to rise, the greater the importance of well-developed outside skills.

The profession of city management resembles an Old Boy’s Network. Watson and Hassett (2003) paint the profile of the long-serving city manager, who has worked more than twenty years in the same city as a white male with at least a bachelor’s degree who has spent most of his career in a municipality with fewer than 30,000 residents, located in the state where he grew up. The profile of a city manager in a large city with a population of over 100,000 is male with a master’s degree or higher who has been promoted from within the same city government (Watson & Hassett, 2004).

Furthermore, within the municipal workforce, Miller, Kerr, and Reid (1999) reveal that “the character of gender segregation among municipal-level administrative and professional workforces tends to pack women into redistributive agencies,” which deal with health and public welfare (p. 226). A case study by Newman (1994) of State of Florida Senior Management Executive Service executives looked at gender and the opportunity structures within three of the administrative agency types outlined in Lowi’s (1985) thesis of administrative structure and models of agency types: regulatory, distributive, and redistributive. Newman (1994) also found that the majority of female questionnaire respondents worked in redistributive agencies, and

further, that “the most highly qualified female respondents worked in redistributive agencies, where their representation was the highest” (p. 280). Similarly, as women enter the culture of city government, their presence may facilitate entry by other women. A study of 156 municipal governments employing between 500 and 10,000 employees by Saltzstein (1986) indicated significant improvements in female employment parity in non-clerical and municipal administrative/professional positions in cities with women mayors. Additionally, 143 male and female city manager respondents to a mail survey investigating gender differences in leadership voices, Fox and Schuhmann (2000) found that female city managers are more likely to work in political environments with greater numbers of female city council members than are male city managers.

Looking at women's career development through the lens of organizational learning goes beyond conversations within the public administration literature about representative bureaucracy and trends of women's representation at the highest levels of public sector leadership. The discourse focusing on representative bureaucracy makes significant contributions in describing the nature, scope, and trends of women's representation (Miller, Kerr & Reid, 1999; Newman, 1994) and defining the organizational and structural barriers (Guy, 1994) that women face in building their careers in public sector management. It lacks, however, the vocabulary and body of knowledge about organizational culture, networking, and barriers to women's learning within the workplace. Structural changes such as Affirmative Action can help increase the representation of women in government, but an understanding of how women learn their way through organizational culture and build informal networks can help women build their careers and become managers once they have been hired. Using the framework and language of organizational learning can help us build upon representative bureaucracy's "what," defining the

issue, by exploring "how," using the lens of organizational learning to identify and implement methods to address barriers and support women managers' learning and career development.

What are some of the barriers for women in the process of learning and adapting to masculine organizational culture? Understanding the political culture of the organization and what is going on politically between key executives is cited by women executives as a factor that holds women back (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998). Women working in the Australian public sector cited gender as an impediment that impacted their careers, including not being a male, their decision to not allow work to interfere with parenting responsibilities, subtle gender bias that was not addressed by managers, and working in a male-oriented department or function (McMahon, Limerick, Cranston, & Andersen, 2006). Another challenge in the process of learning culture is that women executives must adapt to male culture, including learning male managerial customs and rituals and shifting their own behaviors to create a level of comfort for male colleagues (Ragins, Townsend, & Mattis, 1998; Rand & Bierema, 2009). Bierema (1998) suggests that adult educators can help create change by educating organizations and individuals about organizational culture's role in career development, addressing topics such as the importance of negotiating organizational culture and power, self-exploration and reflection, ways to develop strategies to mitigate culture, and career awareness.

### **Career Development for Women**

Given the barriers described above, women face a number of challenges in the process of career development. Bierema (1999) developed a model to theorize how executive women progressively learn and develop within male-centered organizational cultures throughout their careers. According to this model, women progress through three stages: Compliant Novices, Competence Seekers, and Change Agents. The first stage, Compliant Novices, "is characterized

by the women devaluing their talents, doubting their skills, and attributing getting hired to sheer luck over ability” (p. 109). A reflection of this is Fox and Schuhmann’s (1999) survey finding that female city managers were more likely than their male counterparts to respond that they “fell into” the profession of city management. In the Compliant Novices stage, formal learning generally takes place through higher education or corporate training classes while informal learning occurs through mentoring, co-worker relationships and feedback, and mistakes. Women’s strategies for negotiation at this stage rely mostly on following norms and authority figures. Transitions out of this stage occur in response to the understanding that competency is required for advancement.

The second stage of Bierema’s (1999) model is Competence Seekers. This stage is based on a woman’s belief that self-development of expertise is essential for her advancement. To develop competency, women undertake formal education, join professional organizations, seek out peer groups and mentors, and take on jobs and projects involving risk and requiring them to develop expertise. This approach is evidenced in Rand and Bierema’s (2009) research on male and female perceptions of the Old Boy’s Network, in which female posters in an online forum on the networking site LinkedIn were more likely than male posters to suggest that hard work is the best strategy for succeeding. One woman posted this comment to the forum: “If you are an acknowledged expert at what you do...you might not be accepted into the club, but you will gain respect and business. Naturally this means you will have to work harder, and be noticed, but it does work” (p. 17). A large-scale survey of the highest ranking, most successful women in a survey of Fortune 1000 companies found that 77% agreed that consistently exceeding performance expectations and 50% agreed that seeking difficult or high visibility assignments are critical strategies for women’s career advancement (Ragins et al., 1998). Bierema (1999)

notes that women at the Competence Seekers stage negotiate the culture and recognize the power of the Old Boy's Network more than Compliant Novices. However, they do not challenge the organizational culture, speak up about practices with which they disagree, or advocate change.

Competence Seekers' reticence to advocate change within the organizational culture shifts as they transition to the Change Agents stage. As Change Agents, Bierema (1999) posits that women executives begin focusing on reflective thinking, developing others through mentoring relationships, and developing change-oriented networks. Negotiation strategies focus on building networks and relationships to help them problem-solve and create changes within the organization to foster diverse groups. The strategy of developing networks is echoed in the post of a LinkedIn forum participant (Rand & Bierema, 2009): "A lot of networks are emerging around diversity in companies to mitigate [the Old Boy's Network] effect. Many companies have women's networks, technical women's networks, African American networks, etc. where employees can support each other, find mentoring opportunities, and exchange crucial knowledge which helps them advance in their careers. The effectiveness of these networks vary, but it's a start" (p. 18). Women assistant city managers had mixed opinions about the value of a separate women's network or women's issues committee within ICMA, a public management professional organizations (Szymborski, 1996). Some thought it was vital for women to meet with and be mentored by other women city managers, while others thought networking in a more diverse setting with both men and women to be more beneficial.

Change Agents who are willing to reflect upon organizations and build networks to create dialogue and advocate for change is critical. A large-scale study (Ragins et al., 1998) of CEOs and women holding positions of vice president or higher in Fortune 1000 found that men and women executives do not agree on factors preventing women from advancing in corporations. In

order of response, male CEOs identified a lack of general management or line experience, women not having been in the managerial pipeline long enough, and stereotyping and gender bias as the top factors impeding women's progress. In contrast, women executives' responses were oriented towards factors related to organizational culture: male stereotyping and preconceptions about women, women's exclusion from informal networks within the organization, and a lack of general management or line experience. These varying perceptions highlight the need for women executive Change Agents and men executives and managers who are willing to foster organizational dialogue related to barriers to women's advancement.

### **Interventions and Actions to Help Women Advance**

Given the challenges for women in the process of learning organizational culture and advancing to the top levels of organizations, what are some potential interventions and actions that can be taken to support them? A study by Bremer and Howe (1988) examined strategies successfully used by local, state, and federal public sector organizations in Oregon to advance women's careers. Their findings indicate that useful strategies utilized by local governments include using career planning, providing extensive training, offering on-the-job training and paid night classes, promoting from within, and having commitment from top managers to create change.

### **Mentoring and Sponsoring**

A well-documented intervention to help women learn organizational culture and develop their careers is mentoring. Mentoring can be informal or formal and involves pairing a more experienced individual with a less experienced protégé with the intent of helping foster the career and skill development of the protégé. Much research has been done on the benefits of mentoring. Findings of a meta-analysis (Allen, Poteet, Eby, Lentz, & Lima, 2004) of empirical research on

benefits of mentoring for protégés are supportive of the benefits, but indicated small effect sizes for objective outcomes of mentoring such as compensation and promotion.

Leck and Orser (2009) posit a typology of five desired outcomes related to mentor/protégé relationships: psychosocial support, knowledge acquisition, career development support, increased career satisfaction, and autonomy. In their study of why managers decided to seek mentors, they found that the top drivers were psychosocial support and knowledge acquisition. Their results indicate that women seek mentors for career development support while men seek mentoring relationships to acquire autonomy. Leck and Orser suggest that mentoring should be tailored to the needs and career aspirations of protégés.

Female executives in Fortune 1000 companies overwhelmingly expressed the importance of mentors to their career advancement (Ragins et al., 1998). For women who want to break through to the top levels of an organization, “Influential male mentors, with pre-established networks and credibility, can sponsor their female protégés into senior management circles, and provide inside information usually obtained in the old boy networks” (Ragins, et al., 1998, p. 32). Crewson and Fisher (1997) posit that the requirements of city managers change over the course of career development, from learning administrative technical skills to developing the art of administrative negotiation and politics, and note that mentoring is a key way to support this transition. Despite their potential benefits, there are also some drawbacks to mentoring relationships.

Women who participate in mentoring programs may face organizational and interpersonal barriers. Noe's (1988) review of the research identifies barriers women face in finding mentors like tokenism, gender-related stereotypes, norms regarding cross-gender mentoring relationships, and the use of ineffective power bases to establish mentoring

relationships. Negotiating internal aspects of formal mentoring programs such as setting realistic expectations for mentoring, identifying areas of commonality between mentors and protégés, negotiating boundaries in cross-gender mentoring, fostering a reciprocal relationships between mentor and protégé, handling peer resentment, and addressing perceptions that women participate in mentoring as a form of remediation for lack of skills and competency are scrutinized by Blake-Beard (2001) as "challenges and costs" (p. 342) of formal mentoring programs.

A critical look at mentoring reveals several additional barriers for women. Vertz (1985) suggests that mentors must be aware of obstacles in the specific organizational context that are unique to women's career advancement. She also notes that mentoring has negative aspects such as encouraging dependency. Darwin (2000) echoes this concern: "traditionally, the mentoring relationship has been framed in a language of paternalism and dependency and stems from a power-dependent, hierarchical relationship, aimed at maintaining the status quo" (p. 198). A critique of mentoring drawing on Bourdieu's (1977) cultural reproduction is that mentoring relationships are a form of organizational enculturation that serve to replicate existing structures of oppression and hierarchy. These concerns are particularly relevant for cross-gender mentoring relationships with a male mentor and a female protégé, but also for same-gender mentoring.

Bierema's (1999) case study analysis of interviews with eleven female private-sector executives regarding how they learned organizational culture revealed that the women's "use of male language, particularly with references to their work as mentors and supervisors was highly reproductive of status quo power relationships" (p. 117). A secondary analysis (Daley, 1996) of federal employee survey data related to the glass ceiling phenomena tested the effect of gender and ethnicity on career advancement. His analysis indicated that females and minorities must

rely on proving themselves for career success via formal objective factors rather than a positive reputation, and that because they primarily work with other women and minorities, the mentoring and career advice they receive does not provide social access to key decision-making networks that are controlled by white males.

In their review of the literature, McDonald and Hite (1998) report that women may face barriers to connecting with appropriate informal mentors because they have not developed networks that include certain levels of the organization, mentors tend to select protégés who are similar to themselves, or a lack of female executives available to act as mentors. A survey conducted by Fox and Schuhmann (2001) of all the female city managers in the United States and a matched male counterpart regarding their mentoring experiences found that both genders seek out same-sex mentors to a greater degree than opposite-sex mentors. However, both male and female city managers report having had more male mentors than female mentors during their careers. This is likely explained by the greater numbers of male city managers and male public administration professors, and may create a barrier to mentoring for women city managers due to fewer options for female mentors, and male mentors who choose to foster the careers of protégés with whom they share similar characteristics. Women may create their own career development barriers if they do not proactively take responsibility for their own career development, seek multiple mentors, and create career strategies to plan for the future (Bierema, 1998).

McDonald and Hite (1998) suggest that one method of assisting women in accessing and developing mentoring relationships is for the human resources development function of the organization to assist with pairing mentors and protégés. This may be useful for larger municipal governments with larger employee bases, separate human resource development units, and a larger pool of managers to draw from as potential mentors. However, many small municipalities

have so few staff that they do not have a separate human resources development function, with the city manager or city clerk handling payroll and benefits.

One potential option for these small municipalities may be virtual mentoring. Bierema and Merriam (2002) define virtual mentoring, also known as e-mentoring or online mentoring as “a computer-mediated, mutually beneficial relationship between a mentor and a protégé that provides learning, advising, encouraging, promoting, and modeling” and is “often boundaryless, egalitarian, and qualitatively different than face-to-face mentoring” (p. 214). Bierema and Hill (2005) explore the notion of virtual mentoring by comparing and contrasting it to traditional forms of mentoring, identifying benefits and challenges, and drawing key implications for human resource development. They call on the field of HRD to lead the way in fostering online mentoring. For the field of city management, professional national or state organizations such as ICMA or the Georgia Municipal Association (GMA) might be better vehicles for connecting potential city management mentors and protégés because they are able to draw a greater pool of participants from their memberships.

Some scholars (Hewlett, Peraino, Sherbin and Sumberg, 2010; Hewlett, Marshall, Sherbin and Adachi, 2013; Hewlett, 2013) stress that women benefit more from sponsors than mentors. While a mentor guides, advises, and coaches, a sponsor is a senior-level political ally who advocates, inspires, promotes the visibility of, facilitates career moves, and provides stretch responsibilities for their protégé. In return, protégés offer benefits to sponsors such as increased performance, helping them deliver on big projects, initiatives or their organizational vision, and serving as an extension of their sponsor's reputation or brand.

Some drawbacks to sponsorship is that cross-gender sponsoring may be interpreted by others as indicative of an intimate relationship, women underestimate how it can assist their

career advancement, an understanding of how sponsorship works is important, and women perceive using personal contacts for professional gain is not appropriate because it undermines the role of hard work (Hewlett et al., 2013). Like mentors, sponsors often gravitate towards protégés who share similar demographics to their own, marginalizing women and minorities. Nevertheless, one study found that sponsorship can provide a 30 percent benefit to protégés in regard to more stretch assignments, increased pay, and promotions (Hewlett et al., 2010). Sponsors can also help women access high-level networks and make connections they might otherwise not be able to.

### **Developing Networks**

Helping women develop networks of relationships and social connections is a second intervention that can assist in the process of learning organizational culture and career advancement. Networks can be described as social and career-related contacts that develop and maintain relationships to exchange information, support, and access to resources. Networking can be both formal and informal. In organizational learning, networks are described as consisting of social and career-related contacts that maintain relationships to exchange information, support, and access to resources. This differs from the concept of networks in the public administration literature (for example, McGuire, 2002; McGuire and Agranoff, 2007), which expands upon the organizational learning definition by including structures such as agencies and organizations with multiple nodes through which public goods and services are planned, designed, produced, and delivered. In this discussion, we will use the organizational learning concept of networks; however, similar processes of relationship building are necessary for public managers to develop connections and relationships within the network of agencies and organizations with which they must interface to be successful.

Bierema (2005) asserts that women learn corporate culture through their relationships. An example of this is a protégé developing a mutual relationship with a more experienced, better-connected mentor and gaining access to his or her network of contacts. The Old Boy's Network is evidence of the power of network relationships to transmit valued information, support the careers of members of the network, and facilitate access to valued resources (Rand & Bierema, 2009). It also illustrates the potential of a network to teach and reinforce organizational culture, reproducing the status quo and reinforcing structures of inequality. While men and women who posted in the LinkedIn forum view the nature of the Old Boy's Network differently, they agree that it is waning and suggest it is being replaced by Web 2.0 communities such as LinkedIn that are based on more inclusive, mutual support.

For city managers, developing networks is part of not only their career development, but also part of their complex role in communicating information, coordinating efforts, and building partnerships with elected officials, staff, constituents, community partners, local groups, and the media. Nalbandian (1999) describes the role of the city manager as having been transformed to a focus on community building and facilitating diverse participation and representation in problem-solving and partnerships. The various networks involved in and created through the process of community building help to connect city managers with community leaders who can help with problem solving and collaboration and provide professional support. Professional organizations such as ICMA and GMA also help provide career development support through networking and conferences as well as sections and committees that bring together municipal managers with specific interests.

A strategy some organizations use is to develop internal networks to support groups within the organization that share certain characteristics or interests, such as women, African

Americans, or people with specific technical skills. Bierema (2005) conducted a study of an in-company network aimed at supporting the development of women and minorities in a United States based Fortune 500 organization. Her findings suggest that networks can sometimes serve to impede members' career development. Membership in the network caused trepidation among members to advocate for change, resulting in the network serving to reproduce hierarchical structures instead of eroding them. A majority of the network members exhibited what Bierema (2005) categorizes as "conscious unconsciousness," characterized by a strong awareness and recognition of gender and power within the organization, but a low willingness or ability to advocate or initiate change (p. 219). Additionally, the study indicated that organizational culture permeates an organization and impacts the ability of networks to be successful in supporting member development.

### **Leadership Development**

Designing and implementing leadership curriculum within MPA programs that addresses gender and leadership is an approach advocated by Beaty and Davis (2012). Examining program course requirements for 156 MPA programs, they found that nearly half neither required leadership as a core course requirement nor offered it as an elective. They recommend that graduate programs update their course requirements to include leadership curriculum that integrates scholarship about gender and women's leadership and engages students in understanding how gender informs public administration leadership. This can raise awareness among men MPA students about gender and leadership, and better prepare women MPA graduates to confront the glass ceiling to move into leadership roles in city management.

## **HRD Training Classes/Structures**

HRD can be a source of potential support to women to help them develop their careers and learn organizational values, norms, and practices. Bremer and Howe (1988) outline a mix of strategies used by Oregonian local governments to advance women in their organizations. These strategies include fostering strong top-level managerial commitment to women's participation in management, creating pathways for hiring from within, offering a variety of training opportunities focused on both job-related skills and career development, and promoting values of excellence and equal opportunity.

Reliance on formal learning and training approaches to help women develop their careers in city management is insufficient. Bersin (2009) offers a broader framework for conceptualizing learning support approaches, an excerpt of which is outlined in Table 3. This framework includes both formal learning and the spectrum of informal learning, with an emphasis on a multi-faceted approach to fostering learning. Creating myriad opportunities for informal learning is crucial.

Table 3

*Elements of a Learning Infrastructure*

Formal Learning	Informal Learning		
	On-Demand	Social	Embedded
Instructor-Led Training	Search	Wikis, Blogs, Forums	Performance Support
Virtual Classroom	Books, Articles	Expert Directories	Feedback
Games	Videos	Social Networks	Quality Circles
Simulations	Podcasts	Communities of Practice	After-Action Reviews
Testing & Evaluation	Learning/Knowledge Portals	Conferences & Colloquium	Rotational Assignments
E-Learning	E-Learning	Coaching & Mentoring	Development Planning

*Note.* Adapted from "Modernize Corporate Training: The Enterprise Learning Framework," By Josh Bersin, May 24, 2009, *Bersin By Deloitte* (blog), retrieved from <http://joshbersin.com/2009/05/24/modern-corporate-training-the-enterprise-learning-framework/>

McDonald and Hite (1998) review the role of human resource development in women's career development, pinpointing opportunities, concerns, and recommendations for training, career planning, informal learning, and mentoring as HRD initiatives with the potential to enhance women's career development. For example, they identify career planning as an initiative that provides the opportunity for women to focus goals, maximize skills, clarify interests, and prepare for future career advancement. Some concerns about career planning are that women may have limited access to career guidance, it may engender inappropriate career expectations from managers, and women may self-select to participate so that those most in need of planning guidance may not be those who receive it. Finally, they offer recommendations for HRD staff to provide equal access to guidance, educate managers regarding flexible career strategies, and use diverse teams to select candidates with high potential to receive career planning assistance.

Looking at HRD initiatives through the lens of Bourdieu's (1977) idea of cultural reproduction reveals the potential of workplace learning and training to reinforce and replicate the status quo within an organization. Additionally, some scholars utilize a critical and feminist perspective to examine how workplace learning and HRD practices and training structures shape and control women (Bierema, 2002; Fenwick, 2008; Howell et al., 2002). Howell et al. (2002) found that HRD courses offered to women at a manufacturing facility "did not increase the women's skills or their ability to move up in the organization but instead concentrated on creating the right kind of worker" and furthermore "concentrated on helping workers to be flexible, docile, and adjustable—more prepared to be the right kind of corporate human resource" (p. 118-119). They call for HRD professionals to reexamine some of the assumptions of HRD regarding women's work and suggest that subversive feminist theory is a needed voice in the HRD literature to threaten the status quo by confronting inequitable patriarchal structures that limit women's career development.

### **Summary**

The vast majority of all workplace learning can be categorized as informal or incidental learning. Informal learning is intentional, initiated to react to a stimulus, is part of the learner's daily routine, frequently occurs haphazardly or by chance, is connected to the learning efforts of others, is not highly conscious, and is shaped inductively through continual reflection and action. Incidental learning is usually unconscious and takes place as a serendipitous byproduct of other learning. Theories underlying women's informal and incidental workplace learning that are relevant to the city management context are self-directed learning, situated cognition, feminist theory, social learning theory, and the Watkins and Marsick (2006) model of informal and incidental learning. The theoretical framework for this study draws upon these theories to

explore and better understand the critical informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers attribute to helping them develop their careers and reach their positions in city management.

Conversations within public administration regarding women's career development have focused on representative bureaucracy and legislative reforms such as Affirmative Action without accounting for organizational learning and how women develop their careers once they are already within the public workforce. This study introduces a new framework of language and body of literature regarding women's organizational learning to shift the dialogue from defining the issue at a macro level to identifying concrete ways to support women's learning and career development in the public sector. The career development of public sector women executives such as city managers is hindered by the difficulty women face in the process of learning organizational culture. This is especially true for the complex and political environment of city management. Female city managers must learn to navigate the administrative culture of the municipal organization, the political culture of elected officials, and the social culture of the community, citizens, and media outlets. Women's processes of career development are different from men's because of the challenges of learning to navigate patriarchal organizational cultures and their exclusion from informal networks such as the Old Boy's Network.

Specific interventions and actions that women, local government managers, and mentors may take to help women advance in the city profession include mentoring, helping women develop their networks through professional organizations, conferences, and organizationally supported networks for women or groups with special interests or skills. From a critical perspective, these strategies each have the potential to help or to hinder women's career advancement and to reinforce and reproduce existing systems of hierarchy and domination,

depending on the reflectiveness with which they are implemented. Finally, scholars have called upon the field of HRD to critically examine assumptions underlying women's career development to challenge structures and practices that hinder women's advancement.

## **CHAPTER 3**

### **METHODS**

This chapter addresses qualitative research methods that were utilized in this study. These methods were used to identify and explore the informal and incidental learning experiences that current women city managers in the Southeastern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management. The research questions guiding this exploratory qualitative study include:

1. What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career?
2. How do women city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy) and politics (elected officials)?
3. What are some of the barriers faced by women city managers to succeeding in city management?

The discussion will begin with the design of the study and a description of critical incident technique, the method that was used for data collection. Sample selection criteria and procedures will be described and data collection and analysis will be outlined in detail. Finally, considerations regarding validity, reliability, and my positionality and assumptions will be examined.

## **Design of the Study**

This study took an exploratory qualitative approach to examine the critical informal and incidental learning experiences that contribute to the career development of female city managers, a topic that is not documented in the academic literature. A qualitative approach was particularly well suited to my research questions because they are intended to explore and increase understanding of this un-researched area of inquiry. Merriam and Simpson (2000) assert: “If you want to understand a phenomenon, uncover the meaning a situation has for those involved, or delineate process—how things happen—then a qualitative design would be most appropriate” (p. 99). Interviewing women city managers about the most significant learning experiences in their career development provided thick, information rich, descriptive data that could not be collected through surveys, observation, or reviewing documents.

This study used critical incident technique (CIT) as a method of data collection. Developed by Flanagan (1954), CIT was originally a research method with a positivist orientation that utilized empirical data collection of critical incidents for job analysis. Flanagan defines an incident as “any observable activity that is sufficiently complete in itself to permit inferences and predictions to be made about the person performing the act,” and a critical incident as one that happens “in a situation where the purpose or intent of the act seems fairly clear to the observer and where its consequences are sufficiently definite to leave little doubt concerning its effects” (p. 327). When CIT is used within a constructivist, qualitative approach like that of the current study, participants are asked to determine which incidents are critical.

CIT was an outgrowth of several World War II studies conducted by Flanagan and colleagues for the United State Army Air Forces. The studies were intended to elicit quantifiable incidents that were used to improve pilot performance and selection procedures, help define

categories of critical requirements for combat leadership, and identify pilot disorientation incidents to improve the design of flight instrument panels.

Flanagan (1954) described CIT as “a flexible set of principles which must be modified and adapted to meet the specific situation at hand” (p. 335). The five steps of critical incident technique outlined by Flanagan are creating a general statement of aims or objectives, outlining specific plans or specifications regarding data collection, collecting the data, analyzing the data, and interpreting and reporting the findings. One of the defining characteristics of CIT is analyzing critical incidents by sorting them into categories and subcategories to identify themes.

The method has continued to evolve as it has been used and updated by researchers and consultants in a variety of fields. Examples include education (Corbally, 1956), speech communication (Stano, 1983), marketing (Gremler, 2004), organizational development (Davis 2006), nursing (Byrne, 2001; Ivarsson, Larsson, & Sjoberg, 2004), service research and management (Edvardsson & Roos, 2001), counseling psychology (Butterfield et al., 2005), and dentistry (Zakariassen & Hogan, 2006). The ongoing development of CIT has seen a shift from a positivist orientation, where incidences are quantified, to a more constructivist approach in which participant narratives of incidents are data collected as a means to increase understanding of behavior within an organizational context (Ellinger & Watkins, 1998).

Critical incident technique has several strengths that make it an appropriate methodology for this study. A key strength of critical incident technique is the thick, information-rich data it generates. One interview can often yield a number of critical incidents. Due to this, it is particularly beneficial for exploring topics that are not well understood or documented (Gremler, 2004), such as the experiences of women city managers.

CIT has an applied orientation. Corbally (1956) notes that CIT “provides recommendations which can be utilized immediately by practitioners in the field” (p. 61). Ivarsson et al. (2004) also note its relevance for addressing practical issues. Another strength is that data about incidents and context are both reported from the perspective and in the words of study participants. The participant’s perspective can help researchers understand an issue through a vivid lens that is different than their own or those of experts (Gremler, 2004). Finally, as mentioned above, the flexibility of the CIT has allowed it to be used successfully in a wide variety of fields (Ellinger & Watkins, 1998).

The CIT methodology also has limitations. One limitation is its reliance on the judgment of the researcher in determining which incidents are critical and what categories are salient. Flanagan (1954) notes that the process of categorizing critical incidents is more subjective than objective: “No simple rules are available, and the quality and usability of the final product are largely dependent on the skill and sophistication of the formulator” (p. 344). The quality of data collected is impacted by the skill of the researcher in knowing how and when to pose follow-up or probing questions, and also the participant’s willingness to provide adequate detail (Gremler, 2004). Because data about critical incidents is retrospective and self-reported by study participants, it can be subject to recall bias or inconsistencies of memory (Gremler, 2004). Edvardsson and Roos (2001) suggest that time and memory can impact a study participant’s perceptions and reporting of positive and negative critical incidents.

## **Participant Selection**

This study utilized purposeful sampling. Purposeful sampling, also called purposive or criterion sampling, is used when the researcher has certain criteria for study participants. Participants are deliberately chosen according to predefined characteristics such as special knowledge or specific experiences related to the purpose of the study.

For this study, participants were purposefully selected from the population of current full-time women city managers in the southern United States. My sample size included approximately twenty-five critical incidents, elicited from interviews conducted with eight participants. One interview was not recorded due to technical difficulties. The criteria for study participant selection were:

1. Female
2. Full-time city manager
3. Serves a municipality located in the southern United States
4. At least five years of experience serving as a city manager to ensure she has had enough time in the position to experience several budget and municipal election cycles

As an exploratory study, this sample was selected for representativeness of women's experiences working in city management in the southern United States, rather than comparability with the experiences of men city managers. To maximize the richness of the information collected about the experiences of women city managers, I included women working in a variety of community contexts, including both rural and urban, municipalities of varying populations, and geographically dispersed throughout the several southern states. I also interviewed a diverse group of women with respect to race, age, and educational background. Table 4 lists basic

information for each of the study participants. City population sizes and participant ages are included as ranges to help protect the confidentiality of the participants.

