

The Effects of Resource Dependency on Decisions by Public Service Administrators to Offer Local Government Training in Service to the State

Dissertation Overview

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Abstract

For administrators of higher education public service and outreach (PSO) units at public research institutions, the opportunities for service to their states are broad. These administrators' efforts in research, technical assistance, and training address critical needs in their states. Yet all units face limited resources, and the administrators face multiple decisions about investments into new programs. In my dissertation *Effects of Resource Dependency on Decisions by University Public Service Administrators for Service to the State Through Local Government Training* (2019), I explored how resource dependency influenced decision making by university PSO administrators looking specifically at training programs offered in service to the state through local government training programs. The impact of some external stakeholders proved to be a driving force in decisions related to local government training offered by the PSO unit.

Keywords: public service organization, local government, local government associations, resource dependency, effectiveness



Constraints from state revenue, competition for state resources, and the public's attitude toward universities all contribute to an unpredictable resource environment for the university (Zusman, 2005). To survive financially, universities must strengthen relationships with their state governments (Weerts, 2000). Working on state public challenges is one way a university may tighten its connections; as Weerts (2011) said, "In order to become a state priority, colleges must become a solution to a problem, not another problem to solve" (p. 2). These statewide problems also affect local governments, which may seek the assistance of a university public service and outreach (PSO) unit to address the challenges.

A university PSO that offers government training in its service must ensure that its training programming anticipates and meets the needs of the public servants in its state and contributes to the effectiveness of

the government organization (Getha-Taylor & Morse, 2013). The results of training offered by university PSOs can lead to increased knowledge and skill development for government participants. These attendees return to their communities and quickly implement process improvements, improve efficiency, supervise better, manage financial resources, govern more openly and collaboratively, and ensure the long-term viability of their community. However, investing in the launch of new training programs, whether workshops, seminars, classes, curriculum, or certificate programs, often requires a significant financial investment, needs assessments, costly labor resources, the development of knowledge and research in the needed areas, expanded marketing, and a delay in other programming due to limited resources.

The purpose of this research is to inform university administrators about the effects of resource dependency on their decisions to offer local government training through

their PSOs. This research also documents some effects PSO administrators may see on their external state resources from their choices to provide local government training. I examined three research questions:

1. What do university PSO administrators consider as they make a decision to launch or expand a training program?
2. How do external stakeholders influence the university PSO administrators' decision to launch or expand a local government training program?
3. How do influences internal to the university affect the PSO administrators' decisions about launching or expanding a local government training program?

Overview of Conceptual Framework and Relevant Literature

Conceptual Framework

This dissertation explores the decision-making criteria for developing new local government training by university PSOs dependent on state government resources. Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependency theory framework for understanding the environment's effects on an organization informs decision-making for university PSOs. As an organization is deprived of a critical resource, such as state funding for operations, the organization will seek new resources. Since the PSO is dependent for survival on resources that it cannot create or produce internally, the PSO administrators look to the environment for those resources. This resource dependency may impact the offering of local government training programs. Resource dependency theory is based on three primary concepts: (a) organizational effectiveness, (b) the environment and its effects on resources, and (c) the constraints the environment places on an organization (Pfeffer & Salancik, 1978). This framework includes social contexts, strategies for autonomy and the pursuit of interests, and issues of power and dependency (Davis & Cobb, 2010).

Literature Review

Research on university PSOs that serve local government is a subset of a larger body of knowledge around the public service missions of universities and colleges and is also a subset of the body of knowledge around

continuing education in public administration. University public service is often categorized by the market sector in the state that is receiving the service: community, local government, state government, business, or industry (Crosson, 1983). Six categories emerged from the literature (Table 1).

Research Methods

This basic, qualitative study focuses on the experiences of PSO administrators at three U.S. research universities as they considered the effects of resources on their decision-making. This research also includes document analysis from websites of the universities and from training profiles provided to the Consortium of University Public Service Organizations (CUPSO) to further identify influences and decision-making for the PSO administrators.