Table 4

*Study Participants*

Participant Pseudonym	Age Range	Ethnicity	City Population	Approx. Years as City Manager
Lauren Cooper	55-65	White	15,000-24,999	8
Jennifer Tyler	55-65	Black	15,000-24,999 (metro)	9
Hannah Clay	35-45	White	Less than 5,000	5
Mary Hendrix	55-65	White	5,001-10,000	12
Sarah Martin	46-54	White	15,000 -24,999 (metro)	20
Courtney Harbison	35-45	White	5,001-10,000	15
Kathy Phelps	55-65	White	25,000-49,999	6
Emily Hogan	66-74	White	Less than 5,000	24

To identify potential study participants, I solicited the help of several professional colleagues working in various public service and outreach roles at institutions of higher education and in city management who have existing relationships with women city managers the southern United States. Colleagues assisted me in connecting with several of the potential city manager participants by sharing basic information about the purpose of my study and making email or telephone introductions. For the majority of the interviews, my contact recommended a city manager to me to invite to participate in this study, and I made the initial contact via email. The introductory email included information about the purpose of the study and the steps that would be taken to ensure participant confidentiality.

Once the participant responded to my invitation and agreed to participate in the study, we scheduled the time and date of the interview at the convenience of the city manager. All

interviews were conducted either in the participant's office or a conference room at their City Hall. Several days before our scheduled interview date, I emailed each participant a reminder and attached a copy of the human subjects consent form (see Appendix A) and the interview guide (see Appendix B) to give them a chance to review them in advance. I suggested that they review the interview guide and take notes about the experiences that they might want to share.

Of nine potential participants who I invited to contribute to this study, eight graciously accepted and met with me. One city manager did not respond to my email invitation or to follow up emails. By identifying potential participants primarily through professional connections and mutual colleagues, I was fortunate to have a high rate of participation.

### **Data Collection**

Flanagan (1954) and Creswell (2007) suggest refining interview questions and procedures through a pilot before beginning research. In Spring 2012, I conducted a pilot study with three interview participants as part of a qualitative research design course class project. The participants included three local government administrators who did not meet the criteria for participation in my dissertation study. The participants included two women and one man who served as either city managers or county administrators in Georgia. Conducting the pilot interviews gave me an opportunity to field test my interview guide and improve my interviewing skills. Following the first two interviews, I met with the methodologist on my doctoral committee to review the interview transcripts and consult regarding any needed changes to the interview questions. We revised the interview guide and my methodologist provided some useful feedback on my interview skills that was helpful for conducting the third pilot interview.

For data collection for this dissertation study, I interviewed each participant individually in one face-to-face interview at their City Halls that ranged from one to two and a half hours.

Interviews were audio-taped using two recorders and transcribed verbatim as soon as possible afterwards. I hired an experienced transcriptionist to help prepare the transcriptions.

Watt (2007) highlights the benefits of keeping a reflective journal during the research process, including using writing as a means of qualitative inquiry, encouraging deeper reflexivity, and making connections between theory and practice. Immediately after completing each interview, I wrote field note journal entries with short narratives and notes of my reflections about the conversation, what information the participant emphasized, contextual observations, and other relevant details. I also wrote memos to myself during data analysis and the dissertation writing process. The journal entries were helpful in tracking my thoughts about the study, as well as my own learning.

I conducted the introductory and in-depth interviews with eight women city manager participants between September 2012 and March 2013. The timing was drawn out due to my working full-time, the holidays, and the geographical dispersion of the cities whose managers participated. I had hoped to strategically schedule a couple of interviews on the same day to make the most of travel time and time off from work, but scheduling did not allow that. Five of the eight interviews took place between January and March 2013.

### **Data Analysis**

Data analysis was ongoing as I conducted interviews and received the transcribed interview files from the transcriptionist. As noted briefly above, Flanagan (1954) developed data analysis procedures as part of his work with critical incident technique. Interview data is transcribed verbatim and critical incidents are extracted from the transcription. An incident or experience is considered critical or significant if the participant considers it to be. After the critical incidents are extracted from the interview transcripts, a small sample of the incidents is

sorted into piles related to the aim of the study. Once preliminary categories have been created and defined, the researcher sorts the remaining incidents into them and amends or adds categories as needed until all of the incidents have been sorted.

Butterfield et al. (2005) assert that the categories established through this technique “may or may not capture the context of the situation and are reductionist by definition” (p. 481). Because CIT was initially developed for the task analysis of behaviors that are observable, they further recommend that scholars should be mindful in using it for data analysis for studies whose objectives require an in-depth examination of context or explore non-observable phenomenon such as personal experiences or perceptions. This note of caution is relevant for this study, because the objective was to elicit the experiences and perceptions of women city managers related to informal and incidental learning. Understanding context is also critical to my study because of the highly political, gendered context of the city management profession.

Narrative or content analysis is a qualitative method that has been successfully used by researchers (Ellinger, 1997; Cseh, 1998) to analyze data collected using CIT. Creswell (2007) indicates that one option for beginning to analyze narrative data and explore context is to extract stories, or critical incidents, from interview transcripts and ‘re-story’ them by arranging them into chronological order. Cseh (1998) notes that the task of extracting critical incidents from transcribed interviews can prove challenging because “bits and pieces of incidents were found embedded in the descriptions of other incidents” (p. 78). I found this to be true when piecing together the rich details of the learning experiences shared by the participants.

The second step is coding the interview data into categories. Butterfield et al. (2005) outline three stages of creating a categorization scheme using content analysis: defining a frame

of reference grounded in the general aim of the study, determining the categories, and setting the level of specificity for reporting. Incidents are coded and then classified into categories.

Bogden and Biklen (2007) suggest creating coding families such as setting/context, definition of the situation, perspectives held by subjects, subjects’ ways of thinking about people and objects, process, activity, event, strategy, relationship and social structure, narrative, and methods. These codes serve to categorize the data and link to theory, but they also offer a reminder that the process of data analysis “is a process of data reduction. Decisions to limit codes are imperative” (p. 185-186). Organizing and coding the data was a several-stage process as I read and re-read the transcripts. Table 5 shows the preliminary and final codes used to categorize the data for this study.

Table 5

*Data Coding Categories*

Research Questions	Preliminary Codes	Final Codes
What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career?	Serendipity Higher education connection Background in accounting Mentoring I want to run something by you Dig in to new opportunities Challenging assignments Broad knowledge of functions Encouragement to apply	Higher education connection Serendipity Gaining broad knowledge of city functions Mentoring Serving as Acting or Interim City Manager

Table 5 (continued)

Research Questions	Preliminary Codes	Final Codes
How do women city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy), politics (elected officials), and the public?	Mentors Serve as interim CM Build a good team Trial and error Give credit to Council/others Keep professional distance Focus on the work Do your homework and be prepared You never stop learning Ask questions Accept input Build relationships Communicate often Separate personal from professional Make tough decisions Find multiple paths to same place Professional associations	Build a good team Have a mentor Work with elected officials Interact with the public Serve as acting/interim city manager Focus on the work, not the politics Never stop learning Be active in professional associations
What are some of the barriers faced by women city managers to succeeding in city management?	Lack of formal education "Not freaking yourself out" Balancing work & family responsibilities Need to prove yourself Elected officials' perceptions of women Conflict with Council	Confronting gender stereotypes Balancing career & personal/family commitments Proving herself as a manager

There are several benefits to narrative analysis. One is that the context and complexity of the rich narrative data is preserved through the coding process. Narrative analysis is also flexible in that data can be coded and recoded until the researcher is satisfied with the classification scheme. It is cost effective, as the main cost is the researcher's time and effort. Creswell (2007) mentions that some researchers include frequency counts of codes as a quantitative indicator.

However, he notes that counts of codes can also serve as a limitation because a simple count does not indicate emphasis or the narrative context in which the code was used.

Other limitations of narrative analysis include reliance on the researcher's judgment in coding and creating a categorization scheme that represents the participant's narrative and the objectives of the study. As Bogden and Biklen (2007) point out: "you are not attempting to come up with the right coding system, or even the best. What is right or best differs according to your aims" (p. 185). The section below on validity and reliability will outline steps to address potential issues of trustworthiness.

Finally, narrative analysis is bound by the words that are recorded and transcribed during an interview. While researchers often take detailed field notes and write memos regarding their experiences and observations during interviews, coding and categories are created based on the text of transcribed interviews. This does not include key aspects of unrecorded communication such as pauses, silences, body language, what is left unsaid, subtext, and contextual factors (Creswell, 2007). This reliance on transcribed text without the context of unrecorded communication can potentially limit the analysis.

### **Validity and Reliability**

An underlying implication of my study is to identify ways that municipal managers and elected officials can foster and support informal and incidental learning opportunities to encourage women to assume leadership roles within city government. Because my interests are applied, the trustworthiness of my study is crucial. As Merriam (1995) aptly states: "We want to feel confident incorporating research findings into our practice, for what we do affects the lives of real people" (p. 51). Trustworthiness includes concerns with internal validity, external

validity, and reliability. Methods of enhancing trustworthiness also serve as checks against researcher biases.

Internal validity is concerned with the credibility of study findings and whether the findings reflect what is being investigated. In other words, are the findings reflective of what is actually going on? Watt (2007) recalls her concerns about trustworthiness as a new researcher: “Is my study just going to end up being a self-fulfilling prophecy? By this I mean, I know what I will/want to find, so I’ll just go in and find it, and won’t that be easy!” (p. 93). These concerns can be mitigated in various ways.

Several methods to bolster internal validity include the researcher immersing herself in the research site, conducting member checks, involving colleagues or research partners in examining the data, utilizing participatory or collaborative forms of research, and triangulation. For this study, I conducted member checks as completed data collection and began data analysis. As part of these member checks, I asked study participants to provide feedback on themes I identified from analyzing all of the interviews. Butterfield et al. (2005) refer to this step as participant cross-checking. Concepts and themes that emerge through narrative analysis were also shared and reviewed with members of my doctoral committee, a strategy known as peer/colleague examination (Merriam, 1995).

External validity relates to the generalizability or transferability of study findings. With applied qualitative research, the importance of external validity is in helping readers of your research to ascertain whether your findings might also be applicable in their own program, case, or site. This is known as reader or user generalizability (Merriam, 1995). One method I used to enhance external validity is providing thick, rich description to describe my study participants, the contexts in which they work as city managers, the language they use to describe important

informal and incidental learning experiences in their careers, and the incidents, examples, and suggestions they share. By documenting information-rich exchanges, readers of my research can assess the applicability of findings to their specific organization or context. Another strategy that strengthens the external validity of my study is that it is multi-site, including women city managers serving in municipalities that vary in population and urbanicity and are geographically dispersed in the southern United States.

The third component of trustworthiness is reliability, or whether the findings make sense in relation to the data. Peer examination is one method of improving reliability that I used with members of my doctoral committee. It is similar to member checking, but is conducted with peers experienced in qualitative research who can provide input on the process of sorting identified critical incidents into the identified preliminary categories (Butterfield et al., 2005). Reliability is also strengthened by the thorough audit trail I documented of my research, including interview transcriptions and my journal of field notes from each interview. I also wrote several journal entries while conducting narrative analysis to document the process, similar to the reflective research journal advocated by Watt (2007).

### **Researcher Bias and Assumptions**

As the primary instruments of qualitative research, researchers must be aware of their positionality. Bogdan and Biklen (2007) offer some perspective: “Acknowledge that no matter how much you try, you cannot divorce your research and writing from your past experiences, who you are, what you believe, and what you value...The goal is to become more reflective and conscious of how who you are may shape and enrich what you do, not to eliminate it” (p. 38). One way researchers can address their biases and assumptions is to articulate them.

My interest in using critical incidence technique is due to its constructivist approach. While Flanagan's CIT originally had a positivist orientation, Ellinger and Watkins (1998) suggest that taking a constructivist approach to CIT data collection and analysis "amplifies our understanding of the behavior as a function of individual action in an organizational context" (p. 5). This shift of orientation acknowledges the agency of study participants as learners and co-researchers in sharing information about critical incidents in their career development. Kain (2004) agrees, noting: "the entire premise of critical incident research is a handing over to research participants the power to deem whatever they choose as 'critical'...critical incidents are created by the person to whom they are critical" (p. 81).

During the course of this study, I realized that the name 'critical incident technique' is not truly reflective of the data gathering process when the method is used within a constructivist approach. The word 'incident' implies an action or event that takes place at a specific point in time, as was the case when it was formerly used within a behavioral approach. The critical experiences the city manager participants shared with me during this study were longer in duration than an incident, sometimes taking place over the course of days, weeks, or even months. When used as a constructivist approach as in this study and others like it, I propose that the technique should be called critical experience technique. This name better emphasizes the rich narratives of time and experience that are constructed, shared, and collected using this method.

I believe adults actively shape and are shaped by their learning experiences, and therefore my research questions focus on the informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers perceive have been important to shaping their career development. Like Kain (2004), in selecting critical incident technique, I am "opting for an epistemology that conceives of

research as an interactive venture” (p. 82). Study participants were co-learners in this study, constructing and sharing their critical incident narratives and assisting with member checks of themes I identified during narrative analysis. This collaboration over time between the participants and me is also better reflected in the name critical experience technique.

Other biases, or lenses, through which my work is refracted are my ongoing interest in city management and my experiences as a woman in working in community development with predominantly men community leaders and elected officials. I earned my master of public administration in 2004 and have always been interested in city or county management as a potential career path. I currently work as a public service faculty member at a land-grant university, working closely with the city manager, county manager, and community leaders in a rural community to help to develop connections between local groups and higher education resources. The local executive committee to whom I report is composed of nine men and one woman, who has only very recently joined the group. My work has heightened my awareness of the gender dimensions of politics, power, and leadership development in local communities and local government. While I have been extremely fortunate to have a number of wonderful men mentors throughout my career, I believe there are gender aspects to leadership, politics, and management that impact the career development of women in local government.

## CHAPTER 4

### PORTRAITS OF INDIVIDUAL PARTICIPANTS

People and their experiences are the heart of any qualitative research study, and this chapter will describe the generous women city managers participants and the critical informal and incidental learning incidents they shared with me to develop this study. The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the informal and incidental learning experiences that current female city managers in the Southern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management. The three research questions guiding this exploratory qualitative study are:

1. What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career?
2. How do women city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy) and politics (elected officials)?
3. What are some of the barriers faced by women city managers to succeeding in city management?

This study was designed to use Critical Incident Technique, asking participants to describe the most important informal learning experiences that they identify as having been critical to their career development as city managers. Participants shared these key learning experiences with me during face-to-face, semi-structured interviews that were conducted at each of their City Halls. During our conversations, I asked each woman to share specific stories from her career

development journey with me. As each of us continually constructs meaning in our lives, we reflect and make sense of our experiences through storytelling, both the stories we understand within our own heads, and also the ones we choose to share with one another.

### **Portraits of Women City Managers**

This section will include portraits of each of the women city managers that participated in the study, as well as the critical informal and incidental learning incidents they shared. With a relatively small population of women city managers in the Southeast, I struggled with how to preserve each participant's confidentiality and sensitive information while still allowing the thick, rich description of their experiences to take center stage. Each city manager, the municipality where she currently serves, and any other cities or organizations where she previously worked have been assigned pseudonyms. Several participants shared stories or information that they asked me during our conversations not to include in anything I wrote about the study, and those requests have been honored. The cities where the women serve are described using population ranges to provide context regarding size without compromising confidentiality, and any unique events or geographical features that might be identifiable have been described in less specific terms to preserve the context but not the details.

#### **Lauren Cooper**

As I was creating my list of potential participants, several mutual colleagues referred me to Lauren Cooper. She has served the city for over thirty years, including eight as city manager. She began her career in the private sector, first working as a customer service manager with a large utility provider. Later she was an office manager for an agricultural supply firm and gained a love of accounting through learning to buy and sell commodities. She shifted to the public sector, joining the city as a customer service manager, was promoted to department head, and

parlayed her love of accounting and finance into a role as Finance Director before being named city manager.

We met in the conference room of a historic building that had been beautifully renovated. Lauren's down-to-earth friendliness and sense of humor really made the conversation flow and helped me overcome my first-interview jitters. Unfortunately, the pacing of our conversation was influenced by the rumbling of our mutual colleagues' stomachs, and the length and richness of our conversation was somewhat limited by the lure of a group lunch at the local meat and three restaurant.

**Navigating the politics: Communication, collaboration, and building relationships.**

Several years ago, Lauren was at her home in the historic district one evening when a natural disaster occurred, blowing in the windows in her dining room, taking the roof off, and knocking down all the trees in her yard. In the midst of the chaos and panic, she knew she needed to leave her house to get to work. She got into her car and started the engine before realizing that there was no way she could back out of her driveway due to the trees. In her rush to get to the city public safety building, she began walking through the rain and around and over fallen trees and limbs without even thinking to take an umbrella. She remembers: "When I got there, I looked like a wet rat, my hair was a mess...but I got there."

Once she arrived and was briefed by the Police and Fire Chiefs, she began calling City Council members and department heads from her phone list to update them on the situation. Initial reports were that there were a number of deaths, which fortunately turned out to be false. As the City worked to set up a generator and telephone lines at the public safety building in the wee hours of the morning, city crews, volunteers, and department heads began to arrive.

Lauren suggested to the Mayor that they set up regular meetings, so that “the left hand knew what the right hand was doing,’ and also so “the public knew what we were doing.” They held their first joint meeting of the city departments, the county, and local and state agencies, that first morning at 8:00 am. Lauren wryly explained that while they had some prior disaster plans in place, “It’s interesting because our emergency response plan, we did it because we had to. We didn’t do it thinking we’d ever use it, and we didn’t really put a whole lot of thought into it, so we have since tweaked that plan a great deal and hopefully we won’t ever have to use it again but if we do, it will be there.”

Another important decision was the need to develop a plan for registering and organizing volunteers who arrived to help with the clean-up and disaster response efforts. She asked: “Who ever thought volunteers would be a problem? But they were a problem.” They had to create procedures on the spot for volunteer management to ensure volunteers could be tracked and sent to where their help was most needed in the city. For Lauren, the significance of all of her informal and incidental learning through this natural disaster to her career development was the importance of building and maintaining ongoing working relationships not just within the city departments, but also with other governmental agencies, local businesses, and service providers.

**Navigating the politics: Managers have to make and follow through on tough decisions.** Lauren shared an experience that occurred when her city, like many others during the economic issues of the past several years, faced some financial challenges. Property values had declined, reducing the amount of taxes the city was able to collect, and she and the department heads were struggling to balance the city’s budget. The council was reticent to increase the millage tax rate. In examining options for cutting costs without furloughing all city employees,

Lauren reviewed individual departments and positions and recommended and received City Council approval to lay off five employees.

One employee who was impacted was a very good friend who she had known for years. Lauren slowly walked down the stairs from her office in City Hall to her friend's office one floor below to deliver the bad news. She sat down and explained the budget research she had done, and then the conclusion that it would be much cheaper for the city to outsource her position rather than continue to pay salary, benefits, and the ongoing expenses of maintaining updated equipment. Caught off-guard by the decision, her friend was very angry and very hurt, and could not understand why she was losing her job. "Oh, it was awful," Lauren recalls, "it was very difficult, I explained it to her and to this day, she's not the same with me." She made it through the difficult conversation and started the slow climb back up the stairs to her office: "The minute I got to my floor, I just cried and cried and cried. I couldn't help it."

The experience was significant to Lauren's career development because it was a decision that she and the Council didn't want to make, but had to. She "realized at that point that I was dealing with people's lives, and that I needed to do a better job of monitoring what was going on, or monitoring the budget, of catching it earlier. So, it has helped me be more aware of the control that I really have. I have a lot of power over people and I don't want to abuse that power." Managers have to make tough decisions and follow through on them even though they often aren't pleasant or easy.

**Navigating the politics: Going overboard to create solutions for citizens.** Just after Lauren was appointed as city manager, she had a visit from a local African-American woman and her son. She recognized the son from her previous work at the city and thought of him as "belligerent" and confrontational due to previous interactions they had. The woman's property

adjoined a piece of city property, and the city had planted some trees along the border of the property several years prior. Apparently, the public works department had inadvertently planted several of the trees on the wrong side of the property line, on the woman's property. Since the trees had been planted, they had grown and bushed out, taking up more and more space in her backyard.

Her son was very upset about the trees and wanted to know what the city planned to do about the mistake. Lauren offered for the city to remove the trees from the yard with their permission, but the son instead countered by requesting payment from the city. Feeling a bit intimidated, Lauren reacted defensively, asserting: " We improved your property by putting trees out there and we're not going to give you any money." The minute the words were out of her mouth, she realized that she could have handled it in a better way, but they had already been spoken. The city and the property owner ended up hiring attorneys and going to court. The property owner lost the case in court, but afterwards, the City Council voted to pay the woman three thousand dollars.

The learning experience was significant to Lauren because it taught her that she should have asked more questions, beginning with asking the woman and her son what they wanted the city to do to remedy the situation, and then negotiating. She noted that she's "made it a point since then to go overboard if I know somebody is...highly vocal and negative against the city, not me personally, but against the city. I know that I go overboard to try to make them happy, to try to come up with a solution that we can both live with" The experience taught her to treat people respectfully and work with them to make recommendations that meet their needs.

## **Jennifer Tyler**

My meeting with Jennifer Tyler took place in her city hall, which is part of a modern new municipal complex including a park and community center. We met in a spacious conference room with a wall of windows looking out over the complex. As we introduced ourselves prior to turning on the voice recorders, we talked about my interest in pursuing a career in city management, and a local government management conference she had just attended. The combination of her recent experience at conference workshops about advancing women in the profession and her generosity in sharing advice with me during and after the interview made this a very warm, reflective conversation.

Jennifer decided in high school that she wanted to be a federal bureaucrat and began pursuing her goal by majoring in political science and minoring in business as an undergraduate. She went directly into graduate school in public administration and earned her degree during a time when she was one of few women in the program. Initially employed by the federal government, Jennifer soon switched to local government when she took a position as the director of a job-training program. The city manager she worked for encouraged her to apply for a newly created assistant city manager position and after some initial hesitation, she did so and was hired. Jennifer had the opportunity to serve as an interim manager when the city manager left, but decided she did not want the permanent position due to the political situation. Not wanting to spend her entire career in one community, she took a job as an assistant city manager in another part of the country. When she decided to return to the Southern United States as city manager for the municipality she now serves, it was to be closer to her family and aging parents.

**Entering the profession: “My story centers on mentorship.”** Jennifer mentioned several times during our conversation the impact that mentoring has had on her career development, and that her story centers on mentorship. “I’ve had excellent male mentors, white male mentors. I can’t take that away. I mean, when people say otherwise, I say no, that’s not true, because that has not been my experience.” One critical incident she recalled was the support and encouragement she received from the city manager she worked for to consider applying for a new assistant city manager position he had created.

Serving as director of the job training program was very meaningful to Jennifer because she could see the results of her department’s efforts: “It was very fulfilling because I was helping people get training and get jobs, which really turned their lives around, and so I was fine with that.” She and her husband had an eighteen month-old daughter and were pregnant with their second child when the city manager decided to add an assistant manager position. She said she was “oblivious” when he mentioned it in department head meetings because things were going well with her program and she was already thinking ahead to maternity leave. “Oh, that’s nice,” she recalls thinking, because she was not interested and knew several of the other department heads were “just dying to be assistants.”

One day when she was six months pregnant, the city manager called Jennifer and asked her to meet with him. During the meeting, he asked her if she was interested or had considered applying for the position. He suggested that she give it some thought, said he wasn’t worried about her upcoming maternity leave, and encouraged her to at least submit her name to be part of the applicant pool. “I’m good,” thought Jennifer, who initially didn’t want to apply because she felt she was at a good place with her career and family. Her family made the difference, telling her: “We’ll help! You should do it; you’re qualified.” She met with the city manager a second

time, applied, and was selected. Despite the stress of a newborn and her new role as assistant city manager, she found that she really enjoyed working in the community, because it was her hometown and she knew a lot of the people. The city manager mentored her by giving her opportunities to hone her skills.

**Navigating the politics: “I thought if I stay a year, boy, that’s a feat.”** When Jennifer was hired by the City of Camptown, she felt she was met with a lot of expectations because the city had never had a woman city manager or an African American city manager. She sensed that the African American city employees thought: “Oh this is great and now we have a black city manager and blah, blah.” On the other hand, Jennifer considered her responsibility as being to the organization as a whole. The city had been undergoing a gradual transition from the population being majority European American to being majority African American. The city's elected leadership had long been European American, but had just transitioned to an African American woman Mayor and majority African American City Council. Jennifer discovered that the city had long been insulated without a lot of public involvement in government. While the transition in leadership had taken place, “you had a group of people who just wanted to sort of switch races and keep doing the same thing.”

In reviewing the city’s operations, she found that there was little basic administrative infrastructure. For example, they did not have a pay and classification system; it was normal for employees to receive ten percent pay increases each year, mid-level employees had car allowances, and there were positions that were not necessary for a city of Camptown’s size. For the city to “still be operated like Mayberry was just astonishing,” she observes, “I’m serious, I was shocked.” The City did not have a human resources director, and the person serving as finance director was more like a bookkeeper. The city administration was “just a mom and pop

kind of thing,” and she soon understood why Camptown had not been able to do much in the past other than just pay the employees. The existing compensation and benefits practices, or lack thereof, had resulted in the city’s budget being spent on employees rather than on the city or providing services.

As Jennifer focused on the task of making changes and developing policies to implement administrative and financial structures, she not only faced resistance from employees, but also dealt with power struggles between the Mayor and the city council. Prior to Jennifer being hired, the Mayor had attempted to bring in a new slate of staff including a new city manager, city attorney, and judge who she felt would be loyal to her. The Council had successfully blocked the Mayor, but “from that point on, it was hell.” Accusations, lawsuits, and EEOC complaints abounded. The city council members used intimidation and bullying towards Jennifer, threatening her by saying: “Oh, we need to relook at your contract again,” when they felt they did not get their way.

Dealing with the power dynamics between the Mayor and Council made Jennifer think hard about her back-up plan. She still owned a house in her hometown, and she told herself: “If things really get crazy, I could really walk home, it’s a hundred miles, it might take me all day, but I could get there. I didn’t really expect to stay a year. I thought, if I stay a year, boy, that’s a feat.” These informal and incidental learning experiences were significant to her career development because it was Jennifer’s first job as a city manager. The decisions that needed to be made were tough, and the buck stopped with her.

**Navigating politics: Separating the personal from the professional.** Learning to separate the personal and the professional was a theme of my conversation with Jennifer. She told a story about a critical incident that taught her the necessity of being able to maintain professional relationships through identifying common ground. When she was appointed as assistant city manager, the city manager she worked with was helping lead the city in some progressive initiatives that were somewhat contentious, including one that addressed indigent healthcare. The county hospital was one of three hospitals in the city, and had traditionally served patients of lower socioeconomic status and inmates in the county jail. The county hospital was in bad shape in terms of image and finances.

A new hospital CEO was hired, who Jennifer described as “smart and fairly ruthless, but really smart.” The city funded the county hospital with a million dollars for indigent and inmate care. The CEO used the funds innovatively to increase efficiency and improve the hospital’s image, using interns like a teaching hospital to reduce the need for higher paid physicians, spinning off units to create profit centers, and gaining sponsorship from a large local business for a new cancer wing.

The other two hospital administrators in the city observed the changes and the new CEO’s “cut throat” style, and set up a meeting with Jennifer and the city manager. When the administrators complained about the unfairness of the new CEO’s actions, the city manager reminded them that he had been the only administrator who had originally shown interest in his hospital providing the indigent and inmate health services funded by the city. When the city manager suggested that they set up a meeting to discuss how all three hospitals might share responsibility for the some of the services, the two responded that they “wouldn’t want to sit in a

room with him.” In contrast, the new CEO offered to meet with them anytime they wanted to talk.

The learning experience was revealing to Jennifer: “I learned that everything is not just up here on the business level; a lot of times people can’t separate the personal from the professional. And that’s really not a good thing...they couldn’t even find any common ground to sit in a room and talk.” It was significant to her career development because it helped her to cultivate the skill of talking with people who have very different points of view and goals.

**Navigating politics: “Beware of your own world when you work.”** Jennifer emphasized the need for maintaining professional distance with colleagues and elected officials. She described two mentors during her time working for the City of Fortson whose behavior modeled two very different styles of relating to colleagues. The first was the woman deputy city manager that hired her. Jennifer characterized her as “one of those people that either you love her or you hate her.” She pushed hard, and Jennifer valued her style because she was a good teacher and mentor, and she learned a lot from her. Even more, “she didn’t ever require us to be pals and I appreciated that, I really did, because beware of your own world when you work.”

When the City of Fortson’s male city manager left, he was succeeded by an African American woman city manager. Jennifer, who is an African American woman herself, noticed that the manager took a very different approach, using employees as friends to go shoe shopping and getting employees together at out-of-town conferences to go out for dinner to talk about their lives. The city manager had grown up almost as an only child with a much older sibling, and had never really had close friendships. Jennifer is a private person who found the city manager’s camaraderie with employees “kind of strange” and didn’t feel that model worked for her.

As she puts it: “It’s hard to remain professionals sometimes because women want to be girlfriends. You can’t be girlfriends. I mean, you can’t. You can certainly be cordial, but I don’t fraternize with my employees.” Jennifer has also consciously kept her distance from the Mayor of the city she serves because she feels that is the best way to maintain professionalism.

**Navigating the politics: “Leave all this stuff swirling around.”** Two months after Jennifer was hired as city manager of Camptown, a small child was the victim of a gang shooting at a city park. From her perspective, the tragedy served as a wake-up call to the city and the larger community “to say we need to get our heads out of the sand and really look at what’s going on.” Around that same time, the city initiated the process of reviewing and updating their comprehensive plan, having city council sessions and holding public meetings for people to share what they wanted to happen in their community. As a result of that process, a community center was identified as a key desire of residents.

The city documented and completed the comprehensive plan. They also applied for a livable centers initiative grant and gained referendum approval from voters for both redevelopment powers and a special local option sales tax (SPLOST), which would enable the city to pay back any money borrowed to construct the facility. Finding an appropriate site proved to be intensely political.

As Jennifer and city staff investigated possible locations for the town center, a local landowner offered to donate a five-acre site that adjoined a piece of property he had for sale at a premium price. City staff and planners spent a lot of time and effort trying to make the site work, even when it was apparent that purchasing the site would be too expensive, and had a number of significant drawbacks to development, including several utility easements and an ephemeral creek. Ultimately, Jennifer and the site planners decided to look at the city park where the tragic

gang shooting had occurred. The city-owned park was already exempt from property taxes, an important consideration in a highly developed community. The property was suitable for the proposed town center project, and it was selected as the site.

The selection was controversial. Prior to Jennifer being hired, the city had commissioned a study that recommended building a town center around the existing City Hall. In response to that study, a group coalesced that Jennifer described as “vehemently against the town center to start with.” To add to the politics, a council member at that time had bought up property around City Hall, and Jennifer said “he thought he was going to get a real big payday, which oh man, you’d be in jail by now.”

When the City decided to shift the site to the park, “all hell broke loose.” The council member got a group of people together to fight the decision, writing an online blog, accusing the City of stealing money, and serving the City with multiple lawsuits, one after the other. The attorney representing the group was a man who the council member had formerly wanted to appoint to a city position, so the stakes were complicated and high. Their state representative confronted Jennifer by asking “How dare you use this area for anything other than what it is? A child was killed here.”

Ultimately, the City Council did not want to prevent something positive for the community from occurring on the site of the tragedy, and approved the site. Today, the property includes the original park as well as a town center complex. Jennifer reflects on how they were able to move forward despite such contentious politics: “My thing is, somebody has to do the work. Leave all this stuff swirling around. I couldn’t get involved in it; we just continued to do the work. And now we have this complex and the beginnings of a new park. So that, to me, is validation, and the people are happy.” Some of the lawsuits against the city still linger, even as

the City hopes to include private development in the site and other communities look to the City of Camptown as a model for what is possible.

**Barriers for women in city management: Can you really have everything?** When Jennifer and I met for her interview, she mentioned that she had just returned from the annual meeting of the International City/County Managers Association (ICMA), and that our conversation was very timely because she had attended several workshops on advancing women in the profession. One of the panels she heard included women at the beginning of their careers, women who had been in the profession for a number of years, and several who had retired. The discussions she heard during the workshops made her reflect on her own career and the challenges that women contend with.

When we began our conversation, I shared a little about the study and cited the statistic that women represent roughly twenty percent of city managers in the United States. Jennifer made the point that as a woman of color, she is part of an even smaller demographic of city managers. She reflected on gender as it relates to city management:

I think you need skills that women bring to the profession. And that we really should try to promote those more than we do. But it is a very difficult situation because if you are a firm manager, you can be perceived as something that's derogatory. On the other hand, if you're a male manager, you are decisive and strong and confident, but women don't have those labels affixed to them. Nonetheless, I think women are growing in the profession and...I really have positive stories.

Having entered the world of city management a bit reluctantly but with encouragement from a mentor, Jennifer reflected that she had found the panel discussion "funny," because she had dealt with some of the same questions in her own career path. For example, one of the

panelists who had four young children was wrestling with how to balance her career as a city manager with her family and time that her work took away from her children. She summarized it as the ongoing debate about whether women can really have everything, which was a theme in her own career as she balanced the needs of caring for her family, aging parents, and two daughters as a single mother.

### **Hannah Clay**

The circumstances surrounding my conversation with Hannah Clay were probably the most exciting of the interviews for this study. When I arrived at City Hall, it was mid-morning and the receptionist told me that Hannah was in an urgent meeting and would be a little late for our appointment. I settled onto a couch in the hallway to wait for her to return. Roughly thirty minutes later, a door at the end of the hallway swung open. Several men in khakis and work boots and a tall woman in blue jeans and cowboy boots spilled out into the hallway, their conversation continuing to flow as their boots clomped purposefully in my direction. I collected my interview guide and audio recorders as the woman walked up, smiled warmly, and stuck out her hand. “Hi there, I’m Hannah Clay, and you must be the student from UGA.”

She gestured towards her office and we walked in and sat down. Hannah quickly explained that they were involved in some high-stakes inter-governmental negotiations and she had just been meeting with her department heads to develop their strategy. We began talking, and about twenty-five minutes into our conversation, one of the department heads stuck his head in the door and said, “They’re willing to meet with us, let’s go.” Hannah apologized profusely and asked if I minded waiting until she returned. I had driven quite a distance for the interview and was more than willing to wait so that we could complete it. I had also noticed with a sinking feeling that neither of my voice recorders had recorded the first part of our interview, and was

determined to finish the conversation. As Hannah and the department head headed out to the parking lot, the receptionist kindly suggested some downtown shops I could visit to pass the time until they got back.

When Hannah returned, we had a long, in-depth conversation about her critical experiences working in local government and as a city manager. Unfortunately, the technical difficulties continued and I was not able to record the conversation. In lieu of a transcription of our interview, I took copious notes and used those notes during data analysis. Not being able to record this interview is one of the few disappointments of this dissertation process. Hannah had a truly amazing story, beginning her career as a small equipment operator working on the operations floor of a local industry. She was promoted into an office job at that industry and later began her career with the city as a utility customer service representative. Through a can-do attitude and determined willingness to learn her way through some challenging administrative and political challenges, she became a department head for the city, and then city manager.

### **Mary Henry**

I met Mary Henry in her office in City Hall one morning in the historic downtown district. We have several colleagues in common and though this was the first time we had met, she was so outgoing and friendly that we started talking immediately and had to backtrack so I could turn on the audio recorders. Her career began in finance and banking, and shifted to the public sector when one of the executives of the companies where she worked ran for office with the city and was elected. He encouraged her to apply for an open position, and she was hired as an administrative assistant to the City Manager.

About a year after Mary began working for the City of Granville as the administrative assistant to the city manager, the city clerk retired. Mary was happy with her job and explains

that she didn't interview for the city clerk position because "I was at the point in my life that I was raising my children and I didn't want a lot of responsibility. I wanted to go to work from nine to five and go home and be a momma and a wife." The city council went through the process of interviewing candidates, but didn't find the person they were looking for. As Mary puts it, "My plan and the good Lord's plan wasn't the same you know?" The city manager asked her if she would interview, and she did and was selected. Mary found that she really loved the job duties, the variety, and working with the public.

The city manager was a good mentor and a strong advocate for education, and he pushed her to go back to complete her undergraduate degree and earn her master's in public administration. She was later hired as the city manager of the City of Baxton. Mary asserts that earning her degrees was one of the "best moves" she made to give her the educational background for city management. She enjoys her profession and can't see herself doing anything else.

**Entering the profession: "Come up here, I want to run something by you."** In time, the city manager that hired Mary as City Clerk in Granville left the city, and a new city manager came onboard. Like most managers, he made some changes, and one was to update Mary's job title from City Clerk to Director of Administration and Finance. With her new role, she now served as acting city manager in his absence.

Mary noticed that several mornings a week after the city manager arrived and got to work, he would call her and say: "Come up here, I want to run something by you." Initially, she wondered why he was wasting her time when she already had so much to do, but:

I soon realized how much I was learning from him and how much he shared and how much opportunity there was to learn what he knew. So, it became a really good

experience and I began to look forward to that, and I was involved in a lot of projects that I would not otherwise have been involved in had he not done that. And to this day, if I get stumped on something, I'll pick up the phone and call and say: "Give me your advice, tell me what you think about this."

This informal interaction and mentoring was significant to Mary's career development through her discovery that: "You don't have to know everything about city government, you can't know everything. But, I can be a good manager of people and resources...and get the right people in those jobs...let them be really good at their job and they'll make you good at your job." She recognized the importance of keeping employees informed with weekly meetings for each department to share and better understand the bigger picture.

**Navigating the politics: "You need to have good people...and kind of trust that they know what they're doing."** Mary shared a story of a critical experience that taught her that a city manager needs to hire good people and show trust in their expertise. It was the beginning of a holiday weekend in the City of Granville, and the traditional annual parade through the city had been planned for months. All signs pointed to a fun weekend, with crowds and families downtown enjoying music, balloons, funnel cakes, and fellowship. Plans took another turn when a disgruntled husband and wife took their attorney hostage and held him at gunpoint because they were dissatisfied with some work he had done representing them. To add to the sense of crisis, the couple had also planted several bombs around downtown Granville where the festivities were set to occur.

The city manager, who Mary describes as "very strong, very assertive," stepped back and turned over control of the situation to the Chief of Police. The Chief of Police brought in state and federal law enforcement agencies to rope off the downtown area and diffuse a couple of

bombs and secure the area. Meanwhile, the city manager "sort of kept the media at bay...but he did not jump out in the middle of the TV cameras every time they came around." Mary worked behind the scenes to craft a mutual aid agreement with neighboring police departments. The goal was to relieve city police officers so they could rotate home to sleep, since nobody was sure how long the hostage situation would last. The atmosphere was tense: "it was a lot of pressure from a lot of people because you just didn't know when it was going to end, and you just didn't know...you were hoping that nobody was going to get hurt."

Partway through the negotiations, there was a breakthrough and then a setback. The hostages were freed, but in a strange twist, the attorney "turned around and told them pretty much he didn't think they got a good deal and he took them back in and it kind of started over again." Everyone was frustrated, and the situation ended up lasting three days before it was finally resolved. Mary shared that this experience was critical to her career development because she observed the city manager's trust of his team members and his willingness to step back and take instruction from the Chief of Police. "A manager needs to...have good people, you need to be able to trust them, make sure they have the education, the training, and kind of trust that they know what they're doing."

**Navigating the politics: "You can't be afraid to go and take those risks...because it makes your city look good."** One of Mary's responsibilities with the City of Granville was coordinating elections. Planning for November generally begins in January because of all the details involved. She knew that "there are so many things outside of your control that can go wrong and they can cost you an election and have an election overturned...you have to plan." The first thing Mary did to prepare herself was to read the entire state code of elections and chart a chronological timeline of everything that she needed to do. As she shared her timeline with other

communities, she was asked to serve on the state voting commission, and was included as one of the pilot test sites for electronic voting equipment in the state.

On the day of the election in November, members of the national media, state legislature, other elected officials and dignitaries were all on hand to observe the piloting of electronic voting in Granville. Mary felt that everyone was watching and "it was a tremendous amount of pressure." She didn't usually sleep before elections anyway, but she had prepared herself well.

At lunchtime, she had arranged for tomato soup and sandwiches for the poll workers and visitors. Even though she wasn't hungry, Mary had gotten a sandwich and bowl of soup. Standing in line next to a state official, Mary turned to talk with her and accidentally turned her bowl of soup onto the front of her own blouse. Brushing off her blouse, she joked to the official: "Don't worry, if this is the worst that happens today, I'm okay!" Taking a deep breath, she buttoned her blazer over her blouse and refilled her cup of soup.

Spilling her soup was the only incident on an otherwise successful election day. A blind voter who came to the polls was interviewed after casting her ballot by the media. Mary remembered that the woman declared to the reporter that "this was the best thing that ever happened, that she had never been able to vote by herself and she never knew if she really voted for who she wanted to vote for because she had to rely on somebody else to do it for her."

Not long after the election, the state began using Mary's timeline for election training, and other communities began to call upon her for elections expertise and advice. She was invited to help teach workshops on holding elections. Mary said she felt the experience of learning how to coordinate elections was important to her career because it taught her about taking risks: "You can't be afraid to go out and take those risks and do those things to help promote those things because it makes your city look good. It made my city council look good, I wasn't concerned

how I looked, but our city got a great reputation from that." It also taught her to think reflectively about decisions and possible outcomes in order to make the best possible decision when taking on new situations or challenges.

**Navigating the politics: "It's your job to make the best recommendations you can to city council."** Like many cities, Baxton is in the electricity business. They sell electricity to residential, commercial, and industrial customers, as well as to other municipalities. Baxton's utilities department put together a very detailed, competitive proposal to provide the service to another city interested in buying electricity. Their proposal had some very stiff competition, but Mary felt confident that it "was by far the best proposal, and it was the best for their citizens, it was the lowest cost," and that "if I had been the city manager making that decision, this would be the deal, this is what we need to do."

Mary and the utilities department head attended the other city's council meeting to present their proposal and answer questions. After hearing all of the proposals, the council looked to their city manager and asked him for his recommendation. The manager, who was somewhat inexperienced, threw up his hands and hedged: "Well, whatever you think. Whatever you want to do." Mary felt that he had not done his homework by evaluating the proposals and using his expertise to provide his council members with good information. As a result, "they didn't make a good decision because they didn't have all the facts." The experience was significant to Mary's career development because she learned:

It's your job to make the best recommendation you can...to give them the best advice, to be impartial, do your homework, know the facts, make the best recommendation you can make. But at the end of the day, if your council doesn't go with it, that's their job to make

the final decision and you may not like it and not agree with it, but you have to implement it. As long as it's legal, of course.

City council members look to the city manager for her expertise and opinion, and it is crucial to keep them informed so that they can make good decisions.

**Navigating the politics: "The one thing you can take with you is your reputation."**

One community where Mary worked was a small college town, with a lot of young adults and alcohol, and the myriad issues that the combination of those two factors can create. The city had been experiencing a number of incidents related to underage drinking, drug use, and driving under the influence (DUI), and members of the public began pressuring city council to adopt more restrictive alcohol ordinances. As the pressure escalated and elections took place, students turned out at the polls to vote in new council members who Mary characterizes as "much more relaxed towards alcohol laws." One council member who was able to stay in office was a businessman who owned and had interest in several bars downtown.

The responsibility of enforcing the alcohol ordinance and issuing alcohol licenses was part of Mary's job. When police issued a citation to a business for a violation of the city's alcohol ordinance, such as selling to a minor, Mary would notify the business owner of the offense, the penalty, and the process. She also researched the facts of the violation, prepared the report, sent a copy to the business owner, and presented the information to the alcohol control board. The board included seven appointed members who heard appeals from business owners and had the authority to revoke an alcohol license if the offense was serious. Business owners could appeal a board decision to the city council, but the council would generally uphold it. The problem, as Mary soon realized, was "when you started having the same people who owned establishments

on the city council." The effect was that the business owners were appealing decisions that could cripple their businesses to their own competition.

The council member was called into question "many times, but he still had a voice and vote on every issue and it was a big time conflict of interest." The situation came to a head when two businesses owned by the council member were cited for underage sale of alcohol, and the alcohol control board revoked both of his licenses for a five-year period. Granville's city council had approved the alcohol ordinance and penalties. The alcohol control board members had made the decision to revoke the licenses. Unfortunately, the actual enforcement of the decision fell to Mary, who ended up losing her job as a result of the politics. She called the experience a "life-changing situation" that taught her "If you're going to stay in this line of work...the one thing that you can take with you forever...You know, my daddy used to say 'I've never seen anybody driving a Cadillac to the grave loaded with gold.' But the one thing you can take with you is your reputation." People know a good city manager by her reputation of doing the right thing.

### **Sarah Martin**

When I arrived at City Hall, I was really looking forward to meeting Sarah Martin because several mutual colleagues had strongly recommended her as someone to include in my study. She is highly regarded as being an innovative and skilled city manager. Sarah's office was cheerfully painted, decorated with art on the walls and mementoes from some of her international travels. Our early career development experiences are extremely similar, so talking with Sarah about her career was not only a wonderful contribution to this study, but also personally helpful as I consider my own future path.

**Entering the profession: "Oh, well working in a city can be really fun."** Sarah had always wanted to be a history and civics teacher. That is, until she began college and took Introduction to Education, when she determined "that was not going to be my future. It wasn't going to work." Disappointed, she switched her major to politics and history and visited one of her professors to talk about possible career options. As they looked through books and researched other careers, she started to consider working for government. She had already interned with the federal government and knew she did not want to work at the national level. Her college town had a council/manager form of government, so Sarah called the city manager to ask if she could talk with him about the idea of working for local government.

Sarah remembers going to his office: "He's like, 'Here's what I've done all my life and it's exciting, and blah, blah, blah,' and I was like, "Oh, well working in the city can be really fun"...It was just a great conversation about the kinds of things he did everyday." Informally learning about the day-to-day life of a city manager through a personal interaction with someone who was enthusiastic about the profession was critical to Sarah's career development because it helped her decide to enroll in a graduate program for public administration when she completed her undergraduate degree.

**Entering the profession: "We'll give you all the problems that start with 'R.'"**

Sarah's first job after graduate school was in human resources, reporting to the city manager. The city had just bought a PC computer and at the time it was a major capital expenditure. They gave her the PC so she could learn how to build a database for job applicants, a challenge that she found to be "exciting stuff." The PC was connected to a large printer the size of a small coffee table that required her to "manually adjust the paper size and the paper rolled on the little holes.

She also led the way with digitizing the city's time and leave records on the monstrous old mainframe computer.

As she gained experience, the city manager gave her more projects, "anything I wanted to do, particularly if it was something that neither the manager or the assistant manager didn't want to do." She conducted salary surveys, ran police and fire assessment centers, learned how to roll fire hoses, managed both the film and block party permitting process, and met a lot of the city staff in different departments. The manager and assistant manager asked Sarah about her career goals and when she told them she was interested in becoming an assistant city manager, they began deliberately giving her projects to help prepare her. The joke around the office was: "We'll give you all the problems that start with 'R'...and so it was like, railroads, rats...everything..."

The significance to Sarah's career development of having strong mentoring, career planning, and opportunities to work on a wide variety of projects was that she "was able to do all kinds of general stuff." In fact, when she began looking for assistant city manager jobs, "the challenge was...I couldn't find anything in another organization as an assistant manager that would let me do as much as I was already doing at that point." As luck would have it, the existing assistant city manager left unexpectedly for another position, and Sarah had already been groomed to take on the role.

**Navigating the culture: "Well, if you can figure out how to pay for it, do it."** One of the most important learning experiences that Sarah shared was the renovation of their historic City Hall. When she started working for the city, the building was still heated by steam radiators and "literally, when it rained, everyone...you had a designated place that you took your trash can for the drips." One day during a city council meeting, a chunk of plaster fell from the wall. At that time, the council members were "pretty tight with any kind of capital money or treatments or

maintenance," but Sarah managed to identify some funds to hire a local architect to develop plans for renovations as well as an addition. They had three sets of plans, a one-story plan that included a new council chamber, a two-story plan that included the new chamber and the office spaces, and a three-story plan that included the first two and added more office space.

The assistant city manager and Sarah strategized how to gain consensus from the council. Experience dictated "generally anything really big took three years to do, so you kind of have to show it to them; 'we're not quite ready.' You show it to them again; 'yeah, we're getting more ready.' And then the third time; 'okay.' And so we're kind of used to that cycle with them. " They collected information for the cost estimates and planned to show the plans and estimates to the council members during their annual retreat in February. At the retreat, Sarah and the assistant city manager laid out the plans and decided to present the two-story plans. They didn't want to ask for too much and risk the project being rejected, but they felt they needed at least some office space to be included. They "went through this whole presentation...and at the end they were basically like, 'Well, if you can figure out how to pay for it, do it.'" She and the assistant looked at each other as though they could hardly believe what they had heard.

By May, they had developed a financing plan that they presented to the city council along with the annual budget. The council adopted both in June, and the project began. It moved extremely quickly for a public sector capital project. Sarah laughs at the pace: "So, literally, in two years, we had gotten the project approved, financed, and moved out, built, moved back in." The other shoe that they were afraid would drop, never did.

The city hall renovation project kick-started what became a "huge" ten-year chain reaction, during which every one of the city's facilities will have been renovated or rebuilt. Sarah described the significance of the effort to her career: "really going through the public finance and

construction management and all of that stuff, it was something I hadn't done. So, yeah, one project that they finally approved very quickly compared to everything they'd ever done before...it's been very successful."

**Navigating the politics: "Trying to figure out how to get thrown under the bus and not get killed."** Driving down a street not far from her home, Sarah began noticing a house that always "ha[d] a lot of garbage out for one house." Neighbors had also noticed that the house was a little different, and a group of them went over and learned that it housed a community-based counseling center funded by a state agency. They went "ballistic" with questions and concerns, "and were making up tons of stories." The group talked with the city's planning director, who discovered that the center had not applied for a permit as required by the zoning ordinance, but told the neighbors that the location was not in conflict with the zoning. Sarah remembered that "of course the neighbors didn't like her answer, so they went to one of our [council members]...and so he got in on it."

The neighbors attended a city council meeting and loudly expressed their concerns while representatives from the state agency tried to clarify the purpose of the center. The commission requested Sarah to review the center, the planning director's decision, and the city's zoning ordinance. It was "clear that the [city council] wanted my recommendation to be that they had to leave. But they wanted something official to say that, and so I looked at our zoning ordinance and quite honestly, it was not clear." Her review found that while the director had made some technical errors and some mistakes in communicating effectively, they were not substantive errors. She also researched the Federal Housing Act as it applied to discrimination.

In preparing her report for the council, Sarah knew she needed to balance the concerns and support of multiple stakeholders. When she shared the report with the Mayor, he was

hesitant for her to send it to the other council members as part of their meeting agenda packet. She told him: "I've got to. I mean, I'll tone some of it down, but you asked me to do this and this is what we've got to do. The agenda packet is going out tomorrow so people will have it over the weekend." By that point, most of the council members had already gotten involved, and emails had been flying. Emails and blog activity intensified over the weekend as Sarah's report was circulated.

A highly contested aspect of the report was some statistics Sarah had included from one of the city departments. The group most strongly opposing the center had narrowed to six, "and there were two people in particular who were just...rabid. I mean, they were mean, rabid." Due to the proximity of the center to her home, people "were coming to my house with petitions...and there are still these two folks, one of them in particular...who won't talk to me, which is fine...but it was pretty traumatic and pretty intense." One had called the same city department, spoken with a different employee than Sarah had, and had received a conflicting set of statistics. Sarah was frustrated that the city department hadn't provided consistent reporting. The Mayor and several council members put pressure on her to retract her report. She resisted, stressing that the statistics she had included were correct, and "Part of it is that you pay me to tell you things you don't want to hear. If I didn't tell you things you didn't want to hear, I wouldn't be serving you." At the same time, the city attorney told her that there "was no basis for kicking them out other than this community witch hunt."

Finally, Sarah called the Mayor and suggested a compromise. She knew that the Mayor and city council wanted to resolve the issue, but "they didn't want to throw me under the bus, so I was trying to figure out how to get thrown under the bus and not get killed, or either be able to still be here after being thrown under the bus, or this is it."

Sarah offered to publically state that she was not a lawyer and that the city attorney would hire an independent attorney with expertise in zoning and housing to review the situation and issue a report. She explained: "it was a face saving for the city council...it was an option where they didn't have to publically reprimand me or make a decision that was totally a hundred and eighty degrees different."

The effect was that "it gave us some breathing room and an outside, independent expert, you know, weighed in on it." The independent attorney's report concurred with Sarah's, so the city council ultimately decided not to take any action. In the background, Sarah internally worked with the planning director to ensure the center went through the required application and permitting process. A positive outcome was that the neighborhood association was reenergized during the process, and their leadership reached out to the city, developed a community garden, and a neighborhood watch program. Things came full circle when the neighborhood association was working to identify community safe spaces in their area, and decided to include the pre-crisis center as a safe place. Sarah said, "You get these moments every so often and when they happen, you just...luckily no one can read the bubbles in my head."

This situation involved informal learning that Sarah identified as very important to her career development because she learned to navigate a very emotional community issue and "be able to still be here after being thrown under the bus." Sarah chuckled about the nature of city management:

If you start getting thrown under the bus a lot, it's probably time to find a new terminal. I mean there is some art of...the art of coming up with multiple ways to get to the same place. I think a part of it is you've got to know where your line in the sand is, and when

it's time to defend it, you've got to stand up and defend it. But if it's not beyond that line, then you can figure out how to make it work.

It is a valuable political skill to enable stakeholders involved in a contentious issue to save face while edging out of their respective corners.

### **Kathy Phelps**

Kathy and I met late one morning in the lobby of City Hall. She gave me a very warm welcome and I immediately felt comfortable talking with her. She led me across the lobby and around the corner to her office for us to talk. Kathy's office included neatly organized bookcases with binders and reports lined up on the shelves. As I took it all in, I imagined that they probably contained many years and hundreds of thousands of hours of city efforts, ranging from annual budgets to ordinances to emergency management plans to architectural renderings for parks and community facilities. In front the binders on the shelves sat picture frames with photos of family and grandchildren. We sat down at a small table and began to talk as we signed the confidentiality forms and I turned on my audio recorder. During our conversation, Kathy's enthusiasm for the work that she does for the city was truly infectious and inspiring.

**Entering the profession: "When can you start?"** Serendipity played a big role in Kathy beginning her career in city government. She had just left a job in the private sector and was looking for a position where she could work during the day while taking college courses towards her degree in the evening. At the time, the local board of education and the city shared office space. She walked into the lobby during her lunch break, intending to find out if there were any positions available in the school system.

The school system offices were dark because they closed for lunch, so Kathy walked to the other side of the lobby to talk to a "very pregnant lady" who asked if she could help. When

Kathy explained that she had wanted to apply for a job with the school system, the woman asked if she could type and take shorthand. Kathy replied that she could do both, and the woman handed her a city job application and instructed her: "If you'll fill out this application, I'll get it to my boss." Putting her hands to her belly, she continued: "Because I've got to go have this baby and we need somebody that can start right away. When can you start?" Hearing that story, I teased Kathy that if it had gone the other way, she might now be the school superintendent instead of the city manager.

Her interview process with the Finance Director and City Clerk included the usual questions about work experience, school, and her career goals. The elected Finance Commissioner, however, posed more personal questions about marriage, family, and: "Are you going to start a family soon?" Such questions were not uncommonly asked of women job applicants at that time, "but still, today...you don't touch questions like that." Kathy was hired as a junior clerk working at the City of Williston's front customer service counter and promoted to senior clerk within a short time. She continued her steady career development by being promoted through the ranks of the accounting department, handling bank statements and payroll. As Finance Director and City Clerk, Kathy's responsibilities expanded with more involvement in citywide decision making, assisting the city manager, managing staff, and twice serving as interim city manager. Spending six months as Assistant City Manager afforded Kathy just enough time to hire and train a new Finance Director and City Clerk before she was appointed as Williston City Manager by the city council.

**Entering the profession: "How do you think this will go over?"** Like Mary Henry, Kathy Phelps also described regular meetings with her city manager in Williston as critical experiences in her career development. The city manager would call her into his office in the late

afternoon to talk about plans and ask her advice for how to present and frame ideas or projects that he had in mind. Kathy recalled: "He would ask me...and I used the term 'Williston-ize it'...How do you think this will go over? Do you think the citizens of Williston can get used to this? Will they accept it?" One specific example is when they strategized how to advocate for a proposed residential paving fee to both the citizens and the council, including visiting civic groups to garner support. Kathy identified these afternoon brainstorming sessions as critical to her career development because she was able to better understand the process the city manager used "and the decision trees he would make." The exchange represented reciprocal mentoring in that Kathy provided advice and helped her city manager learn about the community, but she learned a lot, too.

**Entering the profession: "I'm better prepared. With each manager I was also learning."** When Kathy's mentor, Ed, left his job as Williston's city manager, Kathy was less than excited about working for someone new. "No way," she thought, "No way am I going to devote my life to making them successful and helping them run the city when they're just going to leave and then we're back to ground zero." The council had named her interim city manager for a second time, and so she decided to apply for the position herself. The outcome was very disappointing because she was not hired, especially because "nobody on the council told me they weren't going to hire me." Kathy only found out the news when she said the police chief commented to her, "Hey, um, sorry you didn't get that position," and she had to act as though she already knew. All she could do was respond, "Well, it's okay, it will work out, things always work out for the best."