For this study, the following definitions in Table 2 identify the varying levels of administrators at a university.

For this study, I conducted interviews with university public service organization administrators from three research universities that are also members of CUPSO. The sample selected for this research represented three research universities that participated in the national 2017 review of training programs conducted by CUPSO and were active members of CUPSO as of March 2019. Twenty training programs representing 16 institutions were included in the CUPSO review, and seven represented land-grant university programs.

This study used two data collection methods: qualitative interviews and qualitative document review. The participants for semistructured interviews were the university PSO director, their training manager, and the senior university administrator over the PSO function at the university, either the provost or a vice president. Given that each university was organized differently, I worked with each PSO director to determine the appropriate training manager at that institution for the interview and to select the appropriate senior university administrator who worked with the PSO unit. The University of Georgia Institutional Review Board provided human subjects approval for this study.

Data collection occurred from March to May 2019. Interviews were conducted in spring

Table 1. Literature Categories

<i>Literature categories</i>	<i>Key outcomes and concepts</i>
Historical perspectives on public service at universities	Through outreach and engagement, universities developed partnerships between the academy and the outside world that helped build community partnerships through resources, respect, responsiveness, academic neutrality, and a recognition of contributions (Kellogg Commission, 1999; Weerts, 2005).
Frameworks for university PSO	The frameworks for university PSOs are varied and affect their service to state and local governments (Sellers & Bender, 1979; Ward, 1983).
Profiles of university PSOs that conduct training for local governments	The literature includes some studies that look more closely at the structure and organization of university PSOs by state or university (Battaglio, 2008; Phillips, 1977). Between Phillips and Battaglio's studies, the number of local government training programs by university PSOs increased, suggesting significant investments of university resources in the development and execution of these programs.
Training needs for local government officials	The training offerings varied based on the size and structure of the local governments (Slack, 1990) and the subject matter priorities for the local government managers, supervisors, and employees (Haas, 1991; Vanagunas & Keshawarz, 1985; Whorton et al., 1986).
Training programs managed by a university PSO available to local governments	The types of training vary according to content, participants, and the latest research. In the literature, various structures for local government training programs were present (Azzaretto et al., 1981; Phillips, 1977; Spindler, 1992).
Evaluation of the effectiveness of training efforts for local governments	Dunn and Whorton (1987) found university PSO government training programs lacked professional norms against which to measure. The lack of norms could be problematic in evaluating performance and effectiveness or lead to a lower perceived value by the university (Dunn & Whorton, 1987, p. 9).

2019 at the CUPSO annual conference in Portland, Oregon, if the interviewees were in attendance. For the interviewees not attending the CUPSO annual conference, I arranged an interview at their university office.

As a part of this basic qualitative study, I completed a document analysis. The first documents to be analyzed were the training programs named in the national CUPSO training program review. In 2017, members of CUPSO began completing voluntary, detailed profiles on many of their most significant training programs to share best practices and information for other uni-

versities considering new programs. These documents, stored in a membership section of the CUPSO (2019) website, included descriptions of training programs, the rationale for starting a training program, the intended audiences for training, the budget for the training program, the development and membership of an advisory committee, the historical narratives for beginning the program, and results or impact from the trainings. The profiles were analyzed and reviewed for the similarities of responses across the programs.

During the semistructured interviews, I asked the administrators to identify their

Table 2. Definitions of Levels of University Administrators

<i>Term</i>	<i>Definition</i>
Senior university administrator	May hold the title of a university vice president or associate provost, has responsibility for the PSO functions at the university, and local government training is one portion of many, varied responsibilities.
Public service organization director	Has the responsibility for a PSO unit that focuses on serving government clients through applied research, technical assistance, and training.
Training manager	Holds the primary responsibility for specific training programs offered by the university PSO that serves local government clients.
University public service organization administrators	A collective term that represents the individuals who are senior university administrators, PSO directors, and training managers.

most significant local government training program. I analyzed documents available on the university's website or in printed collateral marketing materials about the program based on the answer. I reviewed the university's website for other local government training programs not mentioned as the most significant one by administrators and the marketing information or materials on those programs as an additional data source.