Instead of becoming bitter about the decision, Kathy made herself "walk in the shoes of the city council" and "decided to do a self examination...alright, if you were on the council, what

would it take to make you the person that they would hang their hat on and say 'This is a person when needs to be our next city manager'?" After a lot of thought and prayer, she concluded that getting her degree was the one thing she was missing that could make her "be the professional manager that our city deserved. A person that the city council could defend when they put a name out there and announced: 'This is going to be our city manager.'" Making school a priority, she worked out her schedule with the new city manager, Sam, so she could attend classes. Her goal was to position herself so that she would be ready when Sam retired.

A pledge Kathy made when Sam was hired was "I'm going to be very supportive of Sam, and I'm going to tell him everything I know about being city manager so that he can be the best city manager he can be, and I'm going to be his loudest cheerleader." They had worked together previously, and when Sam began, she also expressed her support to him. Sam was city manager for six years, and during that time Kathy was able to finish her degree in accounting, continue learning through serving as Finance Director and City Clerk, and provide care for several close family members who really needed her during difficult transitions in their lives. Not being the city manager during that time allowed her the flexibility to provide support to family and the time to be able to take time off when she really needed to. She thinks back that there were "a lot of things over that six year stretch that I look back on, and thinking 'Thank you for taking care of me, Lord. You knew what was best for me even though in that initial hurt of not getting the job, I didn't understand. Now, I understand.' And six years later, I'm better prepared. With each manager, I was also learning."

**Negotiating the politics:** "As you get a new opportunity, you just dig in." After working five years on the front counter, Kathy was promoted to the accounting department. The senior accountant had worked for the city for a quite a while and would not train anybody

because she was worried it might impact her job security. She also had a habit of threatening to retire when something upset her. Kathy remembers at least two occasions when the senior accountant threw her retirement papers on the department head's desk on her way out the door to lunch, and then apologized and took them back when she got back to the office. One day, after writing a check for incentive pay for an employee in a different department, she was "fired up" and tried the same stunt on the way to lunch. This time, the director had the papers notarized and mailed them while she was at lunch.

When she returned and apologized, the director told her: "I'm sorry, but you're retiring as you've suggested you want to do." The senior accountant expressed some hard feelings towards Kathy, because she believed the director would not have mailed the papers if Kathy had not been there and willing and able to fill her job. Kathy reminded her that she had made the decision to retire, and that she would accept the position if it was offered to her because it was a great opportunity.

As Kathy explains her approach: "If you call it success, one factor in my success is I've loved every job I've ever had here, and I guess it shows. As you get a new opportunity, you just dig in." She had gained some experience running payroll and doing accounting when the senior accountant had been on vacation. In addition, Kathy created a chart of deadlines, created what she called an "if I die before I wake" notebook to document everything that needed to be done for each position she held with the city, and reorganized the accounting filing system to make it easier to find information more quickly.

**Navigating the politics: "It's hard to ever go back."** One of Williston's city managers that Kathy especially enjoyed working with was Ed. They would often meet in his office in the late afternoon and talk about projects and ideas, and Ed would ask Kathy for her insight to

"Williston-ize" different plans he was thinking through. That entailed coaching Ed on how the community might perceive an issue, helping him better understand local politics, or adjusting the details of a plan to improve its chance of acceptance by the community. In these meetings, they were mentoring each other and sharing their expertise.

One issue that Kathy and Ed collaborated together to "Williston-ize" was a proposal for a special fee to support residential paving in the city. The goal was to raise funds for paving through fees so that the city's general funds would support "just your basic services." Kathy and the city manager worked to sell the idea to the community by visiting civic groups and building upon existing public support for the need for paving. Their proposed plan was to implement a four-dollar fee.

They presented the proposal to city council, which voted to approve it. The Mayor decided to veto it, and the council negotiated by cutting the paving fee to two dollars. Unfortunately, when the fee was reduced to two dollars, the economics did not generate enough revenue to cover the cost of paving. As a result, it was still necessary for the Finance Director to transfer money out of the general fund to pay for paving. Kathy says there is still lingering confusion: "Well the citizens, still today, think that your sanitation fee is going for paving...it's not." The confusion between the original proposal and the one that was approved by the Mayor and council "has created a little bit of distrust on the public side because they think we tricked them and we didn't trick them. That [*the four dollar fee*] was what we proposed; it just didn't pay us that way."

The significance of this experience to Kathy's career was the understanding that "you have to be careful in presenting things to the public and educating them on how it's all going to work until the council approves it. This was the lesson learned there; wait and see how it passes,

how much money you've got." This effort revealed to Kathy that in local government, it can be "hard to go back, clear that up" once a plan has been shared publicly, even if changes are made during the approval process.

**Negotiating the politics: "I had to call the roll to fire him."** Kathy identified the significance of the time she spent working with Sam as giving her an opportunity to observe how Sam interacted with the city council. His style was very different from Ed's, in that Sam "ma[de] sure that each one had the same information to make decisions on. And with Ed, it was more like, you work the ones you need to work. Try to make sure you've got your four votes." Kathy felt that Sam's approach was very important. She had seen the result of Ed's style, because "on two different occasions I had to call the roll to fire him, and it failed both times, but he saw the handwriting was on the wall. He needed to be looking for something else." Six months before Sam retired, he promoted Kathy to a new Assistant City Manager position that had been created. That gave her time to hire and train a new Finance Director and City Clerk before Sam retired and the city council appointed Kathy as Williston's City Manager.

**Barriers for women in city management: "I think they expected since I was a woman that I would be all talk."** When Kathy was promoted to Finance Director/City Clerk, she became a department head. At that time, all of the other city department heads were men, and they had a routine of riding together to luncheons with the city's elected officials. In the car on the way to the meeting, they would share what was going on with each other. The men invited her to ride with them, but she said she noticed that "after a while, I wasn't one of the boys because they thought I would tell them everything going on, and...I couldn't discuss that with them." In her role, she was privy to conversations with the city manager about compensation-related projects and decisions that she could not share with them.

The other department heads couldn't get any information out of her, even though she told me that she perceived "they expected since I was a woman that I would be all talk and tell them everything I knew." Kathy was hurt that they no longer wanted to ride to lunch with her, but once she explained her role, they worked through it professionally. This experience was important to her career development because Kathy's discretion in safeguarding sensitive information resulted in some of the department heads coming to her office to talk things over with her: "they respected the fact that if they had something that they needed somebody to talk to about, they knew it wasn't going anywhere." She had gained access to the informal network of department heads.

**Barriers for women in city management: "This is too stressful a job for a woman to handle."** At the council meeting when Kathy was appointed interim city manager, one of the council members spoke against the decision, asserting: "Well, I think this is too stressful a job for a woman to handle. I think with Kathy and her family and stuff, I just feel like that's going to be very stressful." The council voted to approve Kathy's appointment, and the member called her later to explain that he supported her personally and knew that she was a dedicated hard worker. Then, he repeated his earlier comments from the council meeting to her. Kathy assured him, "Well, I promise you my family won't hinder me from doing a good job for you. I will work hard and assure you that I will make certain that every citizen who calls, that their complaints are handled and anything that you need me to do, I'm glad to do and will not miss a beat."

As circumstances would have it, the council member's daughter became the principal at one of Williston's well-respected schools. Some time later, Kathy ran into the council member and his wife at a special event at the school. They pulled her aside and he complimented her work: "You know I remember thinking that might be a big job for you, but you've done such a

good job...you women are made of sturdy stuff. I'm proud of the job you've done." She reflected that seeing his daughter perform well in a leadership role might have helped him change his attitudes, which were developed at an earlier time when "that was how men felt, that women didn't belong in those stressful, high-level jobs, that they couldn't do them." Kathy chuckles and shares the story's significance to her: "So, I've had to show them that I can, many times."

### **Courtney Harbison**

A relative of a colleague knew Courtney through their work together as members of a statewide professional organization, and referred me to her. She was the youngest of the group of women who agreed to participate in this study, and I really admire her 'can-do' attitude towards learning her way through her career. The tremendous growth and accompanying changing needs of the community during her time working for the City of Martinsville has demanded a lot of her as a municipal manager, especially due to the city's location in multiple counties. Her love for her job and for the community is infectious.

**Entering the profession: "I went up and applied and had no earthly idea what cities did."** Like Kathy Phelps, serendipity was involved in Courtney's entry into city management. She had graduated from law school with no interest in practicing law. She and her husband had just moved to Martinsville, his hometown, and she was looking for jobs although she didn't know yet what she really wanted to do. He came home one day and told her: "There is an opening up at the town hall. I don't know what they do, but the city is so small, it can't be much. You ought to go up there and apply." At that time, the city had about five hundred residents and was not a manager form of government. Courtney recalled that she "had no earthly idea what cities did," and other than a law school internship in a district attorney's office, she had never worked for the government or even thought about it. She was hired as the city clerk.

The city had been without anyone running the office for a number of months, so Courtney dove in. Reading all the city council minutes from the previous five years gave her a good idea of what the city did and some background on the community. Her first task was to run an election. She had grown up in a different state, so she had "never even seen a paper ballot because I'd moved here from...a city that used voting machines." Similar to Mary Henry, she read the entire state election code and spoke with the Secretary of State's office to learn how to coordinate the election.

Courtney met many residents because they came to city hall to pay their water bills and visit with the utility department manager. Others would come to sit on the rocking chairs in front of city hall, and high school students queued to have prom pictures taken there. With only five hundred residents, she "knew their name, their address, and every one of their pets' names, you know? I mean, people would see me in the grocery store and hand me their water bill." Whenever a new issue or question arose, she would research the issue or call state agencies, professional associations, or neighboring government administrators to understand options for how to respond in Martinsville.

The initial informal and incidental learning curve that Courtney described was critical because it was foundational to her early career:

I discovered I loved it. I mean, it only took about six months before I realized that I liked the fact that every day was different. I liked hearing about how a city runs, all the different facets of it...there are so many things that a city does that no one thinks about unless they're actually working there...before I came here I never thought about what median has beautiful landscaping, who takes care of it, or who pays for the street lights, you know?"

She learned that the work was interesting and challenging, and that the research skills she had learned in law school served her well.

**Negotiating the politics: "It was an amazing time."** Not long after Courtney was hired, the Mayor lost re-election. The new mayor was both the first woman and the first person not originally from Martinsville to be elected mayor. The mayor was a bundle of energy who had formerly worked in a corporate office. Courtney said it seemed like the new mayor had "read everything there was" before taking office, and her primary goal was to make sure the city was prepared for the growth that was coming. The city grew from five hundred residents in the late 1990s to almost seventy-five hundred residents a little more than a decade later. One of the first things the Mayor began when she took office was the tradition of an annual city council retreat in the spring when the council members could formulate their priorities and goals for the next eighteen months.

During one of their annual retreats, the council members set a goal to build a new police station and a library without property taxes, in eighteen months. Space was at a premium for the city, and the police department "had over twenty people with desks inside the building, the whole police department worked out of here...they just all really needed to get out." The library at the time was in a "tiny" building that had been repurposed. Courtney described it as "charming, but it wasn't a full service library for a town that was growing and had as many citizens as we had and as much of a need for that kind of service."

In researching funding options, Martinsville's Impact Fee Committee, which was made up of real estate developers, unanimously agreed to implement impact fees. This was a big victory because developers are the key group that pays impact fees when they develop property. Martinsville was growing so quickly at that time that even relatively low impact fees created a

steady income stream for the city because "we were a city of twelve hundred and we were issuing about a hundred new residential building permits a month." With impact fees in place, Courtney talked with staff at her state's municipal organization. Initially she thought they might be able to fund the facilities through a lease purchase, but learned they were not a good fit because the city did not collect property taxes at that time. As they continued talking, the staff member suggested that she look into creating an urban redevelopment agency (URA). She did so, and formed a URA for Martinsville, which was able to issue bonds. The impact fee revenue was used to repay the bonds.

Working with the new mayor through a period of extremely rapid growth was significant to Courtney's career because "it was a challenge but something that really taught me more than I can ever imagine because she was a true believer in asking everyone else what they were doing and then taking the best of that and instituting it in Martinsville." Further, "we were working to keep up, to stay innovative, to provide all the services that everyone wanted and still not have property taxes...it was an amazing time." Informal and incidental learning were important to figuring out how to help the mayor and city council members meet their goals as well as to provide services to the community.

**Negotiating the politics: "I could not ignore their conclusions."** With such a small city staff, Courtney had become friends with many of the employees. One employee working in bookkeeping had been hired around the same time as Courtney, and she trusted the person "explicitly." In reviewing the accounts, she started noticing that some of the paperwork was not correct. She remembered that she "believed it was an honest mistake, or it was someone else." Still, the accounting did not add up, and so police department investigators began to investigate

the matter. When they brought Courtney the results of their findings, despite her earlier disbelief, she "could not ignore their conclusions."

Their friendship made the situation difficult. Walking into the employee's office to break the news of what the investigators had uncovered about the embezzlement was "one of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my job...but I did it." After Courtney fired the employee, the local news media reported widely on the story. The employee pled guilty and was sentenced to five years in prison. Courtney commented that the sentence was stiff despite the relatively small amount of money, and that she feels "horrible" for the employee's family.

Despite Martinsville's phenomenal page of growth, Courtney reflects that until discovering the embezzlement by the staff member, "I was still feeling like we were the little family in the trailer, and we weren't." As a result of the theft, the city instituted a number of financial controls "that I never would have thought we needed." The incident has created a new vigilance when it comes to financial review and controls. They also have video cameras that record payment transactions at City Hall to be able to review any transactions called into question. The experience was significant to Courtney's career development because "it really let me know that I couldn't...no matter what, I can't trust anyone, and I've always been a very trusting person." City managers have to balance trust for their employees with administrative controls and reviews that protect the best interests of the city.

### **Emily Hogan**

A colleague referred me to Emily Hogan as a potential participant for this study because of her long experience in city management. After emailing back and forth for a number of weeks trying to find a date and time that would fit both of our schedules, we scheduled a time to meet. The day of our interview, she was not feeling well, but graciously kept our appointment because

of her interest in the study. We met in a conference room adjacent to her office with a large window that looked out into the woods. Despite feeling under the weather, Emily was engaging, astute, and interesting to talk with, and our conversation seemed to fly by.

**Entering the profession: "I had to get very realistic about living in the world."**

Emily's undergraduate degree is in social work, and she finished the university with a strong sense of wanting to serve others. As she put it: "I set out to save the world and I couldn't get anybody to hire me to save the world, so I had to get very realistic about living in the world." Through family connections, she was hired as an aide to their local congressman and moved to Washington D.C. The initial plan was for her to work in his office, and he would pay her tuition to attend law school. At the time, she thought it "sounded like a cool and groovy plan," and so she made the move. It didn't take long, however, for Emily to realize that "being on a congressional staff is tedious, long hours kind of work." They worked so many hours that she decided against law school. She also really missed her family.

After a year working as a congressional aide, the head of training for a federal program office in her home state came to visit the congressman for a meeting. Emily met the training director, got to know her, and landed a job in the program office, enabling her to move back home. She travelled the state as a trainer, while beginning to take graduate classes in social work part time. Unfortunately, a little over a year into that job, the program suffered major federal funding cuts and her position was eliminated as part of a reduction in force.

Emily decided to become a full-time student, but had already realized that she did not want to continue graduate school in social work. She had always been interested in administration, and after some consideration and the offer of an assistantship, she switched to public administration. Through one of her professors, she heard about a job available with the

City of Livingston as a grants coordinator. During that time, there were "tons of grant monies, lots of staff," and the city was looking for a "token woman" to secure and administer grants. Her professor helped connect Emily with the then-assistant city administrator, an alumnus of the program, and he hired her. Her career in city government had begun.

**Negotiating the politics: "It was their decision; they duly made it."** One critical incident that Emily described was an instance when she did not agree with a city council decision, but was responsible for implementing it. The City of Livingston had long had an agreement with the Chamber of Commerce to market the city and run the welcome center. Emily notes that the city council members at the time were very negative, and "there had been rumblings on and off for years about 'Well, we don't like what the Chamber is doing; they're paying their director too much.'" She pauses to add: "Which I tended to agree with." The council members also felt that public funds being spent on tourism should be under the control and direction of the city.

Behind the scenes, she would discuss the issue with the city council members, urging them that the city didn't need to "get in the marketing and advertising business." She felt it was preferable for tourism funds to be sent to an outside organization like the Chamber, where it was under the purview of the business people who served on the Chamber board and could be spent with more flexibility than the city's financial procedures would allow.

Emily was successful in keeping the city out of tourism until one year the city council voted three to two, "by barely a majority vote," to end the contract with the Chamber of Commerce. She told me she remembered that it was "'Katie bar the door' once a couple of these guys who had been trying to do this for years got the third person to go with them." They directed Emily and city staffers to create a Department of Tourism. The council members "knew

what they were doing by cutting off the Chamber, but they really did not know what a Department of Tourism was. They handed Emily the responsibility of setting up the new department. She "totally disagreed with their decision, but it [was] their decision, they duly made it, they duly voted upon it." The city attorney, assistant city manager and finance director were also not in support of the council's decision. Nevertheless, Emily and the administrative team were able to create the department and hire a woman department head. She emphasized the importance of having a strong team to "kind of herd all those efforts together to try to create the most logical thing out of [something] illogical."

In the midst of the decision to create the department of tourism within the city, Emily "became labeled, of course, pro-Chamber, which I was." There was an attempt to fire her, but her supporters "packed the council room and kind of sent them with their tail between their legs." Her contract was on the city council agenda for her to be terminated, but the vote did not receive enough votes and she kept her job. The experience was a critical one in Emily's career because she learned the importance of carrying out decisions duly made by the city council, whether or not she agreed with their policy decision. With the help of her administrative team, she asserted that they "tried to do it as professionally and fairly and squarely as we could."

**Negotiating the politics: "Let's just sit here and think about this a little bit."** Emily made the point that "every city has its own personality and I do think that if you don't learn it and become compatible with it that you're not going to be successful." She did not share any specific incident, but stressed the importance of mentors to her learning about the community and how to navigate the local personalities and politics. For example, her husband grew up in Livingston and "has been very instrumental...in helping me to better understand" the community.

Emily also mentioned a former elected official and businessman, Larry, and his wife, Karen, who took her under their wings. She talked about their friendship and said, "both of them were huge in [her] growth and development in terms of the community." They knew a lot of people in the community and introduced Emily to a lot of different people in the time before she married her husband. Larry was a former mayor and "because of his direct involvement in the city, was a great balancer to [her] as well as a great...mentor/counselor."

Larry and Emily discussed issues going on with the city and the council and he would advise her. She laughed as she remembered their conversations: "He had a lot of nicknames for me. One of them...was 'Wierdo,' and he'd say, 'Now Wierdo, let's just sit here and think about this a little bit.'" Having mentors who were well connected in the local community and took time to help Emily understand the local culture and people were "instrumental" to helping her get to where she is as a long-time city manager.

**Barriers for women in city management: "Just do the work."** Emily shared that one important aspect of her "major" decision to aspire to the position of city manager after serving as assistant city manager was not to get overwhelmed by the responsibility. As she explained it:

The biggest piece is not freaking yourself out, and I had told other managers this, especially females...and that is to...just do the work, to not think about 'Oh, I'm the boss and it's dark and lonely at the top' and get all that stuff in your head and in your heart and every place else, to not psych yourself out. To just say, "Ok, I'm going to do this but I'm going to be about doing the work.'

Interestingly, Kathy Phelps had already relayed Emily's advice to me before I talked with Emily. The two women had gotten to know each other through their state municipal organization, and Emily had shared the same advice with Kathy when Kathy became city

manager of Williston. Hearing it twice during interviews made me realize that the profession of city management is relatively small, and there is a lot of potential for women to mentor and support each other.

### **Other Coded Themes**

I identified several other common themes while analyzing the interviews for this study. These themes were commonalities among the participants that had bearing on these women city managers' career development, but did not directly address the stated research questions. These included considering career development decisions in relation to family commitments, pursuing higher education to support career development, and using accounting and finance skills as a career pathway to city management.

As they shared their experiences, several city managers described their career development in relation to family commitments and responsibilities. One participant mentioned parenthood when she described her initial reluctance to apply for an assistant city manager position because she was expecting a baby. Another city manager ruefully noted the impact of local politics on her children when the local media reported something negative about her and children at school commented on it. Being a city manager is a very public position in a community, and one participant noted that she did not apply for a promotion at one point in her career because she preferred to keep her personal life more private at that time than she would have been able to in the new role. Caring for aging parents inspired one of the women to look for city management jobs closer to her hometown, and another to later be grateful when she did not receive a promotion she had hoped for because she was able to have time to provide care to family members. A participant also shared how much she enjoys sharing her career experiences with one of her children, who works in local government for a different municipality.

A second recurring theme among the women city managers that participated in this survey was returning to school for formal learning, to earn the credentials they felt were needed to be hired as a city manager. Several women recounted instances in their careers where they were appointed to serve as interim city manager, but perceived that they were not promoted because they did not have a college degree. Encouraged to complete her undergraduate degree by the city manager she worked with, one participant not only finished up, but went on to earn her master of public administration (MPA) degree. Seeing an opportunity, another woman city manager planned ahead and made it a priority to complete her undergraduate degree before her manager retired so that she was better qualified to successfully apply for his position.

Among the participants who did not enter city management already having completed graduate degrees, a common career development route was via finance and accounting. Lauren Cooper, Hannah Clay, Mary Henry, and Kathy Phelps all began their careers working in entry-level accounting and finance roles and learned their way upward through positions with increasing responsibilities until they became city managers. In contrast, Jennifer Tyler, Sarah Martin, Courtney Harbison, and Emily Hogan entered their municipal careers with professional graduate degrees. These four women began in roles that were not accounting or finance-related, such as job training, human resources, city clerk, and grants coordination. It may be that having a graduate degree on their resume as evidence of formal learning provided these women an opportunity to begin their careers in positions above entry level, where accounting and finance skills were not as critical to their career development.

## Summary

This chapter related a number of informal and incidental learning experiences that the women city managers that participated in this study identified as being critical or very important to their career development. While each woman's career path was unique, their experiences of entering the profession, negotiating the politics, encountering barriers, and learning their way into and through city management shared some similarities. Most of the women found their way into municipal employment through some form of serendipity, whether it was finding that the school board office where she intended to apply for a job was closed, wanting to find a job that didn't involve shift work, realizing the degree she was working on was not what she really wanted to do, being encouraged by a former co-worker or professor to apply, or moving to town and applying for a job at City Hall despite not having any idea of what cities did.

Navigating the politics of municipal management is an ongoing learning process for the women city managers that participated in this study. The experiences they shared indicated that they learn how to handle the political nature of their jobs from watching other city managers, mentoring, trial and error, reflecting on situations they felt did not go as well as they might have liked, and being circumspect about their roles as city managers in relation to the roles of the elected officials for whom they work. Most reported having positive mentoring experiences from men city managers with whom they worked. Each described a willingness to roll up their sleeves, take on new challenges, and learn whatever was required for them to get the job done. Several of the women city managers that shared their experiences for this study discussed gender-related barriers to their career development. These included the importance of focusing on the work to avoid getting overwhelmed, needing to better promote the skills that women bring to city management, working to balance career with family, and the issue of how to deal

with the gender stereotypes or expectations of others. The next section will analyze the identified themes and commonalities in greater detail and examine how they relate to the theories and models discussed in Chapter 2.

## CHAPTER 5

### ANALYSIS AND FINDINGS

Chapter 4 recounted the critical experiences that the women city managers contributing to this study identified as having been most important to their career development and journey to becoming city managers. This chapter will present the findings of the analysis of those critical experiences.

The purpose of this study was to identify and explore the informal and incidental learning experiences that 8 current women city managers in the Southern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management. This exploratory study was guided by three research questions:

1. What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career?
2. How do women city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy) and politics (elected officials)?
3. What are some of the barriers faced by women city managers to succeeding in city management?

The data collected during the study was coded and analyzed using narrative, or content analysis. This method is described in Chapter 3. A summary of the study findings, including the categories used for coding, is shown in Table 5. The discussion of findings is organized in the order that the categories are presented in the table.

Table 6

*Overview of Coding Categories*

Research Questions	Coding Categories
What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career?	Connecting to local government through higher ed. Serendipity Gaining broad knowledge of city functions Mentoring Serving as acting or interim city manager Misc.
How do women city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy), politics (elected officials), and the public (citizens, media, etc.)?	Build a good team Have a mentor Work with elected officials Interact with the public Serve as acting or interim city manager Focus on the work, not the politics Never stop learning Be active in professional associations Misc.
What are some of the barriers faced by women city managers to succeeding in city management?	Confronting gender stereotypes Balancing career & personal/family commitments Proving herself as a manager Misc.

**Informal and Incidental Learning Experiences Critical to Deciding  
to Pursue a Career in City Management**

The women city managers that contributed to this study each followed a unique path on their career development journey to city management. Despite these unique career paths, the informal and incidental learning experiences they defined as critical to their career development share some similarities. These common experiences include: (1) connecting to local government through higher education, (2) serendipity, (3) gaining broad knowledge of city functions through diverse assignments, (4) having a mentor, and (5) serving as acting or interim city manager.

### **Connecting to local government through higher education**

While higher education often involves formal learning, participants in this study indicated that the relationships and networks it can help a student develop also contribute to informal and incidental learning. The data suggests higher education played a critical role in the career development of several of the women city managers that participated in this study. Examples provided by the women are included in this section.

**Higher education as a stepping-stone.** According to some of the participants in this study, higher education can serve as a stepping-stone to prepare and connect women for careers in local government. For example, when Sarah Martin opted to change her undergraduate major from education to politics and history, she indicated that she consulted one of her professors about possible career options. After completing a Congressional internship, she said she knew she preferred not to work at the federal level. Sarah recalled that she and her professor looked through some career planning books together and learned about city management. After meeting with the city manager of her college town to discuss city management, Sarah said she decided to "get an MPA right out...go from undergraduate to an MPA and get it over with." While working on her MPA, she started working with one of her professors at the university's institute of government. When Sarah graduated and was looking for jobs, she found her first position when her professor connected her with a former student who was an assistant city manager and had a job vacancy.

Emily Hogan shared a similar story. She said she was nearing the end of her MPA program when she learned from one of her professors that the City of Livingston was "looking for a token woman in government" to serve as a grants coordinator. During that time, Emily explained that a number of federal and state grant funds were available to local governments, and

the city needed someone to secure and manage grants. Her professor helped Emily to get in touch with the assistant city manager, also an MPA program graduate, and she was invited to interview for the position. The job was initially temporary, but soon became permanent.

Sarah's and Emily's experiences provide some insight into the role that higher education can play in raising awareness of city management as a career option and encouraging women to consider it. One of Sarah's advisors helped introduce her to city management, a career option of which she had not previously been aware. Public administration professors have great potential to serve as mentors (Fox & Schuhmann, 2011) and valuable bridges to connect their students with alumni in the profession. In a study of seven local, state, and federal agencies in Oregon to determine highly successful strategies to increase the proportion of women in management, Bremer and Howe (1988) found that agencies networked with schools of higher education to generate a qualified pool of women applicants. Both Sarah Martin's and Emily Hogan's entries into city management demonstrate the value of connecting women MPA program graduates to alumni working in local government with available internships or job openings.

Higher education faculty and academic programs that work with students interested in public service careers have a unique opportunity to encourage and foster women to consider local government. There are several strategies that can be used to help raise students' awareness. For example, faculty can invite public administration practitioners into their classrooms to share expertise with students. Faculty can further increase the value by including diverse speakers who reflect the make-up of their classrooms. Fox and Schuhmann (1999) note that because the percentages of women faculty members in public administration and public affairs graduate programs are lower than the percentages of women students in those programs, "through their educational experience, women see fewer opportunities than men to find same-sex role models"

(p. 388). Seeing more women in public sector leadership positions and as public administration faculty may help women students become more aware of careers available to them, and better visualize themselves in those roles.

**"If you're going to stay in this line of work...you need to have that education."** Two participants in this study began working in the public sector before completing their undergraduate degrees. Both women recalled that once they had begun to work in local government, they engaged in self-reflection about factors that could contribute to advancing their careers in city management. Mary Henry and Kathy Phelps each concluded that completing her degree could be very beneficial. Several scholars have noted the importance of higher education to a successful city management career and the role of an MPA degree to career entry and progression (Watson & Watson, 2006; Aguado & Frederickson, 2013). Ultimately, both women made the commitment to return to college part-time to finish their undergraduate degrees, with the support from the city managers for which they worked.