To manage the data, I used coding to retrieve specific pieces of data more easily and to develop categories and themes from the identified segments of data. While I created categories and themes through analytical coding, I continued to pay attention to any bias I may have brought into the study. The analysis included looking for themes reflected in the interviews or the CUPSO profiles as another method for validation. The triangulation of semistructured interviews, document analysis from training program profiles, and document analysis from the university website information and collateral was a focus in this research.

Key Findings and Conclusions

This research yielded six main findings showing influences on decision making (Table 3); however, I did not find that all six were of equal influence or were weighted the same by PSO administrators as they made various decisions.

To depict my conclusions, I use a metaphor and visual image that illustrates the relationships and elements impacting university PSO administrators' decisions as

they consider local government training programs (see Figures 1 and 2). Each university PSO may have its own collection of local government training programs that I described as residing in an open container inside a transparent *box of influences*. All around the PSO training open container is a permeable, transparent, flexible box with sides that allow air to flow in and out. The open container is not full, but it does have content that represents all the current local government training programs the PSO offers in the state.

The bottom of the transparent box supports the container and keeps it upright. This bottom side of the box represents the university that supports the PSO and serves as its foundation by providing labor and resources that give the training container a fixed location inside the university.

The walls of the box represent the environment's constraints on the PSO in regard to the training its PSO administrators may pursue. The box has four side walls: a wall of metrics, a wall of labor representing faculty and staff, a wall of finances, and a wall of the marketplace. The top of the box is the university's mission. Since the box is permeable, the significant influences of external actors can push into the box despite the influences of the walls. These external stakeholders and their demands push into the box and directly impact the container of training programs by either delivering a request for local government training, changing the scope of a training program, or even pushing directly past the container and avoiding the PSO altogether. Those external influences are government

Table 3. Key Findings

Finding	Examples of supporting data
<i>External influences</i>	
<p>Finding 1: The influence of external stakeholders was a dominant consideration when working with government associations.</p>	<p>The request of an association to start a training program was cited most frequently as the reason for the start of local government programs.</p> <p>One senior university administrator said, “[We] don’t want to lose associations; we see them as low-hanging fruit. Why are associations important? They serve people too. Like we do. They are a source of research, studies and are partners to get things done. They are a source of revenue too.”</p>
<p>Finding 2: The state legislature exerted the most influence as external stakeholders when involved with the PSO programs.</p>	<p>Some state legislation required the PSO to work with a particular statewide, local government association like a state’s municipal league. Other state legislation stated specific roles of the PSO in delivering a training program for local government officials.</p> <p>Legislative mandates at times led to the PSO developing programs in which the PSO currently had no expertise. An administrator shared, “Sometimes they [the legislature] create a requirement to do something which we have no expertise in, that’s really—that’s strange. So, we’re just lucky that they think of us as somebody who would do some of that stuff.”</p>
<i>Internal influences</i>	
<p>Finding 3: The metrics used to evaluate the effectiveness of a training program also affected PSO administrators’ decisions.</p>	<p>The measures cited most frequently by the PSO administrators in interviews were not needs assessment results but the counts of people attending a local government training, the longevity of a training program, or the end-of-program evaluations.</p>
<p>Finding 4: The influence of the mission of public service provided a guiding compass for decisions.</p>	<p>In my interviews, the historical roots of the PSO were evident and highly influential as the PSO administrators talked about their university’s land-grant history or the unique history around their institution as a core element of how they addressed the mission of their own PSO’s work.</p>
<p>Finding 5: The organizational location of the PSO contributed to the variety of internal influences the administrators experienced or avoided as they made a decision.</p>	<p>Operating outside the more visible teaching and research functions of their universities, the PSO administrators described maneuvering with autonomy as they grew or expanded their local government training portfolios.</p>
<p>Finding 6: The access to financial and labor resources at a programmatic level remained a strong influencer on the decisions that administrators made.</p>	<p>The decision to start a new training program or expand a training program was constrained by finding a current faculty member interested in the client group or new topic.</p> <p>The administrators described having to make enough revenue to cover the program’s cost but also expressed their desire for a program to have some dollars left over to support other public service programs for more rural or less affluent local government agencies’ officials.</p>