Once Mary Henry was hired as city clerk, she said she soon ascertained that she needed to further her education. The city manager she worked for was a strong advocate for education and encouraged Mary to return to school to complete her undergraduate degree. She related that he also urged her to continue to graduate school to earn her MPA. She asserted: "That was one of the best moves I did because if you are going to stay in this line of work, you really need to have that background, you need to have that education, you need to have all the experience you can have."

Dewey (1938) identified the disjuncture between an expected and an actual outcome as a trigger for learning. More recently, other scholars have discussed and developed a model to depict the role of this disequilibrium as a trigger within the cycle of informal and incidental

learning in a workplace context (Marsick & Watkins, 1990; Marsick et al., 1999; Marsick et al., 2006). One of the learning triggers in Mary's informal learning process that led her to return to college was observing the lack of permanence of jobs in city management. She observed: "one thing you hear all the time in city government is that you can never count on this being our permanent job in any location, and what I've always told people [is] 'you're only one bad election away.'" Higher education is one way to mitigate the turnover of the profession, because a degree is a credential that can help in finding a new job.

Kathy Phelps had many years of experience with her city and was serving as interim city manager for the second time when she decided to apply for the city manager job. When the city council chose to hire someone else, she stated that it was a learning trigger for her to "[decide] to do a self-examination." As part of her reflection process, Kathy remembered putting herself in the shoes of the city council members to consider "what it would take to make [me] the person that they could hang their hat on and say, 'This is a person who needs to be our next city manager.'" Kathy's conclusion was that her "degree was the one thing that was missing." When the newly hired city manager started work, she told him that she was working on her degree and would need to take her lunch break at the end of the day in order to get to class on time. The new manager was supportive, and she explained that she made it a priority to graduate before that city manager retired so that she would be ready if the council wanted to consider her for the job.

The informal learning process of self-reflection that Mary Henry and Kathy Phelps each undertook inspired them both to return to college to complete their degrees. It supports the Marsick et al. (2006) model, with its depiction of informal and incidental learning as a continuous cycle of reflection and problem-solving that is heavily influenced by the context in which the learning occurs. The experiences of both also illustrate the three conditions proposed

by Marsick and Watkins (2001) to enhance informal and incidental learning. First, they engaged in self-reflection to identify their underlying knowledge of their own contexts. Next, both Mary and Kathy proactively thought through their options and learned new skills to implement their chosen options. In this case, they returned to formal schooling to earn their degrees. In addition, they used creativity to expand their options, earmarking time in their schedules to attend class and complete degree requirements while working full-time and raising their families.

Both women received support and encouragement for returning to school from the city managers for which they worked. Mary Henry and Kathy Phelps identified the value of a higher education degree as a credential to help confirm their knowledge and professional preparation with elected officials and the public. Watson and Watson (2006) note that almost 70 percent of city managers hold at least a master's degree, and that "having an advanced degree will continue to be critical for those wishing to enter and progress in the profession" (p. 144). Having a degree provided the women with the professional credentials needed within their workplace contexts to help them attain top management roles.

### **Serendipity**

Four of eight women city managers that participated in this study were hired into their initial city government positions without any specific intent to work for local government rather than the private sector. They were either looking for a job or were recruited by someone they knew, and decided to continue working for the city when they realized how much they enjoyed it. Courtney Harbison's, Kathy Phelps', and Lauren Cooper's hiring circumstances reflect the first scenario, while Mary Henry's fits the second. Their experiences indicate an opportunity for local governments to work with school systems, higher education, informal networks of existing

employees and elected officials, and the media to better publicize what city managers do and available career paths.

**"I went up and applied and had no earthly idea what cities did."** The work of a city government largely occurs behind the scenes, and many people do not know about all of the functions coordinated by city employees. One participant revealed that she "went up and applied and had no earthly idea what cities did." Courtney Harbison had recently graduated from law school, was looking for jobs, and happened to apply at city hall after her husband mentioned hearing about an opening. As she remembered: "I'd never worked for the government. I'd never thought about working for the government." After working for six months, she realized that she "liked learning about how a city runs, all the different facets of it...there are so many things that a city does that no one thinks about unless they're actually working there." Applying for the job with the city was serendipitous, but the variety of things to learn and the fact that every day was different inspired Courtney's decision to stay and build a career.

**"When can you start?"** For Kathy Phelps, being in the right place at the right time resulted in her being hired by the city. Like Courtney Harbison, Kathy was also looking for jobs and serendipitously ended up applying at city hall. She had actually come to apply for a job with the Board of Education, but their office was closed during lunch. City hall was on the other side of the lobby, and she was encouraged to fill out an application after talking with the city's front desk representative, who was days away from beginning maternity leave and looking for her own replacement. Kathy offered one key factor of her success: "Do your job and be happy where you are...I've loved every job I've ever had here and I guess it shows." Working with the public, organizing processes, and digging into new opportunities involving learning were some of the aspects Kathy described enjoying about her career.

**"I don't think I decided, I think it was decided for me."** One of the participants suggested that it felt like city management had chosen her, rather than vice versa. Lauren Cooper began her career as a customer service supervisor at an electrical service provider. When she and her husband moved, and she took a position as office manager of an agribusiness. In that position, she developed a love for accounting and numbers through weighing trucks, selling produce, and dealing in the commodities market. She began her career with the city as a customer service administrator and was eventually promoted to Finance Director. When the city manager she worked for left, she had been working with the city for over twenty years.

Lauren laughed during our conversation when I asked her to explain how she had decided to become a city manager, answering: "I think it was decided for me." Her response echoes Fox and Schuhmann's (1999) research indicating that women city managers were more likely than men city managers to say that they "fell into" city management. It is also indicative of the *compliant novice* stage of Bierema's (1999) three-stage model of women's career development, in which women tend to devalue their own skills and expertise and attribute their successes to luck or to other factors outside of their own efforts or control. Lauren initially began working for the city because of her background in customer service and accounting, not because she was specifically seeking a role in local government or public service.

**"I thought he meant the bank."** One of the women city managers began her career with the city based on a positive working relationship with a former colleague. Mary Henry was not looking for a job at all when the chairman of the board of the bank where she had been Assistant Banking Officer was elected Mayor. She had cut back to part-time at the bank to care for her child when the new Mayor recruited her to come back to work full-time. Initially, Mary said she thought he meant he had a position available for her at the bank, but found when she agreed to

return that the job was with the city. Beginning as an assistant to the city manager, she was encouraged by the city manager and Mayor to apply for city clerk when the position became open. The job suited her well: "I love[d] doing the duties, I love[d] the variety, I love[d] meeting with the people and working with the public." Although she did not seek out a career in city management, she asserted that she couldn't imagine doing anything else. Mary's experience is a good example of how a woman's informal network can help her make serendipitous connections to career opportunities that she might not otherwise seek out.

These four women city managers' career paths into city management evidence the role that serendipity can play in career development. They also show the often long-term nature of building a career in city management, as Kathy Phelps, Lauren Cooper, and Mary Henry all worked for the city for more than a decade, and sometimes two, before being named as city manager. Courtney Harbison, Kathy Phelps, Lauren Cooper, Mary Henry, Hannah Clay, Sarah Martin, and Emily Hogan fit the professional city manager career path of *single-city careerists*, as defined by Watson and Hassett (2004). A single-city careerist steadily develops her career within one city, honing her skills and serving in various positions while developing competence. Improving opportunities for qualified staff to be promoted from within is one key strategy Bremer and Howe (1988) identified that was successfully used by public sector agencies in Oregon to help women advance that could have been greatly beneficial to women city managers whose career paths fit the characteristics of a single-city careerist.

Kathy Phelps, Sarah Martin, and Emily Hogan also fit Watson and Hassett's (2004) career path classification of *long server* city managers. Long server managers serve in a long-term, stable position within a municipality for a number of years. Each of these three women city manager participants has served her city for more than twenty years. While serendipity may have

helped Courtney Harbison, Kathy Phelps, Lauren Cooper, and Mary Henry begin their careers in city management, the opportunities to learn and do a variety of things were incentives for them to stay.

### **Gaining broad knowledge of city functions through diverse assignments**

Six of the eight study participants cited the variety of functions and ongoing opportunity and challenge to learn new things as something they greatly enjoy about their careers in city management. Digging into new projects, accepting challenging assignments, and taking on new responsibilities all engaged the women in ongoing informal and incidental workplace learning like that defined by Marsick and Watkins (1990). One of the women city managers interviewed in Szymborski's (1996) exploration of why there are so few women city managers "point[ed] to an increasing amount of responsibility and complexity of assignments as examples of how her skills were honed for the top job" of city manager (p. 13). These often self-directed informal learning experiences and assignments involve getting to know other employees and community stakeholders, becoming familiar with the politics related to a project, finding out about relevant regulations and processes, knowing who to ask for expertise, understanding the economics of a project, and how an issue relates to other city functions.

Learning organizational culture and developing an informal network of colleagues were both implicit in the informal learning that the women city managers described. These learning activities undertaken by the participants on their own terms provide examples of the tacit learning by doing described by Livingstone (2001) as characteristic of informal and self-directed learning. Accounting and finance were mentioned by five of the eight participants as key expertise they developed during their careers.

**"We'll give you all the problems that start with 'R.'"** When Sarah Martin started volunteering for new projects, the city manager and assistant manager began giving her all the ones they didn't want to do. Working on those various projects gave her the opportunity to become familiar with a number of city functions and departments. Eventually, the joke around the managers' offices became alphabetical: "We'll give you all the problems that start with...'R.'" Sarah remembered them joking about "rats, railroad, the budget, revenues...'R,' okay." Once Sarah and the city manager talked about her interest in becoming an assistant city manager, he began strategically giving her other projects that would help develop her knowledge across the organization. His mentoring efforts personified Crewson and Fisher's (1997) perspective that "mentors hold the key to supporting the refinement of skills in the science of administration while slowly nurturing a respect for the art of governance" (p. 385).

When the assistant city manager unexpectedly left to take another job in a different city, Sarah was highly qualified with the skills, experience, and internal city government relationships to be hired into his position. Sarah's experience demonstrates the value of broad exposure to helping learn the organizational cultures within various city departments, administration, and elected officials. She had also been able to build a network of contacts within city government, among representatives of other levels of government, and with community stakeholders involved in city efforts. These skills and contacts that Sarah was able to develop are examples of the "inside" and "outside" skills that Radin (1980) posits are required of women who aspire to executive roles in government.

**"As you get a new opportunity, you just dig in."** Kathy Phelps' career path began in customer service and then shifted over to accounting and finance. Working with finances and the budget gave her an understanding of the needs and priorities of each of the city departments, as

well as personnel, since salaries and benefits account for the largest portion of a city's budget. One example Kathy shared was when an employee retired without having trained anyone on her duties, and she had to learn the job on her own: "As you get a new opportunity, you just dig in." This willingness to learn and a "spirit of inquiry into how things really work, including a commitment to one's own learning and growth" is one of the characteristics that Nalbandian and Nalbandian (2002) build upon from Wolfe's (1980) work on professional competence in the applied behavioral sciences, applying it to their discussion of specific competencies required of contemporary local government managers. Throughout her career, Kathy described taking on new responsibilities, building an understanding of underlying process, and organizing and documenting those processes to ensure institutional knowledge was preserved. The expertise that Kathy developed in finance and budgeting helped her develop strong working relationships with city leaders and staff, and gain a broad understanding of how politics and administration interact in the day-to-day efforts of city government.

**"I liked learning how a city runs."** Courtney Harbison began her job as city clerk at a time when the city had not had anyone in her position for six months. She "showed up the first day having no earthly idea what I was doing," and began by reading all of the previous five years of council minutes to know "what they did." She jumped into the job head first, starting with learning how to run an election and figuring out how to automate the city's accounting system. She enjoyed the variety of duties and "found it all very interesting." Courtney attributes much of her ability to learn the job to the willingness of nearby local government managers, agency representatives, and municipal association staff to share their knowledge. Connecting with nearby local government professionals to ask questions and share expertise helped her to effectively build a strong regional network of colleagues.

Four of the eight women city managers that contributed to this study came into city management with strong accounting and finance skills. Finance is a central hub within city administration because it is the foundation of city government operations. Being involved in finance and budgeting is a central role in local government that provides broad exposure to all the various departments, functions, and personnel within the city.

Four of the eight participants spent time serving as an assistant city manager, a position in which they had opportunities to work on diverse projects with various departments, agencies, and stakeholders. The path from assistant city manager to city manager is not necessarily direct, as suggested by a survey (Breen, 1994) of women city managers that showed that while 58 percent had been hired from within, only 21 percent had been promoted from an assistant manager position. Regardless of the position from which they were promoted to city manager, broad exposure to people and projects required a lot of informal and incidental learning from the women and helped them develop their networks and learn the organizational cultures involved in working with administration, politics, and the public. For a number of the participants, this broad exposure was offered to them through a mentor or supervisor who encouraged them to take on new opportunities.

### **Having a mentor**

Many of the study participants mentioned mentoring as a critical informal learning experience that helped them decide to pursue a career in city management. Six of the eight women city managers that participated in this study talked about mentors who helped them build their careers. Similarly, Szymborski (1996) notes that all the women city managers he interviewed to identify reasons for the paucity of women in the profession agreed upon the importance of mentoring. Mentors helped the women in this study learn about the profession,

gave them opportunities to hone their skills and expand their knowledge, and included them in decision-making to ready them for the next steps of their careers. Most of the mentors were supervisors, city managers, or elected officials who shared their knowledge and expertise.

**"My story...would center on mentorship."** Jennifer Tyler spoke several times in our conversation of the impact that mentoring has had on her career development as a city manager that is a woman of color. Although the environment of city management can be "sexist," Jennifer emphasized that she's "had excellent male mentors, white male mentors. I can't take that away." Strongly encouraged by the first city manager she worked for, Jennifer submitted her application to the candidate pool for assistant city manager. At the time she was hired for that position, Jennifer was pregnant, and the city manager not only offered to work with her on her maternity leave, but also found someone to provide homecare for her newborn baby. As Jennifer remembers, "he brought me along with...some great opportunities to hone my skills." Later in her career, Jennifer worked with a woman deputy city manager who "pushed very hard...and I appreciated that because I learned. And she was one of those people who was a good mentor; she was a good teacher." The deputy manager modeled a level of professionalism that suited Jennifer's style because she "didn't ever require us to be pals."

Jennifer's experiences evidence the importance of mentors who can help women learn to avoid organizational obstacles in the organization that might limit their potential. The mentor who encouraged her to apply for the assistant manager position and offered flexibility and support during and after her pregnancy helped offer options so that Jennifer did not pass up a key career opportunity. Of the participants in the study, Jennifer was the only city manager who mentioned having had a woman mentor. McDonald and Hite (1998) cite the scarcity of available executive women mentors as a potential barrier to mentoring for women. Jennifer respected the

relationship not only because she learned a lot, but also because the leadership style her mentor modeled was one she could personally relate to. From her descriptions, these two key mentoring relationships offered Jennifer several of Leck and Orser's (2009) typology of desired outcomes, including psychosocial support, knowledge and skill acquisition, and career development support. Part of the process of learning organizational culture for women city managers is adapting personal style and positioning individual identity, including race and gender, within larger social, political, and organizational contexts.

**"I want to run something by you."** Two of the study participants described mentors who spent time talking through city projects with them to help them learn. One of the city managers who Mary Henry worked with would regularly call her up to his office in the morning, saying: "Come on up here, I want to run something by you." Initially she worried that the time was taking her away from her own work, but began to look forward to discussing projects and learning from him. Mary explained that he gave her a chance to get involved in many projects she would not otherwise been part of. To this day, she said that she still keeps in touch with her mentor and calls him to ask for his thoughts and advice on things she is working on.

Kathy Phelps had a similar mentoring relationship with one of her city managers. They would meet towards the end of the day to bounce ideas off one another. The city manager, who was not from Williston, would ask Kathy: "How do you think this will go over? Do you think the citizens of Williston can get used to this? Will they accept it?" Their conversations are a good example of bi-directional mentoring and evidence that Kathy was simultaneously learning and teaching the art of administrative negotiation and politics. Crewson and Fisher (1997) propose that city managers go through a career development transition in which they shift from developing administrative technical skill to learning politics and negotiation. Kathy shared her

knowledge of the local community and at the same time gained insight into the city manager's decision trees, the process he used for determining how an initiative might move forward, and interactions with city council. She also noted several instances where she learned what not to do from observing a mentor's less successful efforts.

From a critical perspective, reviewing projects and brainstorming approaches are examples of an ongoing organizational enculturation process through which Mary, Kathy, and the other women city managers learned the administrative, political, and social cultures of the profession. Several scholars (Darwin, 2000; Bierema, 1999) have noted that cross-gender mentoring relationships with male supervisors like those participants in this study described may be reproductive of the status quo because of the intersections of race, gender, power, and hierarchy involved. Even bi-directional mentoring relationships take place within an unequal hierarchical structure that perpetuates itself even as it has the appearance of being mutually beneficial. From a critical perspective using Bourdieu's (1977) concept of cultural reproduction, these mentor/protégé relationships and the related informal and incidental learning that the women undertook are framed within the male experience and language of career development, and help replicate existing structures that marginalize women from pursuing and attaining city management positions.

**"Hey, we have this project."** Mentors can help prepare their protégés by exposing them to new projects that will require them to develop new expertise and contacts. When Sarah Martin started her first job, she worked in the city manager's office. As she gained experience and took on new challenges, the city manager and assistant city manager mentored and encouraged her by exposing her to a wide variety of projects. Their mentoring relationship was bi-directional in that they provided guidance, encouragement and lots of projects, and Sarah tackled things that they

either did not have time or the interest to do. In their conversations about Sarah's career goals and what she hoped to do in the future, and her mentors gave her project assignments to help prepare her further. Even after the assistant city manager left for another job, he and Sarah Martin continued to stay in touch. When the city manager position opened up years later, it was her mentor who gave her a pep talk and pushed Sarah to seriously consider applying for it.

This experience illustrates the benefits of seeking multiple mentors and future career planning for women interested in city leadership roles, as advocated by Bierema (1998). Sarah's mentors helped her build her network and her skill set by offering her projects working with multiple city departments. Being a protégé to two influential male managers with well-established connections and considerable expertise connected Sarah to information and levels of the organization and community that she might otherwise not have been able to access. Ragins et al. (1998) emphasize the importance to women, like Sarah, of having influential male mentors who can sponsor them to higher levels of management and help them gain access to insider information "usually obtained in the old boy networks" (p. 32). By inquiring about Sarah's future career goals, her mentors tailored the projects they offered to help prepare her for the diverse knowledge she needed to succeed in city management. The bi-directional mentoring relationships they developed still exist years later, each acting as an advisor and friendly ear for the other.

**"Let's just sit here and think about this a little bit."** Having a mentor with experience as an elected official can be very valuable. Emily Hogan's experience was somewhat unique from the other women in this study in that the mentoring she described as critical to her career development was not from any of the city managers or supervisors with whom she worked. Instead, the mentors Emily described were a former elected official and Emily's husband, whose

hometown is the city where she serves as city manager. The former elected official and his wife took Emily under their wings when she first started working as grants coordinator for the city and introduced her to a lot of people in the community. The couple was well known in the community, and the husband was very involved in various civic endeavors and politics. Emily describes him as "a great balancer to me as well as a great mentor/counselor" who would talk through issues with her. With deep roots and understanding of the community and previous service in elected office, her husband has also been instrumental in helping her understand local politics and providing guidance.

Bierema (2005) posits that women learn organizational culture through their networks. These non-supervisory mentors' nuanced understanding of their city was essential to help Emily learn the norms and organizational cultures of the community and elected officials with whom she works. Her mentors' social and political networks and willingness to connect Emily to key community members were critical to developing her network when she was relatively new to the area. Their counsel and insights into public opinion and perceptions offered Emily psychosocial support and a better understanding of community cultures and context that influenced how local decisions and attitudes that could impact the city and its efforts.

Mentoring was described by six of the eight women city managers in this study as being critical to their career development. All of the mentoring relationships described were informal rather than formal. Participants most frequently cited supervisors, but also a former elected official and a spouse, as influential mentors. The majority of the mentors described by the women who participated in this study were men, which aligns with Fox and Schuhmann's (2001) research finding that both women and men city managers reported having more male mentors than women mentors. The mentoring relationships shared by participants offered career

assistance via opportunities for acquiring new knowledge and skills. Study participants learned both behaviors to emulate and those to avoid from the role modeling provided by their mentors. The counsel and conversations involved in mentoring relationships were a form of bi-directional psychosocial support for both the women and their mentors to adapt and develop within the social, political, and administrative cultures that form the context of the work environment of city management. Mentoring helped prepare study participants for their eventual appointment as acting, interim, or permanent city manager.

### **Serving as acting or interim city manager**

Serving as interim or acting city managers within their organizations was a commonality in the career development of five of the women who were part of this study. An interim city manager is usually appointed by the city council when a city manager resigns or is fired, and serves until a permanent city manager is hired. In some cases, an interim manager is hired as the permanent manager. When a city manager is on temporary leave or disability, an acting city manager is designated by the city council to assume the responsibilities and authority of the city manager for that short period of time. For example, when Mary Henry was promoted to Director of Administration and Finance, one of her responsibilities was to be acting city manager as needed. The experiences the women in this study recalled from serving in the temporary roles of interim or acting city manager were somewhat stressful, likely because they involved transitions and a new role that was thrust upon them when an existing city manager left.

When the city council named Sarah Martin as interim city manager, she was unsure of whether she wanted to apply for the city manager job because she was still in a learning curve as assistant city manager and it was not timely for her personal life. Talking with her mentor about whether or not to apply, he counseled her: "I think you need to think to yourself, do you want to

be the boss or do you want to train a new boss?" Going through the selection process with a pool of ten candidates took four months, during which time Sarah served as both assistant city manager and interim city manager. She reflected on that transition period: "I [couldn't] do everything wondering, so is this like a little job test, right? The down part of being the interim is that you're the only one doing a ground test of your performance..." Serving as an interim city manager offers a trial opportunity for the interim city manager to learn more about the job, assess any new or different organizational relationships they will need to build, and determine whether or not they are interested in the permanent position.

Taking on the position of interim city manager was challenging for three of the study participants because of the network of existing relationships and the organizational knowledge they brought to the job. Roots in an organization can prove both beneficial and detrimental because of the relationships involved. Jennifer Tyler's connections within her network helped her avoid what might have been a difficult tenure as city manager. She served eight months as an interim city manager early in her career and "had a chance to be a city manager" at the time. Jennifer opted against pursuing the position due to a newly elected mayor whose attitudes towards women were not as progressive as Jennifer would have preferred.

In her work on interim administrators in nursing, Alley (2005) raises the issue of the "potentially uncomfortable situation" that occurs when an interim is not selected to become the permanent administrator (p. 324). For example, existing relationships with elected officials and knowledge of the organization created disappointment and decreased morale when two of the participants in this study were not hired after filling the role of interim manager. Completing two terms as interim city manager without being hired into the permanent job made Kathy Phelps question why she was "good enough to do the job while they're looking, but not good enough to

get the title and the pay that goes with it." Emily Hogan echoed this sentiment, remembering that she was "not very happy" when she was not hired after her first term as interim city manager. Asked by the council to become city manager after her second stint as interim manager, she remembered that she wanted to say: "You didn't want me before, and I'm not sure I want you now." In the end, she agreed to serve and was hired seven months later as permanent city manager. Using their inside knowledge of organizational cultures and people to do the hard work of holding the city administration together while keeping efforts moving forward during the transitions without being selected by the council as permanent city manager was frustrating for the women.

### **Ways Women City Managers Learn and Navigate Organizational Culture**

The women city managers that shared their experiences as part of this study named a number of strategies they informally learned to navigate the organizational cultures of city administration, politics and elected officials, and the public. The strategies were: (1) build a good team, (2) have a mentor, (3) work with elected officials, (4) interact with the public, (5) focus on the work, not the politics, (6) never stop learning, and (6) get involved in professional associations. Each strategy is described below, with examples.

#### **Build a good team**

One of the fundamental ways women city managers navigate the organizational culture of administration and bureaucracy is through building relationships and working together with their department heads and key partners. In charting future trends for public administration, Denhardt (1999) suggests that the field "will be entering into a period in which the conduct of public organizations will increasingly be executed through patterns of teamwork and shared leadership" (p. 288). Further, he explains that public management is moving away from its traditional,

hierarchical approach towards one that engages clusters or teams of people in working together. Members of a management team can support each other by working together and sharing information and key connections to facilitate getting things done. All eight women who contributed to this study mentioned how vital it is to have a good team.

A strong network of team members can buffer the demands of unexpected events and situations. When a devastating natural disaster hit her city, Lauren Cooper relied on her department heads and staff to update her on what was going on. One of the first things she instituted were regular, joint meetings for her department heads, elected officials, partnering agencies, and the media to stay updated and informed. Lauren emphasized the importance of continuing to maintain those relationships even after the disaster had been addressed.

The morning that Hannah Clay and I talked, I was able to observe the esprit de corps of her management team as they collaborated to address an urgent funding issue that had unexpectedly threatened to impact the city. When they returned to City Hall from an impromptu meeting in a nearby community, their body language, faces, and banter conveyed what seemed like the group's collective sense that they had worked together to do what they could to protect the city's interests. During our conversation, several employees opened the door to Hannah's office to give her a high five, evidence of a team atmosphere.

**"Let them be really good at their job."** Building a strong team of capable department heads assisted the women city managers in this study in navigating organizational culture by sharing key information and helping to communicate the work of the city to elected officials and the public. One of Mary Henry's mentors taught her that an effective city manager can't and doesn't have to know everything about every job in city government herself. Instead, she noted:

I can be a good manager of people and resources...and get the right people in those jobs and then you can't be intimidated by those people, you've got to encourage them, you've got to send them to training and education, let them be really good at their job because they are good support people and they'll make you good at your job.

Mary holds weekly department head meetings with her management team to discuss issues in each department and pitch in to help each other address them. She also asks department heads to make presentations to council. This type of team is what Yukl (2012) refers to as an executive team, characterized by diversity of functional background, stability of membership, high autonomy to determine work objectives and procedures, and high authority of the internal leader or city manager.

The value of a solid team, says Emily Hogan, is "everybody has got the different talents and capabilities to help jump in there and try to, whether it be the financial director and his financial capabilities, city attorney and legal capabilities, and HR and their capabilities, and those kinds of things to kind of herd all of those efforts together to try to create the most logical thing out of [something] illogical." When Kathy Phelps became interim city manager, she also formed a management team with regular meetings. She expanded the network by inviting the city council secretary to serve as a liaison between the management team and the mayor and council. Another team-building change she implemented was seating department heads at the front of the room during council meetings to assist her in responding to council inquiries.

**Foster communities of practice.** Sarah Martin has worked hard during her time as city manager to develop a management team whose members reflect and can articulate the city's vision, strategy, and ethics. She reported proudly that they have a strong staff of people who "understand how to play as a team and understand that we all have different roles on a team in

any given situation." Her management team has participated in a book club together for the past seven years to read and discuss leadership books. Department heads that trust one another and share common language and frames of reference for thinking and talking about leadership and management can form a solid organizational network for a city manager.

Through the book group, Sarah fostered a community of practice (Wenger, 2000) for her management team in which they used readings to spark social learning and dialogue about leadership as it relates to the specific social, political, and cultural contexts in which they carry out the administration of the city. The book group can be viewed through the lens of social learning theory (Wenger, 1998; 2000) in that the learning of the group took place in a shared workplace context where department heads discussed their experiences and mutually defined their understandings of leadership. Shared dialogue about the common interests of leadership and management among the city manager and department heads helped the managers make meaning through their daily practice as well as discuss the leadership practices that they wanted to construct and reinforce within the context and cultures of city government. Using the social learning of the book group engaged department heads in an administrative sense of community, imagined and oriented themselves as colleagues within that community, and mutually aligned their perspectives, resulting in more consistent communication and messages between the management team, elected officials, and the public.

City managers not only need to surround themselves with capable staff and department heads, but also create a feeling of camaraderie among managers of neighboring municipalities. Courtney Harbison noted that due to her city's central location, she has built strong, long-term network relationships with neighboring city and county managers through exchanging and sharing information of common interest. As Courtney puts it, "when somebody leaves one place,

I usually end up with them somewhere else." Her connections to neighboring administrators can be interpreted as either a loose community of practice or a network, depending on whether they are creating meaning through practice or simply sharing information. They exhibit several characteristics of communities of practice as defined by Wenger and Snyder (2000), helping solve practice-specific problems quickly, transferring best practices, and coaching each other to develop professional skills. These relationships are an important forum for social learning to help answer questions, construct knowledge, develop competencies, and work together on local and regional issues of common interest.

### **Have a Mentor**

Most of the women managers included in this study shared stories of influential mentors who provided them with crucial informal learning experiences that helped them learn to navigate the organizational cultures of administration, politics, and the public. Women shared instances of mentors who modeled behaviors that they found helpful, and also examples of ways of doing things that they chose not to emulate. Some of these experiences and mentoring techniques were shared in the portraits of the study participants in Chapter 4. Others were shared previously in this chapter as an example of a type of informal learning experience that were instrumental in helping the women decide to pursue city management as a career.

### **Work with elected officials**

Learning the organizational culture of the elected city council or commission is essential for women city managers to be able to effectively carry out the governance of the city as well as to remain employed. The staggered terms of elected officials cause the membership of the city council to be in flux in accordance with election cycles and the ebb and flow of political issues and priorities. The relatively short average tenure of city managers, regardless of gender, is an

indication of the complexity of the organizational culture of politics and the difficulty of learning it. This section describes some of the informal learning experiences that the women city managers that participated in this study shared relative to politics and working with elected officials.

**"Make the best recommendation you can."** The city manager's job is to provide expertise and advice to city council members to enable them to make informed decisions, and to assist them in implementing them. Mary Henry describes the interaction of administration and politics this way:

When all is said and done at the end of the day, it's your job to make the best recommendation you can to the city council to give them the best advice, to be impartial, do your homework, know the facts, present them with the facts, make the best recommendation you can make. But at the end of the day, if the council doesn't go with it, that's their job, to make the final decision and you may not like it and not agree with it, but you have to implement it, as long as it's legal, of course.

City managers may sometimes advocate certain courses of action to elected officials based upon their administrative expertise, but it is vital that the manager ultimately respects the council's decisions and works with them to carry them out. To be successful, city managers must learn how to establish working relationships based on mutual respect with elected officials, including an understanding of each other's role in city governance. This process is ongoing as new council members and mayors are elected and take office.

Emily Hogan described a situation where her council decided to create a new department within the city's organizational structure that she did not think was a good idea. Despite her misgivings, "it was their decision, they duly made it, they duly voted upon it, and it was our job

to go create this department of tourism, which is what we did do." Emily and her department heads worked together and "tried to do it as professionally and fairly and squarely as we could." One of the skills that city managers must learn to carefully traverse is the fine line between advocacy and administration. As Bierema (1998) observes in calling for adult educators to incorporate career development topics into their teaching: "Careers are riddled with learning to navigate organizational culture, politics, and rules" (p. 101). Women city managers learn to navigate the balance between administration and advocacy by learning the organizational cultures of the elected officials, city employees, and members of the public with whom they work. The process of relationship building is often more difficult for women city managers because the majority of city council members and mayors with whom they work are male.

**"I had to call the roll to fire him."** At times, a city manager will get caught in the crossfire of a decision-making process or council politics and have to learn their way through the situation. City managers are usually at-will employees, which means the city council can vote to terminate their contracts at any time, for any reason or none at all, by including it in their public meeting agenda and calling roll to vote. Four of the women city managers who contributed to this study faced termination votes, had elected officials suggest that their contract needed to be reviewed, or called roll for a vote to terminate the contract of a manager for whom they worked. One participant was forced to resign during the course of this study. Another participant was terminated from a previous department head position as when her duties placed her in the middle of a conflict of interest involving a city council member.

Although city managers are hired for their expertise to provide the best recommendations they can to council, sometimes politics have greater weight than administration when elected officials make decisions. As a by-product of Emily Hogan's early advocacy against the council's

decision to create a new tourism department within the city government, she "became labeled...pro-Chamber, which I was, and there was an attempt to fire me." Her employment contract was on the city council's meeting agenda for termination. Due to support from the public and personal supporters who packed the city council meeting room during the meeting to speak on her behalf to the council, Emily was not terminated.

Reviewing the city's accounts soon after taking a position in finance, Hannah Clay revealed that she discovered strong evidence that one of the city's elected officials had been receiving free city services for years for several of his properties. She said that she initially chose to approach the official privately, informing him that the service would no longer be provided without payment and asserting that he should pay restitution. When he vehemently denied the theft, she shared the evidence with the city council, initiating a series of attempts by the official to assemble enough votes within the council for her termination. Hannah's organizational relationships and the trust the council had in her work enabled her to avoid termination.

When Jennifer Tyler began working in Camptown, she stated that thought it would be an accomplishment if she were able to stay for a year. The city council "had bullies and if they don't get their way and if you don't do what they want, then it's intimidation: 'Oh, we need to relook at your contract again.' And I'm like, 'Whatever.' I mean, fully, I was prepared for whatever." Luckily, the threats never escalated to a roll call for her termination. Nevertheless, power struggles within the council and "topsy turvy" administrative disorder made both the administrative and political organizational cultures very challenging for Jennifer to learn and navigate.

One of Kathy Phelps' mentors managed his relationships with council members with a strategy of "work the ones you need to work, try to make sure you have your four votes." She

said she learned from a subsequent city manager she worked with, who had a different approach to working with elected officials: "I watched how he interacted with the council, making sure that each one had the same information that made decisions on." Kathy observed the riskiness of the first city manager's approach, recalling that "on two different occasions I had to call the roll to fire him and it fell both times, but he saw that the handwriting was on the wall...that's bound to be stressful on somebody when they start having roll call votes to fire you. That's tough." When Kathy was hired as city manager, she was already eligible for retirement benefits with the city, so she opted for the unusual route of accepting the position without a contract. She said she jokes with the Mayor that her job security is on a meeting-to-meeting basis.

Contract or no contract, the stakes for learning the culture of politics and developing a solid organizational network of working relationships with elected officials are very high for city managers. Women city managers must quickly learn the norms and rules of a traditionally male political organizational culture (Watson & Watson, 2006). City managers reported that learning and managing the policy role, which includes mayor and council relations, policy proposals, and managing council agenda items, accounts for an average of 32.3 percent of their time (Newell and Ammons, 1987). In the examples from this study included above, elected officials used their positions, privilege, and power to reinforce structures of domination in relation to the women city managers that participated in this study. These structures shape and are shaped by organizational contexts and the interaction of the cultures of administration, politics, and the public. As these experiences illustrate, a city manager's job depends on her ability to learn organizational culture, become enculturated into existing structures and hierarchies, and develop a network of relationships with elected officials, fellow administrators, and the public.

**"Try to figure out how to get thrown under the bus and not get killed."** Part of learning political organizational culture for city managers is learning how to work with elected officials to respond to the concerns of the public. Sometimes that puts city managers in a position where they must navigate between several different organizational cultures, spheres of influence, and awareness of competing interests. Two of the women city managers in this study described an instance when they found themselves in the middle of political conflict.

Sarah Martin shared an example of an experience where she successfully navigated a difficult political situation. When a state agency quietly established a community-based center in a residential area, neighbors were alarmed and voiced their concerns to city council. Sarah was forced to strike the balance between addressing concerns of the public and council, interpreting city zoning ordinances, conflicting police activity reports, and protecting the federal housing rights of the center's clients. Things escalated after Sarah issued a report detailing the issue that further incited opposition and created a situation she described as: "either you support the neighbors, or you support the city manager."

According to Svara (1999), part of the role of city council members is to "help to keep the city in touch with the electorate, they serve as a pressure valve that helps to moderate the tension of distraught constituents, they draw attention to breakdowns in systems and problems with services, they promote consideration of a wider range of alternatives than professionals might raise and they deal with the political realities that surround many city government actions" (p. 51). To resolve the issue and defuse the tension with the community group without taking sides, the city council needed a "face-saving" option to defuse the situation. Sarah had to "try to figure out how to get thrown under the bus and not get killed," and suggested they hire an independent attorney to look into the matter. This story illustrates what she termed "the art of

coming up with multiple ways to get to the same place." Sarah Martin's well-established organizational relationships with the mayor and council and her knowledge of the cultures of politics and the public provided her the time and counsel to suggest a solution that enabled the council to address public concerns while protecting the rights of the agency's clients and her own job.

Sometimes getting caught between the public and elected officials does not turn out as well. Conflict over policy or style with members of the council was the primary cause of manager turnover pinpointed by Whitaker and DeHoog's (1991) study of 133 city managers in Florida. Before Mary Henry became a city manager, her duties put her in the center of a difficult-to-navigate conflict between public pressure, the alcohol control board, and a city council member. There was public pressure regarding city alcohol ordinances, and one of the council members owned several bars. Mary was responsible for preparing reports about citations of alcohol ordinance violations and presenting them to the alcohol control board. Two of the council member's businesses were cited for violations, and the alcohol control board revoked his alcohol sales license for five years.

Appeals of control board decisions were decided by the city council, and Mary remembered that "he was called into question many times, but he still had a voice and a vote on every issue, and it was a big time conflict of interest." Unfortunately, Mary got caught in the middle and lost her job. Her termination highlights the tensions between the organizational cultures of politics and administration. Administrators' job duties give them responsibility for enforcing or implementing policies or ordinances that they had no role in establishing, which can unduly make them a target of political backlash.

Using the lens of situated cognition theory (Merriam et al., 2007; Merriam and Brockett, 2007; Fenwick, 2000) to examine Sarah and Mary's experiences reveals how inextricable their informal learning is from the social, political, and cultural contexts in which it takes place. Women city managers work within contexts and hierarchies of relationships, power, and influence where they are often in relationships of dominance and subordination both due to their job and their gender. A city manager's job context is shaped by powerful social, political, and historical structures that serve to constrain her power in relation to the decisions and policies made by elected officials and influenced by the public. This almost perpetually subordinate hierarchical position, coupled with the gender imbalance in the proportion of men to women elected officials, means women city managers are continuously learning and serving the public within a situated context that reproduces and is reproduced by existing social, political, and cultural structures.

### **Interact With the Public**

Navigating between organizational cultures of administration, politics, and the public is an important part of how city managers help maintain city infrastructure. According to Nalbandian (1999), the role of a city manager has shifted from providing technical administrative expertise to a focus on building community and facilitating diverse community participation in problem solving and partnerships. According to Thomas (2012), the public interacts with government in three unique roles, as citizens, as customers, and as partners. He underscores the need for local government professionals such as city managers to learn how and when to work with public stakeholders in the context of each of these three roles. Four of the women city managers that participated in this study spoke of informal and incidental learning experiences that occurred in the context of interacting with the public. One experience related to how

potential policies are presented to the public to gain their support, and the other involved building and maintaining relationships with a variety of community stakeholders.

**"Be careful in presenting things to the public."** Understanding how to develop public support is a key skill that women city managers must learn. While Kathy Phelps served as Finance Director, she worked with the city manager to develop a proposed additional sanitation fee to support some much-needed paving for residential streets, an issue with a lot of public support. She and the city manager ran the numbers, proposed a four-dollar fee, and spoke to civic groups and the public to educate them and generate their support for the proposed fee. When the proposal went to the Mayor and council for a vote, the council approved it, but the Mayor vetoed it. The council responded by reducing the fee to two dollars, which passed, but wasn't enough money to cover the costs of paving.

Kathy expressed concern that this caused some distrust and confusion from the public and explained that it was "because they think we tricked them, and we didn't trick them. That was what we proposed, it just didn't pay us that way." Thankfully, the issue did not escalate to cause public opposition, but Kathy stressed how important it is "to be careful in presenting things to the public and educating them on how it's all going to work until the council approves it...wait and see how it passes, how much money you've got." Using Thomas' (2012) role of the public as citizens, both the public and the elected council members did not fully understand the technical financial requirements for the additional fee to be able to support residential paving as proposed. City managers have to learn to become adept at communicating with different groups with multiple interests to develop and maintain their support and successfully implement the work of the city.

**"Build those relationships."** A city manager is required to coordinate efforts with stakeholders and other governmental agencies as a part of normal city operations, and especially so during an emergency. Building and maintaining communication and relationships with stakeholders is vital to this coordination. When a natural disaster struck Lauren Cooper's city, they were inundated with offer of assistance from other governments, other agencies, businesses, and volunteers. Everyone pulled to together to help with what they could, and Lauren recalled that she requested that a registration area be organized to coordinate and triage volunteers to direct them where assistance was needed and they could help with what they wanted to.

Lauren indicated that the experience was significant to her career because it made her realize "that communication is so very, very important and collaboration is as well, not just with the people that you deal with every day, but in building relationships in the community." She emphasized, "Build those relationships and not just have [them] at that one time, but continue them on." Lauren's efforts to develop community relations and facilitate communication within city departments and between the government and the community is illustrative of Fox and Schuhmann's (2000) findings from a survey of 90 women and 148 men city managers regarding the role of gender in city administration. Their results suggested that women city manager respondents appeared more likely than their male counterparts to be concerned with community relations and facilitating communication within the city. Her efforts to organize volunteers to help respond to a disaster are an example of engaging the public as partners to serve the needs of city resident as customers who needed assistance from local government (Thomas, 2012). Accepting assistance from other organizations and volunteers, fostering communication among departments and agencies, and maintaining networks of relationships once they have been forged is vital to building trust with partners and the public.

**"You have to let people be part of the decision."** Involving the public in local decision-making is essential for developing relationships and trust between city government and the community. Nalbandian and Nalbandian (2003) assert that one contemporary trend for local government managers is a growing emphasis on citizen engagement and building a sense of community. In working with local stakeholders, Jennifer Tyler learned first-hand about the need for building community trust in city government. Helping lead revitalization and redevelopment efforts in a large city, she recognized how little trust existed between the elected officials and community groups within the neighborhoods.

While their elected representatives advocated for new libraries and recreation centers, Jennifer remembered that community groups resisted, telling her: "We just don't believe that the city is going to be able to build it. We believe if they tear it down...you don't know how long it took for us to get this [existing facility]." They were skeptical that the city would deliver on promised new facilities if they demolished the existing ones, because officials had traditionally made decisions without asking their input. Jennifer recalled, "The level of trust was just terrible. And so that was an eye opener for me how imperialistic a government could be." It was critical to her career because she felt it was a lesson that "you can't decide for people, you have to let people be part of the decision and decide for themselves, good, bad, or indifferent, they're the taxpayers. They're the ones who are really in charge." As she reported discovering, trust can erode when the public is not engaged in their roles as citizens, customers, or partners (Thomas, 2012) in local government decisions that impact their communities.

Learning to engage the public and solicit public feedback regarding local decisions is an important process for city managers. Fox and Schuhmann's (1999) research has suggested that women city managers are more likely than men city managers to take public feedback into

account related to their work. To gather community input for how to revitalize the city's historic downtown commercial district, Courtney Harbison formed a group of community members and downtown property owners. The group was diverse: "new, old, I think the youngest was probably eighteen or twenty and then we had some in their nineties." They conducted a series of meetings and interviews to ask stakeholder their opinions and ideas about downtown. The result was a plan that compiled all of the input and priorities. Courtney was proud that "we've moved every single year towards those, we're about ten years into a twenty-year plan." By engaging members of her community in the role that Thomas (2012) defines as a partner in public management, her city has made progress towards common goals. The revitalization efforts have momentum and support from the public and elected officials because they reflect the community's vision for their downtown and their trust in city administration to make improvements, even if it takes years for them to be implemented.

Nalbandian (1999) identified increasing engagement in community building, facilitating participation, and developing partnerships as growing professional roles for local government managers. Engaging with the public and building community trust is an essential factor of learning the organizational cultures of the public, administration, and politics for women city managers. Building trust with individuals within their organization, with elected officials, with representatives of state and regional agencies, and with members of the community is also essential for women city managers to develop an informal network of relationships to help them get things done.

As these stories illustrate, women city managers engage with stakeholders and operate within organizational cultures and contexts of race, class, and gender that often include distrust of government. Structures and relationships of domination and oppression that underlie distrust

of government can make it very difficult for city managers to navigate, because of their role within those government structures and relationships. These four women city managers learned the value of reaching out to community members, groups, and stakeholders at appropriate times, and maintaining and building trust within their informal networks over time.

### **Focus on the work, not the politics**

One factor noted by women executives as holding women back is an understanding of political organizational culture and the political interactions between key executives (Ragins et al., 1998). As Watson and Watson (2006) point out, a city manager's positive relationships and credibility with elected officials are integral to success. A key strategy shared by the women city managers that participated in this study for navigating the political contexts of their environments is to remain focused on the work instead of the politics. Remaining focused on the administrative aspects of what needed to be done helped the women ensure that the needs of their city and residents were met, even as political debates occurred. The women city managers emphasized being willing to take calculated risks and make tough decisions to move their cities forward. Examples of how they learned to navigate the organizational cultures of politics and the public are detailed in this section.

**"Somebody has to do the work."** Four of the women city managers revealed that they learned the organizational cultures necessary to their positions by focusing on the work that needs to be done rather than on the politics. Staying focused on the bigger picture and steadily making progress on the work in front of them helped the women avoid getting involved in political issues and conflicts beyond their control. Jennifer Tyler's efforts to develop a citizen-requested community center and city hall and Sarah Martin's efforts to defuse a controversial political situation illustrate this focus.

When Jennifer Tyler became city manager of Camptown, they held a series of city council and community meetings to gather input for the city's comprehensive plan. There was a lot of community support to develop a community center. As they worked to find funding sources and identify a site, a lot of conflict and turmoil emerged, including a council member stirring up controversy and a citizen opposition group. Jennifer commented on her thoughts at the time: "My thing is that somebody has to do the work. Leave all this stuff swirling around; I couldn't get involved in it. We just continued to do the work, and now we have this complex and the beginnings of a new park." Sarah Martin's efforts during the neighborhood uproar about the health center showed a similar focus on what was best for the community as a whole. In the middle of the controversy when she was writing a report for city council about the issue, she said that she reflected, "How do I protect the whole city?" This emphasis on what is best for the entire city helped Sarah successfully navigate a controversial and political situation.

One woman city manager who participated in this study shared an instance where focusing on the work unfortunately not protect her from termination. Mary Henry was fired as a result of her role in the alcohol control board process in her city. While it was very difficult to leave a community where she had invested a lot of heart and soul over the years, she knew she had done the right thing. She reflected: "What I learned from that is if you're going to stay in this line of work...the one thing you can take with you forever, you know, my daddy used to say, 'I've never seen anybody driving a Cadillac to the grave loaded down with gold, but one thing you can take with you is your reputation.'" Mary had focused on completing thorough research and presenting the facts for the board to review and vote upon.

Emily Hogan learned by observing several men city managers with which she worked that egos can get in the way when the manager becomes more prominent in the community than

the elected officials. From her perspective: "Now, females have egos and don't think I don't know that about myself, much less others, ok? But, I think that females are better able, equipped to be about just doing the work and not getting caught up in being something and somebody that doesn't really matter, that really gets in the way." The key aspect of being ready to be a city manager, advised Emily Hogan, "is not freaking yourself out...to do the work, to not think about 'Oh, I'm the boss, and it's dark and lonely at the top,' and get all that stuff going in your head and in your heart and every place else, not to psych yourself out. To just say, 'Okay, I'm going to do this, but I'm going to be about doing the work.'" She believed that respecting that city managers and administrative staff are the "hired hands" to implement the policies duly set by elected officials is foundational to the council-manager form of government. Emily Hogan's approach to the role of a city manager supports Fox and Schuhmann's (1999) findings that women city managers are more likely than men city managers to view their position as oriented towards administration rather than the formulation of public policy, and to agree that city managers should maintain neutrality on controversial municipal issues. The dynamics of politics, administration, and egos among elected officials, the public, and city managers are part and parcel of the structures of power, hierarchy, and gender within which women city managers work.

**"You can't be afraid to take risks."** Three of the women city managers that contributed to this study offered the advice that learning when to take risks is a significant part of their job. The challenge, as Emily Hogan puts it, is "having the discretion to know when it's a good time to risk take and not to risk take." Part of the calculus of risk-taking is determined through informal and incidental learning to prepare for the decision as well as knowledge of the organizational cultures of politics, administration, and the public.

One common form of risk-taking that requires a lot of informal learning and preparation of city managers is proposing large capital projects to elected officials. Sarah Martin recalled sitting in a city council meeting in their historic city hall when "this whole section of plaster on one of these walls just falls." The building had been slowly deteriorating, and it was time to renovate. The city council had traditionally been "pretty tight" with building maintenance funds, but the members had recently changed. Sarah and the assistant city manager found some funds to hire a local architect to draw several sets of designs for various levels of renovations and additions to city hall.

The risk lay in balancing the timing and scope of the proposed project. Their timing was based on their knowledge of the organizational culture of the council and their group norms related to decisions about large projects. Sarah and her colleague knew that "generally anything really big took three years to do, so you have to kind of show it to them: 'We're not quite ready.' You show it to them again: 'Yeah, we're getting more ready.' And then the third time: 'Ok.'" The challenge of scope was which set of plans to show city council. They ended up sharing all three sets of plans with council at their annual retreat, and "we're sitting there and they're looking at them, and we went with the two-story plans. If we asked for too much...and we went through this whole presentation...and at the end they were basically like, 'Well, if you can figure out how to pay for it, do it.'" Informal and incidental learning occurred when they had to figure out how to pay for the project. Sarah was able to develop her capital financing knowledge and expand her professional network thanks to the financing mechanism they arranged with the state municipal organization. The city hall project was so successful that it created a domino effect, with the city going on to renovate a number of facilities.

Coordinating a pilot of electronic voting equipment in her city was a significant milestone in Mary Henry's career development. It was a major administrative undertaking because it combined all of the details and state codes involved with elections with the technical preparation required for the voting equipment. Mary described her thought process regarding the new challenge, "When a new situation comes up, whether it's elections or anything, you don't need to just have a knee-jerk reaction. You need to think about it, you need to calm yourself down and think, 'Ok, if I make this decision, what's going to be the outcome?'" A number of influential state officials came to observe the electronic voting, and the day went very smoothly.

"You can't be afraid to go and take those risks and...help promote those things," advised Mary, "because it makes your city look good. I wasn't concerned about how I looked, but our city got a great reputation from that." Her willingness to do the work to pilot something new created value for the city and elected officials through positive statewide recognition. The public benefited from a more transparent and accessible form of voting. The informal learning that Mary undertook to make the effort a success and the teaching she did later to share her knowledge both helped expand her professional network on a statewide level.

A willingness to take professional risks can be influenced by a variety of factors. After what she described as a "really, really, really, tough year" of professional, political, and personal factors, Emily Hogan was ready to resign her position as city manager. She explained that she had begun to work on tying up some loose ends at city hall when a large economic development deal "hit my desk, and it was like I was...I think providentially, in a mindset that I was willing to take the risk to do the things that perhaps if I was really scared about losing my job, see? I wouldn't have done it." Since Emily had already planned to resign, the stakes of the risks she needed to take to help land the project were different.

As a result, Emily reflected, "I didn't care [about taking] the risk, and it turned out to be a godsend because it turned out to be such a very positive project for me to sink my teeth into and to kind of get back into the saddle in a very positive way." In the process, Emily collaborated with local tourism representatives who had been involved in the creation of the new city tourism department over which she had almost been terminated. The successful outcome of the deal they worked together to negotiate helped smooth over some of those politics, and led her to decide to stay as city manager.

**"I had to make those tough decisions."** To be effective, city managers not only have to be willing to take risks, but also to make and follow through on tough decisions. Four women city managers shared key experiences in the development of their careers that they described as involving difficult decision-making. Mary Henry spoke of a significant experience in her career when the city had a financial shortfall and she was tasked with balancing the budget. Due to the recession, the value of the tax digest had decreased and the mayor and council were reluctant to increase the millage rate. In reviewing the finances, Mary identified several positions that she recommended to be laid off. She remembers, "Oh, it was awful. One of the people I ended up laying off was our IT person and she was a real good friend of mine, had been for years." Mary's research had shown that it would be more economical for the city to outsource IT than to continue paying for salary, benefits, IT equipment, and maintenance. It was difficult to explain the decision to her friend, and had a lasting impact on their friendship. While the council was supportive, Mary identified it as a key milestone in her career:

I realized at that point I was dealing with people's lives, and that I needed to do a better job of monitoring the budget, or catching it earlier. If there was a problem, I didn't need to wait until the end of the year. So, it has helped me to be, I think, more aware of the

control that I really have. I mean, I sit here all day and I think, "You know, I don't have any control. I'm just doing this job, I'm doing what they tell me to do," but that's not true. I do have a lot of control. I have a lot of power over people and I don't want to abuse that power.

When Jennifer Tyler was hired as city manager of Camptown, she familiarized herself with the city's budget and operations and saw the need for some difficult financial decisions. Jennifer found it "astonishing" for Camptown to be so close to a large city "and still be operated like Mayberry." A number of employees had unnecessary car allowances. The city did not have a pay and classification system, and employees were accustomed to annual ten percent salary increases. Several employees had inflated titles, with salaries to match. Jennifer thought, "Now I see why we had issues here. No wonder you haven't been able to do anything outside of paying the employees, because people are taking the money home, and not really putting it back into the city." Jennifer felt the situation was "challenging" because as the city manager, "the buck stops with me and a lot of the decisions we made, they were tough, because...of course there are expectations. They had never had a female city manager and they never had an African American city manager." For the city to progress, some of the unnecessary benefits for employees had to be curtailed. Jennifer began to build administrative infrastructure and make some difficult changes within city policies and administration.

Sometimes city managers have to make decisions that are difficult because they involve what Courtney Harbison described as "a situation you can't fix." One of her employees began working for the city around the same time Courtney did, and she "trusted her explicitly; we were friends." After noticing that some of the record keeping for transactions the employee was responsible for was not correct, Courtney initially "believed it was an honest mistake or it was

someone else." The police department reviewed the paperwork, conducted a thorough investigation, and shared their findings. Turning over the evidence to the District Attorney's office and telling her employee what the police had discovered was "was of the hardest things I've ever had to do in my job because it really let me know that I couldn't, no matter what, I can't trust anyone, and I've always been a very trusting person." The employee was found guilty and sentenced to five years in prison for embezzlement. Courtney instituted a number of controls and purchased security cameras to help ensure financial transactions were better recorded and tracked.

### **Never stop learning**

Five of the women city managers that took part in this study spoke about the types of continuous learning involved in their jobs. Mary Henry explained the need for hands-on learning to become a city manager: "this is a job that you can't start at the top, you have to work in it to learn. It's too varied, too different." The operations of the city involve knowledge of diverse functions, from finance to firefighting and streets to sewers. City managers need to know enough about each function to be able to make good recommendations and understand operational interconnections. She continued, "You never stop learning. I learn everyday. There is so much I don't know...you will never learn it all, it's a continual learning experience." City managers have to be willing to engage in informal learning by reading requirements and legislation, asking good questions, and figuring things out.

Being willing to ask questions and finding out what others are doing are essential informal learning strategies that Courtney Harbison mentioned several times during our conversation. For example, one of the first major tasks she undertook as a city manager was to figure out how to run a local election. Like Mary Henry, she learned informally by reading the

entire election code and contacting the Secretary of State's office to ask for advice. When voters elected Martinsville's first woman mayor, the first non-native to ever be elected, Courtney soon learned that the mayor "was a true believer in asking everyone else what they were doing and then taking the best of that and instituting it in [Martinsville]." Courtney mentioned contacting other agencies or government administrators and asking their advice nine different times during our conversation. By consulting others and learning from their input, she has gained information to tackle issues Martinsville is facing and has built and fostered relationships within her professional network.

Being open to learning from others is critical to discovering the political and social organizational cultures of a community. Emily Hogan posits that "every city has its own personality, and I do think that if you don't learn it and become compatible with it, that you're not going to be successful" as a city manager. She credits an influential mentor as well as her husband as resources that have given her advice and helped her learn her community's personality. Kathy Phelps adds that learning how to listen intently, learn, and remain calm is foundational to building relationships with elected officials and the public. "Listen and learn and then speak, and never, never raise your voice," advises Kathy, "especially with the council or with a citizen." Continuously honing skills like discretion, listening, and fairness has helped Emily and Kathy navigate the organizational cultures of administration, politics, and their communities.

"Professional development and continuous learning is just vitally important to success," says Sarah Martin. During our conversation, she spoke very passionately about being open and willing to learn:

I think once you quit trying to learn or once you think you know it all, that's a very dangerous place to be, and you have to be open to learning from everybody around you. I mean learning from our twenty-something fellow interns as well as learning from the people you've been around forever. Everybody brings something to the table. Yeah, it's kind of one of the things I try to stress to people, is you have to be in kind of a constant state of being open to learning, learning new ideas or trying stuff...learning is a lifelong experience.

As Sarah talked about her career development, it was evident that she enjoys taking on new challenges and experiences that expose her to new information and ways of doing things, including volunteering for new projects, learning new skills, and connecting with others through professional associations.

### **Get involved in professional organizations**

Professional organizations were mentioned by seven of the eight women I interviewed for this study. These include state and national municipal management organizations, training programs, and regional agencies that host regular opportunities for local government managers to network and share ideas and issues. This finding is not surprising because the colleagues who helped me identify potential participants for this study have been very active in state municipal associations and knew the women who agreed to serve as my participants through those organizations. Many of the women city managers actually suggested each other's names as people I should include in this study, not knowing that I already had met and or planned to interview some of them.