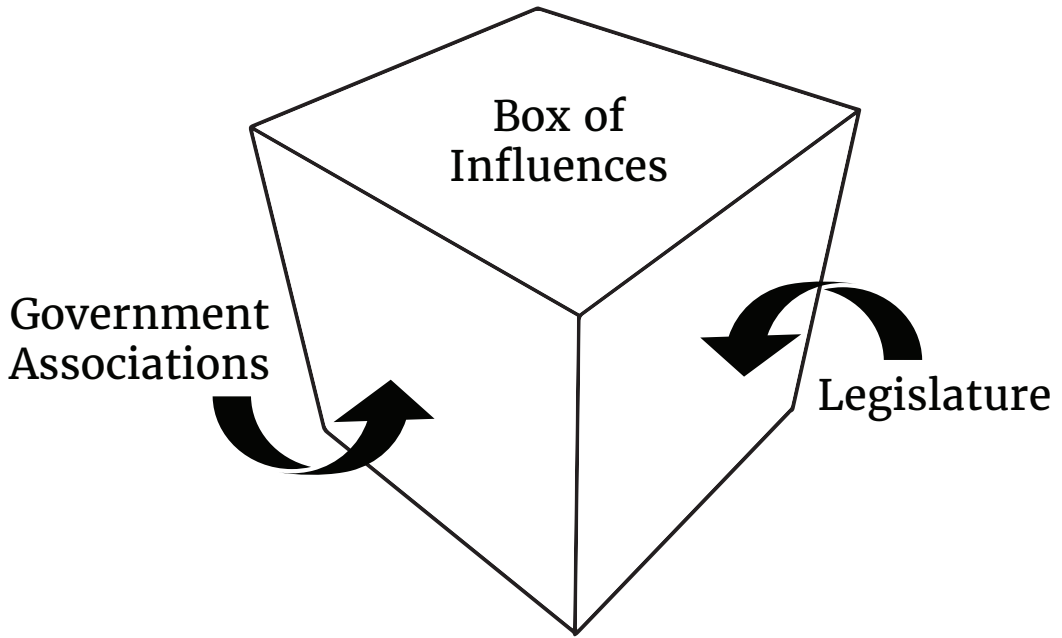


Figure 1. Exterior View: Box of Influences on PSO Administrators' Decisions to Offer Local Government Training.