When Courtney Harbison began working with her city, she quickly reached out to neighboring municipal managers, state agencies, and regional local government support agencies

to become familiar with resources and ask for help when she needed it. She was able to learn a lot informally through networking, because "I've never been afraid to ask people for help or ask them how they've done things." Her city has also been able to access a number of grants and funding sources, through her contacts, to help with city projects.

During her tenure as an assistant city manager, Sarah Martin got involved in leadership roles with a national municipal management professional association. Through that group, she had opportunities to "do a lot of things in terms of professionalism, professional development," including travelling and learning from other managers and governments. When the city was seeking funding for several renovation efforts, Sarah was able to connect with her state's municipal management organization for assistance.

State municipal management organizations can be instrumental in bringing managers together to share their knowledge and informally learn from each other. Following the natural disaster that struck during Lauren Cooper's tenure as city manager, she and her department heads were tapped by their state municipal management organization to share their knowledge. They have presented seminars on disaster planning and response to other local governments in the state. After Mary Henry's leadership to successfully implement electronic voting in her community, she "sort of became an election guru by default." The state municipal management association posted the election planning timeline she developed on its web site and invited her to teach other local government officials about election planning.

Professional organizations provide a venue or gathering space for women in city management to engage in social learning, to connect with and learn from each other. When I met with Jennifer Tyler, she had just returned from a national conference where she had attended a couple of workshops and panels on advancing women in the profession. Those panels inspired

her to reflect on the need to better promote the skills that women bring to city management and the challenge of the "labels affixed" to women versus male managers. Using a feminist framework, Marshall (1984) has explored the labels, and stereotypes, and assumptions related to sex, gender, and power negotiated by women managers, including being judged by double standards. Emily Hogan and Kathy Phelps knew each other through a state municipal management organization.

From my own critical perspective, professional organizations are function as a powerful form of enculturation for municipal managers and local government professionals. Through training classes, continuing education, panel discussions, and networking events, they teach and reproduce the existing hierarchies and structures of power and domination that are part of the context of city management. From my observations, a number of municipal association conferences cater to both elected officials and administrators. Women attending professional organization events observe how few other women elected officials and managers are in attendance, although several participants in this study noted they have perceived that the number of women is growing over time.

Special gatherings and panels focusing on women in government may serve as forums for discussion and same-gender networking and mentoring, but can also isolate women from broader networking opportunities with both men and women where they could make contacts with those who have greater access to levels of power and influence (Szymborski, 1996). As one of Szymborski's women assistant city manager research participants noted regarding the idea of forming a women's issue committee within a national municipal management association, "I don't want to be out of the mainstream, I want to be part of the real conversation and not at the kids' table at Thanksgiving" (p. 13). Bierema's (2005) study of an in-company network formed to

foster development of women and minorities in a Fortune 500 firm found that participation could actually serve to impede members' career development by creating reluctance to advocate for change within the organization despite awareness of gender and power structures.

### **Career Development Barriers Experienced by Women City Managers**

Seven of eight study participants identified gender-related factors that they felt posed barriers or challenges in their career development as women city managers. These factors included: (1) confronting gender stereotypes, (2) balancing career and family commitments, and (3) proving herself as a manager. This section includes the women's observations and experiences related to these barriers.

#### **Confronting gender stereotypes**

The three women city managers with the longest local government tenures of the women who participated in this study shared the following experiences of gender-related stereotypes. Each woman began her municipal career in the late 1970s, at a time when women were rarely found within the executive ranks of local government management. The 1974 ICMA State of the Profession Survey indicated that only 1% of the United States city manager survey respondents were women (ICMA, 2009). The examples in this section illustrate some of the stereotypes and perceptions that women managers face due to hierarchical structures of government that assume male leadership as a norm. The women's willingness to share these gender-related experiences during our conversations and advocate for change may indicate that they fit the profile of the Change Agent executive women's career development stage outlined by Bierema (1999).

**"You can be perceived as something derogatory."** At the time we met, Jennifer Tyler had recently returned from the annual conference of a municipal management association. While there, she attended a couple of workshops on women in the vocation. As our conversation began,

I shared the statistic that roughly twenty percent of city managers in the United States are women and she remarked that there are even fewer women city managers of color. Jennifer went on to say, "I think you need skills that women bring to the profession, and that we really should try to promote those more than we do." She identified a double standard that women managers face: "if you are a firm [woman] manager, you can be perceived as something derogatory. On the other hand, if you're a male manager, you are decisive and strong and confident, but women don't have those labels affixed to them." Marshall's (1984) research documented double standards as a problem faced by women managers, who noted that similar behavior was judged differently depending on the gender of the manager. Women city managers can be negatively labeled for navigating organizational culture using similar behaviors to those that help men managers succeed.

**"I think they expected since I was a woman that I would be all talk."** The City of Williston department heads had a tradition of all riding together to city council luncheons and sharing organizational news on the way. When Kathy Phelps was promoted to City Clerk and Finance Director, the only women department head, she joined them in the carpool. "Well, after a while," Kathy recalled, "I wasn't one of the boys because they thought I would tell them everything going on, and I couldn't." As Finance Director, she was privy to confidential information related to compensation and other finance-related decisions that she could not share with them.

Thinking back, Kathy said, "I think they expected since I was a woman that I would be all talk and tell them everything I knew." After explaining why she could not share with them, "eventually we worked through that professionally, and they respected the fact that if they had something they needed somebody to talk with about that they knew it wasn't going anywhere,

they could come in and sit down and talk to me." Kathy shared that during the hiring negotiations for her to become city manager, she told the council that she "would expect the same salary that [former city manager] had when he was there because I expect to do the same job he did. And many times I think organizations feel like they can pay a woman a little bit less, and I wanted to make that clear." According to Marshall (1984), one strategy women managers reported for dealing with gender bias or prejudice was to be prepared to respond to it directly. In addressing several gender stereotypes through direct communication, Kathy was able to strengthen her relationships with the men department heads and elected officials, strengthening her informal organizational network.

**"A token women in government."** In explaining how she began her career in local government in the late 1970s, Emily Hogan mentioned that she had applied for her job because she had heard that the city was "looking for a token women in government." The position was as a grants coordinator, to secure and administer social service and community development federal grant funds. It is an example of a job with a redistributive function, one of the agency types identified in Lowi's (1985) thesis of administrative structure, and reflects Miller et al.'s (1990) and Newman's (1994) findings that women in municipal and state workforces tend to be clustered in redistributive agencies and functions like grant administration.

### **Balancing career and family commitments**

In addition to contending with gender stereotypes, women city managers also balance commitments to work and family as public figures. A city manager is a fairly visible community position that requires high levels of interaction with the public, especially in smaller communities. A career lesson offered by Watson and Watson (2006) regarding city management is that it impacts personal lives due to the long hours required and the public visibility of the

position for the manager and her family. Additionally, women often disproportionately bear the burden of childcare and household tasks, which can compete with work and career responsibilities for women city managers, blurring the distinction between family and work.

**Separating public life from private life.** Depending on the size of the community and the visibility of the city manager, separating public life from private life is a challenge. Courtney Harbison highlighted the public visibility of a city manager in a small community when she mentioned, "I mean, people would see me in the grocery store and hand me their water bill." Mary Henry concurred when she observed that "it's not just a job, it's more like a way of life because you're not just this job Monday through Friday, eight to five. You're this job three hundred and sixty five days a year, twenty-four hours a day. I mean, people see you in the grocery store and come up to you with their problem because they say, 'You run the city and this is my problem,' and they want you to fix it right then." On the other hand, in a bigger community like Jennifer Tyler's, "Some people do [recognize her at the grocery store], but you know...people don't really pay that kind of attention."

When Sarah Martin weighed whether or not she wanted to apply for city manager, she described it as a "career change that heavily impacted how you lived your life, both time and effort." She remembered that she wasn't sure she "wanted to be the center of community attention." According to Aguado and Frederickson (2013), willingness to relocate is a trend that impacts women's career paths in city management. Their survey research of graduates of one university's MPA program who had served as city managers revealed that 90% of men respondents reported moving to further their careers versus 58% of women. Jennifer Tyler shared that her advancement opportunities were constrained when her now ex-husband was reluctant to move. Family members can also be affected by the politics of city management.

When Hannah Clay confronted an elected city official with evidence of his wrongdoing, his children made trouble for her children at school. Another example of how dedicated women city managers juggle career and family is that after going into labor with her second child, Kathy Phelps "came by [the office] on my way to the hospital and ran payroll." As the data illustrate, it can be difficult for women city managers to separate their work lives from their private lives.

**"I was at a good place in my career, in my family."** Four of the women who shared their experiences for this study described instances where they paced their career advancement due to personal and family commitments. Their experiences have parallels in the literature. Australian women public sector employees cited gender as an impediment that impacted their careers, including their decision to not allow work to interfere with parenting responsibilities (McMahon, Limerick, Cranston, & Andersen, 2006). A study of 65 graduates of the MPA program at the University of Kansas who had served as city managers found that 25% of women respondents agreed that "taking care of children interfered with my career," compared to 9% of men (Aguado & Frederickson, 2012).

When a City Clerk position became available, Mary Henry "didn't interview for it because I was really just happy doing what I wanted to do you know? I was at the point in my life that I was raising my children and I didn't want a lot of responsibility, I wanted to go to work from nine to five and go home and be a momma and a wife." Jennifer Tyler had reservations about applying for an assistant manager position because she "knew it was going to be a ton of work and I was at a good place in my career, in my family. I'm like, 'I'm good.'" Sarah Martin took a while to decide about applying for a promotion due to "some personal things where I wasn't sure I wanted to make some lifestyle changes." Looking in hindsight, Kathy Phelps expressed relief that she had not received a promotion during one point in her career because it

provided her time and flexibility to serve as a caretaker for her in-laws, take time off for the birth of her first grandchild, and provide emotional support for one of her children.

**"Can you really have everything?"** Vertz 's (1985) case study of women in the Milwaukee District Office of the U.S. Internal Revenue Service found that one obstacle for occupational advancement for women in upper-level positions was that they had greater domestic responsibilities than men in similar positions. Jennifer Tyler mentioned that one of the workshop panelists at the municipal management conference that she attended described being a city manager and mother of four young children. The woman described struggling with balancing the time demands of work with family responsibilities, and the impact on her children. Jennifer categorized it as "this whole debate about, can you really have everything?"

As our conversation continued and Jennifer shared her experiences as a single mother of two girls, I realized that she had lived that debate during her years in city management. For example, she described having help to take care of her children and some of the tradeoffs she weighed in ensuring her daughters attended good schools, had diverse friends, and experienced living in both urban and less urban settings. Marshall's (1984) work on women managers found that women interpreted the concept of a having a balanced life differently, recognized that a career would include periods of imbalance, and adjusted their priorities and expectations to help preserve flexibility in their lives. One of Jennifer's daughters is completing her MPA degree while working in local government, evidence of the impact of Jennifer's ongoing efforts to balance commitments to family and a career in public service.

### **Proving herself as a manager**

A common theme of my conversations with four of the women was their coming to understand their authority and abilities as a local government executive and leader. This process of understanding has both internal and external aspects. The participants described experiences when they personally realized their own power and authority as a city manager. They also related instances when they felt the need to prove their abilities to elected officials.

**"The biggest piece is not freaking yourself out."** As related earlier in this chapter, Emily Hogan asserted that "the biggest piece" of the major decision for women who accept a promotion to city manager "is not freaking yourself out" about the power and responsibility of the position. Emily urged that women should instead focus and "just do the work" involved in being a city manager. It is easy to become overwhelmed and isolated by the responsibility of leadership and end up reinforcing traditional structures of hierarchy and domination that cast doubt on women's leadership abilities.

The difficult experience of firing five of her employees as a result of financial challenges ultimately made Lauren Cooper become more aware of how much control she had over her job and the power she had over people as a city manager. Previously, she had thought of her job as just carrying out the will of the city council with little autonomy. Lauren remembered thinking, "Wow!" and asking herself if she was prepared for her role. Her response to herself was, "Yeah, I'm up for the challenge. I can do it. But you know, I'm just going to do a better overall job." Realizing her own control and authority over the context of her work inspired her to be more vigilant about monitoring the city's finances.

As part of Bryans and Mavin's (2003) research into how women learn to become managers, they asked study participants about when they first felt like a manager. Their findings

indicated that "one of the most significant issues in this discussion was the realization that as managers the women were responsible for others and their actions had a direct impact on others" (p. 123). This is echoed in the experience Lauren Cooper shared with me about her realization of her own control and power as a manager.

**"You have to be who you are."** Jennifer Tyler offered some advice based on her years of experience, "I think for women, you have to be who you are." Her words take a different approach than those of Bryans and Mavins (1984) and Kristeva (1984), who perceive that learning is a process of *becoming* rather than *being*. Jennifer elaborated that she strives for consistency in her style and ethics in both her public and private lives and is not willing to be aggressive or turn her head away from controversial issues or ethics to avoid conflict. Knowing and being true to herself and taking her ethics seriously gave her a sense of authority with employees and elected officials and a reputation as a "firm but fair" manager. As we spoke, Jennifer mentioned ethics and ethical situations three times and her commitment to treating people fairly and inviting their input three times. Jennifer Tyler's explanations speak to Ibarra, Ely, and Kolb's (2013) proposition that people, and women in particular, become leaders by internalizing a sense of their own leadership identity through an iterative process and developing a sense of purpose.

**"I've had to show them that I can, many times."** Research indicates that women and minorities must rely on proving themselves for career success via formal objective factors rather than a positive reputation (Daley, 1996). Marshall's (1984) study of 30 women managers in the book publishing and retail industries identified what she termed the "senior manager barrier" to promoting women to senior positions, which her participants attributed to possible reasons including stereotypes of women, women's reluctance to engage in politics, negative attitudes

towards working parents, and the lack of visible successful senior women managers. A survey of men and women city manager graduates from the University of Kansas' MPA program found that 26% of men 34% of women agreed or strongly agreed with the statement, "It has been my experience that councils are disinclined to appoint female local government administrators" (Aguado & Frederickson, 2012). The data from this study lends some support that women city managers face gender-related obstacles.

Kathy Phelps felt she needed to prove herself by overcoming the gender stereotypes of the elected official who expressed his concerns about her appointment as interim city manager. The council member spoke up in a public meeting that he feared it was "too stressful a job for a woman to handle" due to her "family and stuff." His comment regarding Kathy's gender and his assumptions regarding her family responsibilities indicates evidence of second-generation gender bias. Ibarra et al. (2013) define as a bias that "erects powerful but subtle and often invisible barrier for women that arise from cultural assumptions and organizational structures, practices, and patterns of interactions that inadvertently benefit men while putting women at a disadvantage" (p.63).

In a later phone call, the council member offered his support to Kathy and acknowledged her reputation for hard work and dedication. Kathy promised him personally that her family would not prevent her from working hard and serving the public. After several years of observing her work, the official took her aside at a public event and told her, "You know, I remember thinking that might be a big job for you, but you've done such a good job." Kathy stated that she has had to prove "many times" that she is strong and can handle the stressful situations involved in being a city manager.

## Summary

This chapter presented the findings from the constant comparative analysis of the critical experience narratives collected for this study. After extensive review of the data, I began assigning coding categories to the data and analyzed it using narrative, or content, and constant comparative analysis. I organized and presented the findings within the chapter to address the three research questions that guided this study. Quotations from the interview transcripts helped explain and provide examples of data categories and themes. I used direct quotations from the participants as much as possible to incorporate the voices of the women city managers that generously shared their experiences with me during this study. Literature was incorporated into the analysis to explore how the findings of this study reflect or differ from previous studies and research.

## **CHAPTER 6**

### **CONCLUSIONS, DISCUSSION, AND IMPLICATIONS**

This chapter begins with a summary of the research study. Next, it presents a discussion of key conclusions of the findings and how they relate to existing research about women's workplace learning and the profession of city management. Finally, implications for theory, practice, and future research are outlined.

The purpose of this qualitative study was to identify and explore the informal and incidental learning experiences that current women city managers in the Southern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management. This exploratory study was guided by these three research questions:

1. What is the nature of informal and incidental learning experiences that women city managers identify as critical to helping them initially decide to pursue city management as a career?
2. How do women city managers learn and navigate the organizational cultures of administration (bureaucracy) and politics (elected officials)?
3. What are some of the barriers faced by women city managers to succeeding in city management?

### Summary of the Study

Using an exploratory qualitative approach to address these study questions, I selected a purposeful sample of eight women city managers working in the Southern United States. The criteria for participation in the study were that the manager was: (1) a woman, (2) currently employed as a city manager, (3) working full-time, (4) serving a municipality in the southern United States, and (5) had been employed as a city manager for at least five years to ensure she had experienced several budget and election cycles. Participants were purposefully selected so they and the cities they serve represented a diverse mix of age, ethnicity, years as a city manager, size of city, and level of urbanicity of the city. Participants ranged in age from their late 30s to late-60s. The total number of years that each of the women had worked as a city manager ranged from 5 to 24 years.

Data collection methods included in-depth interviews with each participant, researcher journal entries and memos to document the data collection and analysis process, and online research of each woman's career via city web sites, news articles, and city council meeting notes. I used critical incident technique (CIT), which I have re-named *critical experience technique*, as a method of data collection for interviewing, asking each woman city manager that participated in the study to recall specific experiences that they considered to have been significant or critical to their career development. Each of the 8 participants participated in one (1) in-person interview ranging from 50 to 120 minutes. Each interview was digitally recorded and transcribed verbatim.

I used constant comparative method to analyze the interview transcripts, my journal entries and memos, and online document research to identify categories and themes within the data related to the research questions guiding this study. The primary informal and incidental learning experiences the women city managers identified as having helped them decide to pursue

a career in city management were: (1) connecting to local government through higher education, (2) serendipity, (3) gaining broad knowledge of city functions, (4) mentoring and (5) serving as acting or interim city manager. For the second research question, the methods women city managers reported they used to navigate both administrative and political organizational culture were to: (1) build a good team, (2) have a good mentor, (3) work with elected officials, (4) interact with the public, (5) serve as acting or interim city manager, (6) focus on the work, not the politics, (7) never stop learning, and (8) be active in professional associations. Some of the barriers that the women city managers participating in this study confronted during their career development were: (1) confronting gender stereotypes, (2) balancing career and personal/family commitments, and (3) proving herself as a manager. Key conclusions and implications will be discussed in this section.

### **Conclusions and Implications**

Several key conclusions can be gleaned from the analysis of the findings of this study. The first is that social and experiential learning is central to women city manager's informal and incidental learning and career development. Their learning is dialectically shaped by the multiple social contexts of city management, which create a rich, complex learning environment. Additionally, women city managers understand and value the continual learning required by their position, and tenaciously seek learning opportunities as a strategy to develop their careers and overcome barriers. These conclusions, as well as implications of this study for theory, practice, and future research will be discussed in more detail in this section.

**Conclusion 1: Social and experiential learning is central to women city manager's informal and incidental learning and career development. Their learning is dialectically shaped by**

**the multiple social contexts of city management, which create a rich, complex learning environment.**

The findings of this study document the voices of women city managers describing their informal and incidental learning experiences on their journeys to becoming city managers. They highlight the critical role that social and experiential learning play in women city managers' career development. Their experiences align with social learning theory (Wenger, 1998), which asserts that learning occurs in the ongoing interplay between our socially defined competence and our experience. Social learning theory is constructivist and has roots in experiential learning, evidenced by its focus on practice and the active process of how knowledge is socially constructed. One deficiency that Swan et al. (2009) have noted with social learning theory is that despite increased interest in the perspective, the management learning discourse has largely ignored the social aspects of social learning. Swan et al. (2009) advocate using a feminist lens to examine and debate how shifting social dynamics of gender, class, and race dialectically shape and are shaped by management learning. Women city managers learn to navigate the multiple social contexts of city management, including administration, politics, and the public through social and experiential learning with others.

The women city managers participating in this study described learning to become managers through interactions and projects with colleagues, supervisors, mentors, elected officials, and the public. The participants reported that their learning experiences helped them develop competence in their profession in collaboration with others. Data from the interviews regarding how women learned to navigate the organizational cultures of administration, politics, and the public show how essential learning with and from others is to this process. A number of scholars (for example, Belenky et al., 1986; Cafferella & Olson, 1993; Hayes, 2001; Hayes &

Flannery, 2000) have explored and reviewed the research regarding characteristics of women's learning and knowing. They describe the significance of relationship and collaborative, connected knowing to women's development and learning. In their review of the literature regarding the psychosocial development of women, Caffarella and Olson (1993) identify three major themes: diverse patterns characterized by both periods of stability and change due to transitions, negotiation of identity and intimacy, and the centrality of relationships and connectedness. Hayes (2001) argues that women's development is complex, and broad conclusions drawn from small groups of research subjects can overlook the diversity of women and serve to fuel existing gender stereotypes. Instead, Hayes (2001) proposes that viewed as reflective and inextricable from the gendered social contexts in which women learn and work. Using this lens, social learning may be an adaptive response of the women city managers in this study to learn and navigate multiple, complex, gendered social contexts of their workplace.

Of the 8 methods of how women navigate administrative and political organizational culture identified in this study, 6 clearly involve informal social learning by women city managers: build a good team, have a mentor, work with elected officials, interact with the public, serve as acting or interim city manager, and be active in professional associations. The other 2 themes, focusing on the work rather than the politics and never stop learning, included both social learning and more individually oriented self-directed learning. Mentoring was a common experience of the women who participated in this study that involves social learning. Finally, several women city managers reported taking part in or fostering a community of practice (Wenger, 2000) among fellow local government practitioners through which they reported collaboratively learning about a common interest.

The experiences of the women city managers that contributed to this study are supported by other research. Indeed, a survey of 84 men and women managers at a large Fortune 100 insurance company indicated that 44% reported the most prevalent informal learning activity to develop managerial proficiency was workplace interactions with others (Enos, Kehrhahn, & Bell, 2003). The authors concluded that "informal learning is a social process that is largely dependent on social interaction with other individuals in the workplace and is situated within the organization," and more importantly, "actions, in concert with interactions with others in the workplace, serve as an important vehicle in which domain-specific knowledge is generated, articulated, and dispersed throughout an organization" (p. 381).

A survey of 125 workplace learning and improvement professionals rank-ordered the following informal learning activities they engage in to learn something new to perform their job tasks, in order of highest to lowest frequency: reflect, talk face to face, email, trial and error, web search, read journal, observe, use listserv (Berg & Chyung, 2008). Of these activities, talking face to face, emailing, observe, and using a listserv are all socially oriented and involve others. A qualitative study of 75 women professionals without formal information technology (IT) credentials working in IT, also a predominantly male field, examined how gender shaped their informal learning (Jubas, Butterwick, Zhu, & Liptrot, 2006). The women interviewed for that study identified their participation in communities of practice and other social learning from mentors and supervisors, their networks, and co-workers as important forms of ongoing informal IT learning. The workplace contexts of the participants in these three studies are within specific organizations, whereas city management involves a more complex set of contexts. Nevertheless, the centrality of social learning to women's career development is nevertheless evident.

The complex social and political contexts of city management, including the multiple organizational cultures of administration, politics, and the public that the women had to learn to navigate, cannot be separated from their experiences of learning and career development. Merriam et al. (2007) define *context* as including physical and social experiences as well as the physical and conceptual tools used by learners, such as language, technology, equipment, concepts, and skills. The inextricability of individual cognition and the contextual aspects of learning is a hallmark of the theory of situated cognition, a constructivist approach that builds upon Dewey's (1938) experiential learning and is grounded in the "idea that that what we know and the meanings we attach to what we know are socially constructed" (Merriam & Brockett, 2007, p. 156). The stories shared by the women city managers that contributed to this study provide evidence of the extent to which their workplace learning processes are part and parcel of the social and contextual aspects of their learning.

The women city managers participating in this study experienced learning within and from the complex social, political, and cultural structures that help form the context of city management. Lave's (1988) dialectical view of learning contexts is especially relevant to the context of city management because of his assertion that the contexts shape and are shaped by these social, political, and cultural structures. As Bierema (1998) asserts: "Women's career development is not simply a women's issue. It is a social issue." The multiple social contexts in which women city managers learn and develop their careers is characterized by patriarchal structures of oppression and mediated by a woman's positionality related to gender, race, class, education, and other social factors (Bierema, 1998). Crewson and Fisher (1997) concluded from their research into skill requirements of city managers that "public administration is very much a context-specific enterprise" and urged that "researchers need to build a better understanding of

the role context plays in issues related to public management" (p. 385). As women enter higher levels of municipal leadership, they have the potential to influence and shape these structures to help other women to enter and become leaders. This is supported by Saltzstein's (1986) findings of greater female employment parity in municipalities with women mayors as well as Fox and Schumann's (2000) research indicating that women city managers are more likely to work in municipalities with greater numbers of women city council members.

The participants in this study identified a number of social contexts within which they engaged in informal and incidental learning through their career development. One is the administrative context, which includes supervisors, mentors, colleagues, employees and other team members within city government and other local, state, and regional agencies. Interactions with elected officials and politicians take place within a political context. Members of the public and stakeholders for particular issues inhabit another set of social contexts. Finally, professional associations for local government are a social and political context where political and professional contacts co-mingle, because of their inclusion of municipal staff and managers, elected officials, state and regional agency representatives, and local government consultants and vendors at conferences and networking events. Each of these gendered social contexts is characterized by networks of relationships and patriarchal structures that women city managers must first recognize through becoming what Bierema (2003) calls "gender conscious," and then learn to navigate.

**Conclusion 2: Women city managers understand and value the continual learning required by their position, and tenaciously seek learning opportunities as a strategy to develop their careers and overcome barriers.**

Underlying all of the experiences the women city managers recounted as part of their contributions to this study was their appreciation of the continual learning required by their positions in local government. Some of the forms of informal and incidental learning the women participating in this study described included: digging into new projects, reading information relevant to things they were working on, calling others to gain expertise, gaining knowledge and skills from colleagues, learning through trial and error, observing others, participating in professional organizations, reflecting on their own experiences, and trying new approaches. The data from this study suggests that formal learning is also an important part of the journeys of many women city managers. Sarah Martin and Emily Hogan found employment in local government through higher education connections after earning their graduate degrees in public administration. Mary Henry and Kathy Phelps both pursued higher education degrees as a means to gain a credential to help them advance in their careers. This formal learning can be valuable in a profession where an MPA degree is a common professional credential required of city manager job applicants.

Sharing their knowledge with others was another aspect of the learning experiences recounted by the women city managers during our conversations. Mary Henry described being asked to share her elections expertise by presenting at state workshops and providing election timeline materials she developed to be posted on her state's municipal association web site for other local government leaders to access. Jennifer Tyler noted that she attended and participated in workshops at national professional association conferences and regional meetings. Compiling

"If-I-Die-Before-I-Wake" notebooks for each position she held and cross-filing key information in several different locations so that those who came after her would have the benefit of her organizational expertise were two knowledge-sharing strategies Kathy Phelps mentioned.

Through her engagement in a national professional association, Sarah Martin served on national professional association committees and work groups, participated in conference panel presentations, and travelled internationally to exchange information with other governmental officials. She also coordinated a leadership book group among her staff for them to share thoughts and approaches to leadership. These opportunities for learning through teaching described by the study participants occurred in primarily informal settings where information and expertise could be shared and collaboratively created.

Continual learning is an inextricable aspect of the context of city management, based upon the data collected for this study. Five of the study participants specifically mentioned their ongoing learning during our conversations. Whether developing an understanding of various functions of government, determining how to navigate the organizational cultures of administration, politics, and the public, or building their network of contacts, the women city managers in this study reported constantly seeking information and adding to their knowledge. The data collected for this study suggest that the opportunity for continuous learning is a characteristic of city management that both attracted and helps retain a number of the study participants in the profession.

The career development of each of the eight women city managers who graciously shared their time and experiences with me during this research was characterized by tenacious and persistent learning. The critical experiences they described in our conversations provide evidence. Lauren Cooper learned disaster management by collaboratively leading her city in the

process of responding to and recovering from a significant natural disaster. Jennifer Tyler navigated her way through political minefields to develop and implement plans for a visionary new municipal community complex. Mary Henry rolled up her sleeves to familiarize herself with state election code to lead her community in successfully piloting new voting technology, later sharing her expertise with others across her state. Sarah Martin negotiated a tense and highly controversial community issue by figuring out how to meet the needs of multiple stakeholders without being thrown under the bus. Courtney Harbison engaged a cross-section of her community in gathering input for their historic downtown and collaborated with transportation and historic preservation officials to begin moving towards her community's collective vision. Kathy Phelps dug into each position she held during her career development, documenting her knowledge for each position so her organizational expertise could be shared with others, and graciously shared her nuanced understanding of the local community with the city managers with whom she worked. Emily Hogan provided advice and input for tourism development in her community, and when her city's elected officials decided to pursue a different organizational arrangement, she nevertheless coordinated the team that implemented their vision.