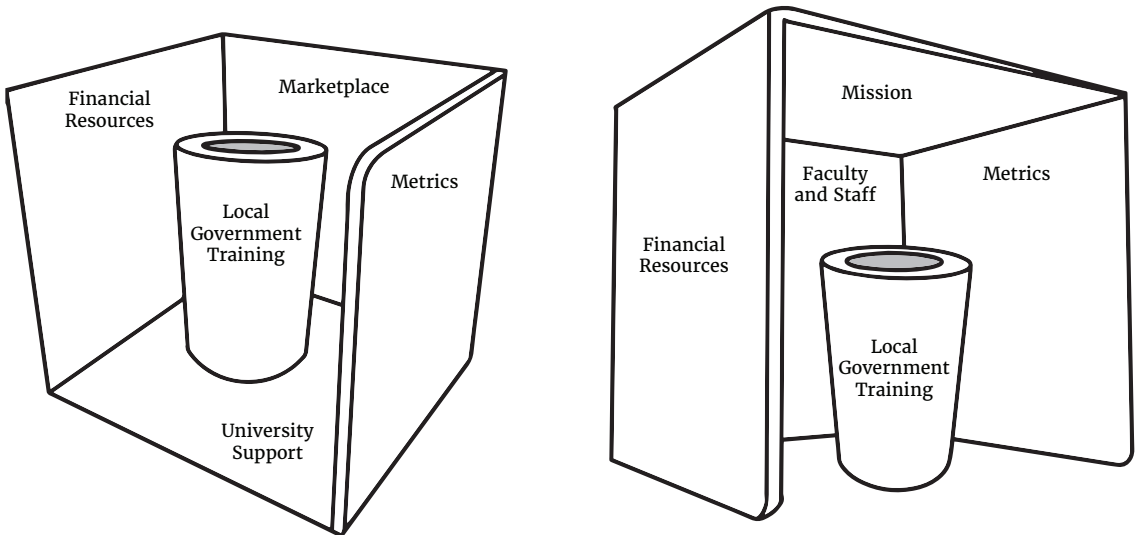


Figure 2. Interior Views: Box of Influences on PSO Administrators' Decisions to Offer Local Government Training

associations and the legislature.

As the metaphorical box shows, the environment, both inside and outside the university, affects the PSO administrators' decisions, as described in Table 4 and Table 5. The internal influences of faculty and staff impact the decisions of administrators based on interest and support for local government training. The availability of financial resources to launch the government training with reduced financial risk also impacts the PSO administrator's decision. However, when the influence of the external stakeholders, the state legislature, or local government associations is present, administrators' decisions are most significantly affected. The PSO administrators respond more to those influences than to the internal forces. Resource dependency constraints are evident in the actions taken as the government associations and legislature request local government training. The PSO administrator manages those external exchanges and their demands on the university PSO. In these cases, the PSO administrator's responses may be more political and less market-focused.

Despite the challenges of resource dependency, PSO administrators that offer local government training expect that the work they are performing is a service to the state. The PSO administrator balances the internal influences of faculty and staff, financial resources, metrics, the market, university support, and the mission. In that balancing act, the PSO administrator also experiences strong external environment influences from the state legislature and local government associations. The university PSO administrator exercises leadership in decision-making by evaluating the resources from internal and external stakeholders to make a decision to serve the state in a new or expanded local government training program.

Significance for the Community Engagement Field

In a changing economic climate impacted recently by the COVID-19 pandemic, university PSO administrators who provide service to the state through local government training face challenging decisions about programs they already offer and those they may launch or expand. Understanding and accounting for the internal influences and the strong external influences provide the

university PSO administrator with additional information to consider before entering the market with a new training program.

A university PSO administrator who looks at this study's metaphorical box of influences can understand the constraining influences of the box. The walls of this box create a structure that responds predictably to its environment, as described using Pfeffer and Salancik's (1978) resource dependency theory. The box is permeable; two external forces, government associations and the legislature, push on the walls. Working from inside the box, the PSO administrator feels the winds of the associations and legislature when they enter the box. With the knowledge that the PSO must generate its revenue to sustain its existence, these external forces impact the PSO administrator's decisions to address local government training. This dissertation includes a suggested checklist with scoring for PSO administrators as they consider adding a new local government training program based upon the metaphorical box of influences.

In the competitive landscape of continuing education, including training for adult learners in a noncredit environment, the findings in this study were surprising in that the external marketplace of individual consumers was not a more significant influence. As training programs assess enrollment fees, most new programs are evaluated for implementation based on considerable market research to reflect the potential return on investment. In my findings, I discovered that the PSO administrators decided to proceed on local government training programs as a response to external stakeholders—for example, requests for the program by state legislatures and local government associations—rather than external market research. Internal resources also impacted the PSO administrators' decisions. External marketplace requests were just one of the internal resources considered and were not considered as strong as external association or legislature influence.