Some of the women city managers in this study detailed their encounters with gender-related barriers in their career development. Barriers they described were being judged by double standards, facing gender stereotypes, struggling to balance work, personal, and family responsibilities, and feeling the need to prove themselves as capable managers to male elected officials and colleagues. Scholars (for example, Marshall, 1984) have documented gender barriers and shared strategies for addressing them. The women city managers that participated in this study described their own experiences with the demands of work and those of raising children and providing care for family members. The research bears this out. Research suggests

that one obstacle to advancement for women is that they bear a disproportionate burden of household responsibilities than do men in similar positions (Vertz, 1985). Women managers who choose to have families face negative impacts on their career development (Aguado & Frederickson, 2012; McMahon et al., 2006). Watson and Watson (2006) note that families can be impacted by the public visibility of city management and long hours required. Several of the older women participants recounted experiences earlier in their careers that included very clear gender bias and stereotyping. The younger women participants did not share gender-related incidents, perhaps due to more subtle but powerful forms of gender bias, termed *second generation gender bias* (Ibarra et al., 2013), and a lack of what Bierema (1999) identifies as *gender consciousness*.

The tenacity and persistence towards learning exhibited by the women city managers in this study and the experiences they shared demonstrate a characteristic that Duckworth (2013) terms *grit*. "Grit is passion and persevering towards very long-term goals. Grit is stamina" (Duckworth, 2013, 3:00). She explains that her research indicates that grit is a better predictor of academic success than IQ. McCall, Lombardo, and Morrison's (1988) work on how successful men and women corporate executives develop on the job found that one of the lessons they learned through hardships was the importance of persevering through adversity. This perseverance can be viewed supporting Duckworth's (2013) concept of grit. Due to the need for city managers to have broad knowledge of the functions of the city and an ability to navigate the multiple social contexts, the career path to becoming a city manager is generally a long-term, learning-filled process. As well, the projects that city managers oversee or manage often require years of long-term visioning, discussion, planning, financing, and construction. To be successful, women city managers must have tenacity and grit.

Nalbandian (2002; Nalbandian & Nalbandian, 2003) has written about the competencies required by city managers, as well as how public administration graduate programs can prepare students interested in local government management for those competencies. He observes that "becoming a top-flight city manager is a lifelong enterprise" (Nalbandian, 2002, p. 24). The early development of a city manager involves learning a craft that later develops into an art, and Nalbandian (2002) asserts that "a lifelong commitment to learning is essential to artistry" (p. 26). Research indicates that municipal managers learn to strike a context-specific balance between the craft, or science, and art of management based upon factors like their level of managerial experience, education, community population, urbanicity, and the form of local government (Crewson & Fisher, 1997). Prior to conducting this research, I had worked for several years with city and county managers, and thought of the role as being somewhat superheroic, balancing the needs of multiple stakeholders, coordinating services, and managing the behind-the-scenes administration needed to make a community run smoothly.

One of my personal epiphanies from the conversations during data collection for this study is that while I still have great respect for the position and the women and men who serve as city managers, I realize that the only "superpower" truly needed is a willingness to be a tenacious and persistent learner. Nalbandian (2003) echoes this realization: "Today's local government professional is not expected to be superhuman...or so we hope. However, the widely varied knowledge, skills, talents, and personal attributes that appear necessary for success certainly encompass enough breadth and depth to involve a willingness to grow continually and to learn from others through one's entire career" (p.15). The women city managers that participated in this study demonstrated that willingness and grit.

## **Implications for Theory**

The findings and the language of organizational learning used in this study have contributed to the knowledge bases of the adult education and public administration literature. Much of the existing research related to executive women's career development has focused on women in the private sector (for example, Rand & Bierema 2009; Ragins et al., 1998). Existing research on city managers reflects data collected from predominantly male participants and is largely quantitative rather than qualitative, as documented in Chapter 2. This study adds to the knowledge base by documenting the voices and informal and incidental learning experiences of women city managers in the literature.

One contribution of the study is that it furthers the dialogue regarding executive women's career development in not only city management, but in public sector leadership as a whole. The findings build upon the body of literature on representative bureaucracy that examines and describes the nature, scope, and trends and patterns of women's representation (Miller et al., 1999; Newman, 1994; Bowling et al., 2006), and identifies and raises awareness of organizational barriers to women's advancement in the public sector (for example, Guy, 1994). Structural changes to address organizational architecture and remove barriers have helped increase the representation of women in government, but discourse in public administration sometimes has the tendency to overlook individual experiences in favor of examining larger macro-level organizational and administrative structures.

The vocabulary and literature of organizational learning used in this study builds upon the discourse related to representative bureaucracy and gender in the public administration literature by providing an understanding of how individual women in local government learn their way through their career development, deciphering organizational cultures and building

informal networks. These findings and conclusions from this study can also inform Beaty and Davis' (2012) call to develop leadership curriculum for MPA programs that engages students in understanding how gender informs public administration leadership, with details of specific strategies for how women city managers have developed their careers.

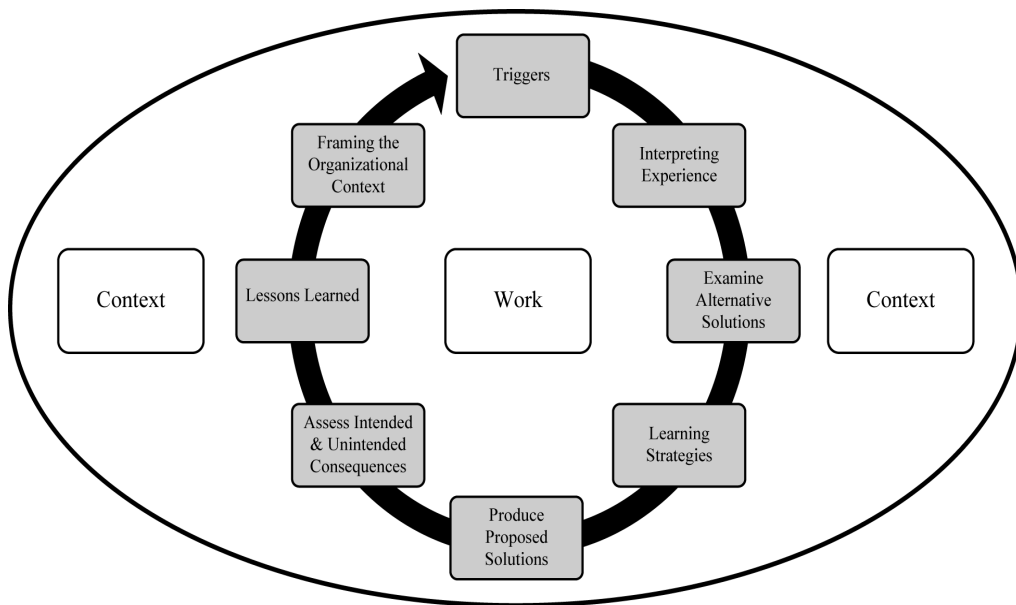
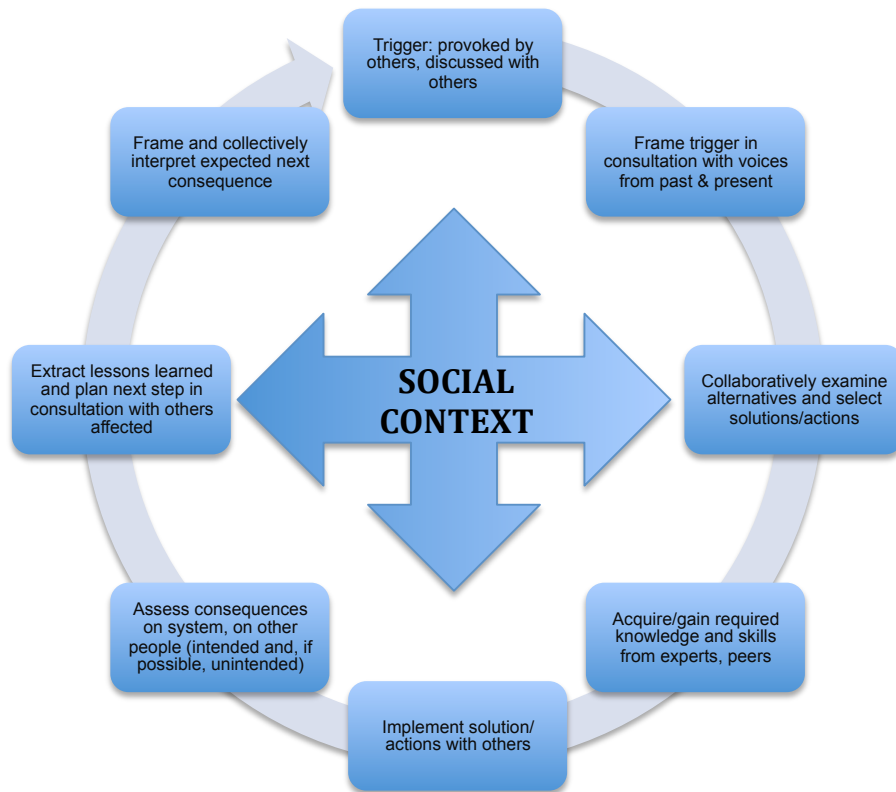


Figure 1. Model of informal and incidental workplace learning. Adapted from "Reviewing Theory and Research on Informal and Incidental Learning (Report No. 38-2)," by V. J. Marsick, K. E. Watkins, M. W. Callahan, and M. Volpe, 2006, retrieved from ERIC database (ED492754).

The findings of this study provide support to Watkins, Marsick, and Fernández de Álava's (forthcoming) recent update of social context as distinct from the larger element of context to further develop the Marsick et al. (2006) model of informal and incidental workplace learning. The Marsick et al. (2006) model is depicted in Figure 1. Examining the findings of this study through the lens of social learning theory suggests that the social context, including the interpersonal network and social ties involved in women city managers' informal and incidental

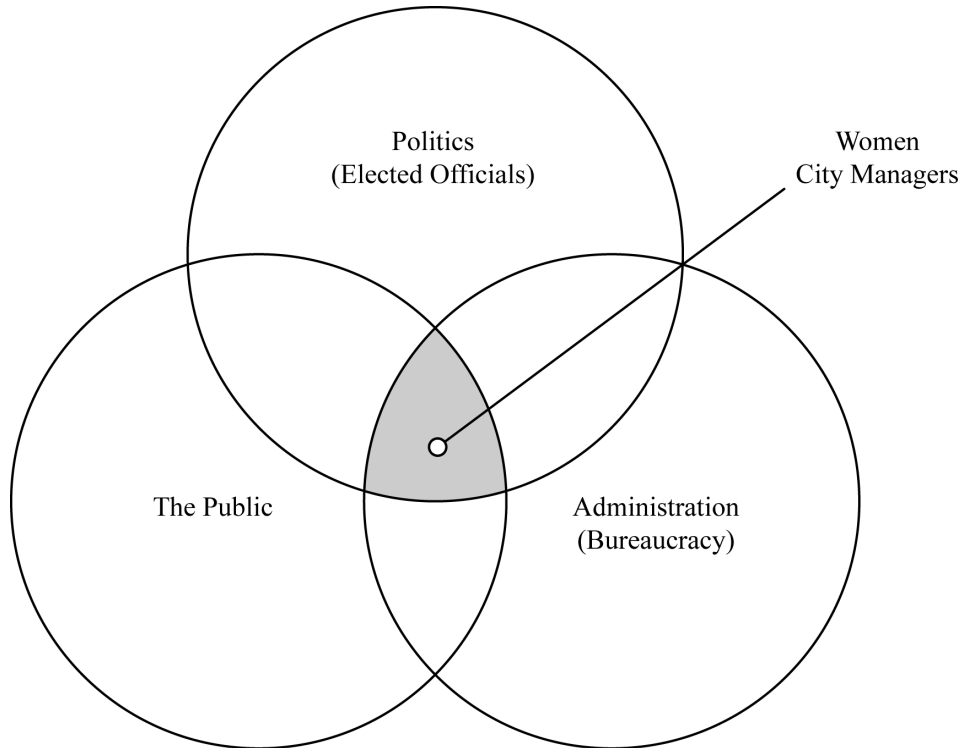
learning, have great significance. The learning experiences shared by the participants support the three modes of belonging that Wenger (2000) defines as anchoring social learning: engagement, alignment, and imagination. Engaging and learning with and from colleagues, elected officials, and the public to address challenges has the effect of creating community and building informal networks. Alignment refers to the mutual social process of lining up interpretations, perspectives, and engagement for a greater social good, which includes becoming enculturated within the social, political, and administrative contexts of city management. Finally, imagination occurs as women city managers reflect and orient themselves toward engagement within the social context constructing images of themselves and other within their social contexts. Watkins et al.'s (forthcoming) enhanced model of informal and incidental workplace learning to reflect social context and the social nature of learning is shown in Figure 2.



*Figure 2. Model of informal and incidental workplace learning adapted to reflect social nature of learning. Adapted from "Evaluating informal learning in the workplace," by K.E. Watkins, V. J. Marsick, & M. Fernández de Álava, forthcoming, In T. Halttunen, M. Koivisto, & S. Billett (Eds.), Promoting, assessing, recognizing, & certifying lifelong learning: International perspectives and practices. Springer Verlag.*

The experiences shared by the women city managers that participated in this study highlight the complexity of the multiple social contexts in which they learn and work. As a further enhancement to the Watkins et al. (forthcoming) model, I have added multiple social contexts. Their model deals primarily within informal and incidental workplace learning that occurs within the social context of a organization such as a corporation, where learning takes place within the social context of that organization. In contrast, women city managers, as municipal executives and leaders, must learn and navigate administrative, political and public

contexts. The multiple social contexts in which women city managers navigate and engage in informal and incidental workplace learning are shown in Figure 3. These multiple social contexts in which their learning occurs are dynamically influenced by each other as well as larger societal and cultural factors such as globalization, the information society, technological advances, and shifting demographics (Merriam & Bierema, 2013). Some examples of context-specific relationships for city managers include municipal employees and colleagues, elected officials, city residents and other members of the public, and other governmental stakeholders.



*Figure 3.* Multiple social contexts in which women city managers engage in informal and incidental workplace learning.

## **Implications for Practice**

This study provides several key suggestions to enhance the practices of adult education and professional career development for women working in local government management. The data indicate the following practical strategies to advance individual career development for women: connecting with higher education, supporting learning within the organization, fostering mentoring relationships, promoting participation in professional organizations, encouraging employees to learn across the functions of the organization, and establishing supports to support both men and women in balancing professional and personal commitments. HROD efforts can be tailored to address the specific career development and organizational learning needs of women interested in management.

The findings of this study indicate the importance of higher education as a pathway to local government for women. Public administration programs can play a significant role in raising awareness of career opportunities available for women in local government, including women government executives in the classroom as guest speakers, and in connecting women students to alumni for mentoring and potential internship and job opportunities. Hiring highly qualified professors whose demographics reflect those of their students is essential, especially given that women outnumber men in earning graduate degrees in public administration (Beaty and Davis, 2012). Developing higher education and alumni connections can not only encourage qualified women to consider working in local government, but also help them to find employment and assist in building their informal networks. Beaty and Davis' (2012) argument for public administration graduate programs to incorporate leadership development curriculum that raises awareness and creates discourse about gender and leadership is well formed. It is only

through greater understanding and dialogue about gender, leadership, and larger structural factors that create barriers for women that change can occur.

Three of the 8 women city manager participants in this study demonstrated characteristics of the *change agent* stage of executive women's career development in organizational culture identified by Bierema (1999). Each of these women was reflective about gender and barriers within the administrative and political organizational cultures within which they operated, and were willing to act and use their own authority to influence them. All three of the women are 50 years of age or older, and 2 of the 3 women described instances where they had experienced negative gender stereotypes in the workplace. Five of the participants did not discuss gender in discussing their significant learning experiences. This suggests that they are either not aware of the structures within organizational cultures that constrain women's career advancement, or they are aware but not at a point where they are prepared to challenge the culture. Bierema (2005) calls the latter "conscious unconsciousness" (p. 219)

An implication for practice is for those women and men city managers who are cognizant of gender and of their agency to create change within the organizational cultures of their own contexts to share that awareness through open dialogue and opportunities for learning; to foster mentoring relationships to help others succeed; to develop networks to help influence the organizational cultures of administration, politics, and the public; and to encourage such dialogue within professional organizations. The criticality of social learning, self-directed learning, and mentors to helping women learn across the various functions of city management are all evidenced by this study. Participants emphasized the value of digging into new challenges and taking on additional projects to help them develop new skills and a greater understanding of local government functions. The self-directed projects described by study participants had a

tremendous impact on the women's municipal career development by broadening their skill sets and helping them develop contacts and relationships that strengthened their informal networks. Women city managers greatly benefitted from mentors who provided them with projects and opportunities to build and hone their skills, and who took time to discuss and debrief projects with them.

The findings of this study can also be used to enhance human resource and organizational development (HROD) practices to support women's career development. Some scholars (for example, Howell et al., 2002; Bierema, 2005; Conlon, 2003) have raised concerns about how HROD may contribute to reproducing existing structures of inequality and oppression by devaluing women's experiences, reinforcing and reproducing existing structures, and struggling with the balance of focusing on the organization rather than individuals. Popular literature about women's career development, such as Sandberg's (2013) call for women to "lean in," tend to gloss over or minimize the complexities of the barriers inherent in a patriarchal system. Her advice to women to achieve success includes believing in themselves, stepping forward and working harder to achieve their goals, and not doubting their ability to balance work and family. Sandberg's (2013) work has successfully raised awareness and increased dialogue about some of the challenges women face in the workplace. From my own feminist perspective, however, the book focuses on strategies that individual women can use to succeed within existing systems rather than advocating for collective change within the existing structures of hierarchy that impede women's career development in the first place.

Ibarra et al. (2013) assert that to help develop a strong pipeline of women leaders, organizations must address structures and practices that support a disjunction between perceptions of women and the organization's norms and expectations for leaders. They outline

three actions that organizations should take to support greater leadership access for women. These suggestions echo the implications for practice already outlined in this section. HROD professionals are well positioned to promote efforts such as these to help support women who aspire to executive management in local government. The first action is raising awareness of second-generation gender bias, which hinders women through subtle and often less apparent barriers such as a lack of executive women role models and mentors, devaluing types of work and career paths that women are more likely to pursue, lack of access to executives and contacts in positions of power, and the double bind that mismatches behaviors considered to be characteristics of leaders with those considered to be acceptable feminine qualities.

Secondly, Ibarra et al. (2013) suggest creating safe spaces like peer groups, project opportunities, or coaching relationships for women to internalize and develop their leadership identities. These are supported by the data from this study related to mentoring, developing broad knowledge across functions, and participating in professional organizations. Finally, they encourage women to identify and anchor themselves in their own purpose for leadership, which can help them remain focused on goals and interests rather than external factors influenced by perceptions of women leaders. An example of this in the data for this study is Emily Hogan and Jennifer Tyler's strategy of focusing on the work that needs to be done and the overall outcome or purpose, rather than on political or organizational factors that could distract them from pursuing what is best for the city.

### **Implications for Future Research**

This study identified and examined the informal and incidental learning experiences that current female city managers working in the Southern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city

management. It could be useful to replicate the study with women managers of municipalities located in other regions of the United States. Data from ICMA's 2009 State of the Profession Survey (ICMA 2009) indicates that the reporting percentage of women city managers varies from 12 percent in the Pacific Coast region to 28.5 percent in the New England region. The women city managers that participated in this research study served cities located in South Atlantic (15.3 percent) and East South Central (27.6 percent) states. Research suggests greater female municipal employment parity in cities that have women mayors (Saltzstein, 1986), and that women city managers are more likely to work in cities with greater numbers of women city council members (Fox and Schuhmann, 2000). Having a critical mass of other women executives seems to have a positive relationship to women's advancement. Expanding this research could examine whether and how women city managers' experiences may vary in regions with greater numbers of women municipal executives as peers.

Another area for future research is to focus on women who have served various tenures as city managers, to determine if their stages of career development align with Bierema's (1999) three-stage model of how executive women learn and develop within male-centered organizational cultures. This study provides some support for Bierema's model among several of the older women participants, who exhibited some characteristics of the Change Agent stage. These women city managers began developing their careers in the United States during the time of women's rights, the women's liberation movement, and the Equal Rights Amendment, in the mid 1970s through early 1980s. Their awareness of gender may have been shaped by these movements, just as Rosser-Mims' (2005) work with women African-American politicians in Georgia found that their political consciousness related to gender and race was raised through the women's lived experiences during the Civil Rights Movement.

As an exploratory study, this sample included as much diversity in age, race/ethnicity, city population, and geographical location as possible. Scholars have argued for the value of documenting the experiences of women managers without comparing them to those of men, to explore voices and ways of knowing and learning that are not currently well-represented in the literature (Bryans and Mavins, 2003). There is value in exploring aspects of diversity with different samples of women city managers to more thoroughly begin to document the experiences of women in the profession. For example, Combs (2003) advocates for research that examines how the convergence of race and gender for African-American women managers dually impacts their access to informal networks and subsequent opportunities for career advancement.

Comparing women city managers' experiences with those of men city managers is another avenue for future research. For example, Fox and Schuhmann (1999, 2000) have compared women and men city managers with regard to factors such as decision-making, policy priorities, how they define their roles, and their motivations for serving in local government. Other scholars have compared aspects of management such as the role of mentoring in career outcomes for women and men business school graduates (Dreher & Ash, 1990); the influence of gender regarding predictors of career managerial success for in-career men and women MBA students (Eddleston, Baldrige, & Veiga, 2004); and, how a public school district superintendent's gender interacts with managerial functions to impact organizational performance (Meier, O'Toole, & Goerdel, 2006).

By comparing women's career development to men's, it may be possible to begin to identify what makes women's experiences unique and what specific supports might be implemented to support their upward mobility. Several of the women in this study mentioned

their perception of needing to prove themselves as capable managers to male elected officials and department heads at different times in their careers. How do these types of experiences compare with those of male city managers? What types of critical learning experiences do men city managers report as being important to their career development, and how do they learn to navigate the cultures of administration, politics, and the public? Comparing men's experiences with those of the women city managers who participated in this study could begin to provide some insight into whether and how women's and men's career development and informal learning experiences are distinct.

### **Summary**

The purpose of this study was explore and identify critical informal and incidental learning experiences that current women city managers in the Southern United States attribute to helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management. Through this qualitative study, I asked women city managers to share the experiences that were essential to their decisions to become city managers, and to learn to navigate the organizational cultures of administration, politics, and the public that are part of the context of their work. I also inquired about barriers the women faced on their journeys to becoming city managers.

In analyzing the data from my conversations with the participants, I concluded that social and experiential learning is central to women city manager's informal and incidental learning and career development. Their learning is dialectically shaped by the multiple social contexts of city management, which create a rich, complex learning environment. Additionally, Women city managers understand and value the continual learning required by their position, and tenaciously seek learning opportunities as a strategy to develop their careers and overcome barriers.

This study enhances the dialogue related to the career development of women executives in local government, adding to the public administration and adult learning literature. It builds upon existing literature related to macro-level issues such as representative bureaucracy and organizational architectural barriers to women's advancement by presenting a new vocabulary with which to discuss organizational learning. The language and framework of organizational learning, combined with the findings of this study, enables us to examine women's career development at a more individual level. It also enables us to better understand the complex hierarchical structures that impede women's progress and consider how to foster the individual informal and incidental learning needed to help women advance their careers not only in city management, but also in public sector leadership at the state and federal levels.

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## APPENDIX A

### Interview Consent Form Informal Learning & Women City Manager Career Development

I, \_\_\_\_\_, agree to participate in a research study about the role of informal and incidental learning in the career development of women city managers. This research is being conducted by Ilka McConnell, a Ph.D. student from the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy in the College of Education at the University of Georgia (ilka@uga.edu) and Dr. Janette Hill, a Professor in the Department of Lifelong Education, Administration, and Policy in the College of Education at the University of Georgia (janette@uga.edu). I understand that my participation is voluntary. I can refuse to participate or stop taking part at any time without giving any reason, and without penalty or loss to benefits to which I am otherwise entitled. If I decide to withdraw from the study, I can ask to have all of the information that can be identified as mine to be removed from the study, or destroyed.

The purpose of this study is to identify and explore the informal and incidental learning experiences that current women city managers in the Southeastern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management. The interview will engage women city managers in discussing informal and incidental learning experiences that were critical to their decisions to pursue city management as a career, as well as their experiences navigating administrative culture, politics, and gender in their careers. Individually identifiable information gathered will be kept confidential.

If I choose to participate in this study, I can expect the following:

1. I will be asked to answer questions about informal and incidental learning experiences as well as potential barriers in my journey to becoming a city manager. It will take approximately 1 hour to answer these questions.
2. My responses to the questions will be audio-recorded as a means to capture the data, and then transcribed. The audio recordings will be deleted 3 years after this study is complete.
3. I, and the city in which I serve as city manager (and municipalities where I have previously served) will be assigned pseudonyms at the time of data transcription, and no individually identifiable information about me, or provided by me during the research, will be shared with others.
4. The researcher may contact me to clarify information provided during the interview. This will take no more than 15 minutes.
5. Once the researcher has completed data analysis, I will be asked to review themes identified from the study and provide feedback. This review will take approximately 15 minutes.
6. The researchers connected with this project will protect my private information, and will keep this confidential by securing all information connected to me in a locked file cabinet in the office of Ilka McConnell, or on a password protected computer.
7. The researcher will use direct quotes from the interview in reports, presentations, and publications; however, the quotes will be attributed to the pseudonym assigned to me for the study. Pseudonyms for cities and places names will be also used in direct quotes to further protect confidentiality.

Potential benefits of participation are that these questions may help me reflect upon my career development and the informal learning experiences that have been important in my career so far. It is hoped that this study will identify best practices for fostering informal and incidental learning experiences that support the career development of women in city management. No risks are expected, although I may experience some mild discomfort while speaking about my experience as a city manager. I have the option of refusing to answer any question at any time without giving any reason.

The researcher will answer any further questions about the research, now or during the course of the project.

I understand that I am agreeing by my signature on this form to take part in this research project and I will receive a signed copy of this consent form for my records.

_____	_____	_____
Name of Researcher	Signature	Date
_____	_____	_____
Name of Participant	Signature	Date

Additional questions or problems regarding your rights as a research participant should be addressed to The Chairperson, Institutional Review Board, University of Georgia, 629 Boyd Graduate Studies Research Center, Athens, Georgia 30602-7411; Telephone 706-542-3199; Email IRB@uga.edu.

## APPENDIX B

### Interview Guide Informal Learning & Women City Manager Career Development

1. Welcome and review purpose and scope of study: Thank you so much for taking time out of your busy schedule to meet with me and share your experiences as a city manager. The purpose of this study is to identify and explore the key informal and incidental learning experiences that current women city managers in the Southeastern United States attribute as helping them develop their careers, learn organizational culture, and achieve their positions in city management.

This interview will take between 60-90 minutes and I will be audio-recording the interview for analysis. I may get back in touch with you if I need clarification on anything that you share during the interview.

To protect your confidentiality, I will be assigning both you and the city in which you serve (and those where you have previously served) pseudonyms for the analysis. No individually identifying information will be used when reporting the results from this interview or the overall study.

If at any time you are not comfortable with answering a question or need clarification, please just let me know. If you would like to withdraw from the study completely, you can ask to have all of the information that can be identified as yours to be removed from the study, or destroyed.

2. Discuss general plan for interview.
3. Explain confidentiality, sign consent forms, and answer questions about forms.
4. Ask participant if they agree to be audio-recorded.
5. Begin interview. I'm here today to collect stories of how people learn their way through to becoming city managers.

Interview questions:

- To begin, please tell me a little bit of background about your career and how you came to be a city manager.
- Next, I'd like you to tell me some stories about specific times in your career when you've had to learn your way through.
  - I'd like you to share 2 stories about times when you really learned a lot it was a really positive experience for you, and 1 story about a learning experience that was particularly challenging.
  - As you tell me the story, think about a play. Please describe:
    - The setting
    - The context, and any background I should know
    - The characters involved
    - The "crisis"
    - What happened
    - How things turned out
  - How was this learning experience important to your career?

6. Final question: Is there anything else you would like to tell me or that I should know about times when you've learned a lot in your journey to becoming a city manager?
7. Wrap-up and answer any participant questions.
8. Conclusion and thank you: This concludes our interview. Thank you so much for sharing your stories and time with me. I will be in touch with you in the next few months to share some of the emerging overall themes from all of the interviews and to ask for your feedback on those themes. The feedback process should take about 15 minutes of your time.