Recommendations for Practice Resulting from the Study

This study's findings, and the checklist developed in the dissertation, may be informative and directly useful for university PSO administrators who are considering new local government training. As these PSO administrators continue to depend on resources external to their organization,

Table 4. The Box of Influences on PSO Administrators' Decisions to Offer Local Government Training

<i>Elements of the Box of Influences</i>	<i>Example</i>	<i>Resource dependency framework</i>
The floor of the box: The influence of being part of a university	Sellers and Bender (1979) found that the university's mission, organization, delivery methods, administrative influence, funding, staffing, institutional status and rewards, facilities, and program of work influenced how university PSOs served local governments. A PSO administrator said, "I'll have the legislators that will call randomly each month and will say what do you all need? And I will have to say you will need to ask the University . . . which is killing me inside because I know what we need, and I know that our needs will never meet the top of the list that [the university] sends out to the legislator for the budget."	Environmental constraints
The top of the box: The influence of mission	A senior university administrator said mission fit mattered: "On the market side, we're open to all kinds of market-driven opportunities, as long as they serve a need in the state that fits our outreach mission and our mission to benefit local government."	Constraint of actions
A wall of the box: The influence of the marketplace	Of the 30 CUPSO programs reviewed, all 30 were conducted in person, and none were in an online-only format. A PSO training manager said, "When it's the really small cities, usually, they don't have the technology, so we can't just put something online for them. They need to come in. But then, there may only be three people that are actually employed with that city. So, if you take one of those away, that's where it gets so difficult."	Understanding of the environment and its effect on resources
A wall of the box: The influence of metrics	The administrators, in interviews, in their CUPSO training profiles, and in their websites and marketing materials, struggled to show meaningful impact from their training programs.	How an organization can describe and measure its environment
A wall of the box: The influence of financial resources	The most frequently used method for securing funding is to sell a training program to an individual government official whose government then pays the fee for attendance and participation. An administrator said, "We do face challenges. Since the early days, we've sort of been on the precipice. The idea is that if you don't raise your revenues, you're in real trouble."	Constraint of actions
A wall of the box: The influence of faculty and staff	A PSO administrator said: "My role is not typically to say we're going to do this program. Sometimes it is to say, here's a program. Here's something I've been hearing. What do you all think? . . . The decisions about the programs that we launch are really, primarily—most of them, not exclusively—but most of them are decisions by faculty."	Constraint

Table 5. External Forces Acting Upon the Box of Influences			
<i>External forces</i>	<i>Benefits</i>	<i>Challenges</i>	<i>Resource dependency framework</i>
Government associations	Legitimacy through current, valued information Revenue growth Increased capacity for instruction and curriculum development Improved metrics	Managing competition Managing association leadership transitions	The association, as an external stakeholder, evaluates and assesses the appropriateness and usefulness of the PSO local government training programs.
State legislature	May require or mandate the training for a group of officials by the PSO Individual legislators in their route to the state legislature often encounter PSO local government training	Some legislative mandates for the training of local government officials are passed into law without any awareness by the PSO administrators	Those outside the organization judge an organization's effectiveness and its activities.

being aware of the influences and their effect on decisions is critical. Movement to the wrong market or a delayed movement to the market demanded by external stakeholders could significantly impact the reputation of the university PSO. University PSO administrators' close relationship with the associations representing local governments provides a strategic opportunity for these administrators to anticipate growing learning needs in the local governments and position themselves to partner and not to compete. Maintaining visibility before the state legislature as a part of the university's mission in public service and outreach also

creates additional opportunities for service to the state, as this exposure leads legislators to value the work and expertise of the PSO faculty and staff who deliver local government training. Knowing the effects of these external stakeholders, PSO administrators need to focus on relationships with these key external stakeholders. Finally, PSO administrators must also increase their ability to measure effectiveness as these same external stakeholders increase their demand for this information. The distribution of external resources from these bodies is impacted by the metrics and impact demonstrated.



About the Author

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