**Concept Paper on the Development of a Voluntary Credentialing Program**

## January 2001

# HOW DID WE GET TO THIS POINT?

ICMA’s new Strategic Plan, adopted by the ICMA Executive Board in July 2000, includes the following strategy:

*Establish a voluntary credentialing program to define and recognize professional local government managers and to promote lifelong learning.*

The Strategic Planning Committee believed, and the board agreed, that it was time for ICMA to initiate the process of setting standards and defining qualifications for professional local government managers.

Most local government charters describe manager positions as those “appointed solely on the basis of executive and administrative qualifications,” but those qualifications have never been defined. Historically, we have relied on a position title and a shared set of values as a definition. During the 1990s, the membership began to look beyond values to competencies and adopted the Practices for Effective Local Government Management as the underpinning for a definition of the profession.

The committee urged the development of a voluntary credentialing program as the last step in the ongoing process of defining our profession. In 1924, we adopted a formal Code of Ethics. In 1994, we founded the ICMA University and adopted guidelines to Tenet 8 that committed us to an assessment of professional skills and abilities on a periodic basis and to at least 40 hours per year of professional development activities based on the Practices. In 1999 we completed the Management Practices Assessment that provides a knowledge-based assessment and a performance-based assessment of effectiveness.

# WHAT WILL VOLUNTARY CREDENTIALING DO?

A voluntary credentialing program can benefit members as well as strengthen the profession. In addition to providing recognition for life-long learning, it can help explain the difference between a professional local government manager and anyone else who applies for a manager’s job from outside the profession. It offers an opportunity for interested members to promote the unique expertise that they bring to the profession of local government management. Such a program can help demonstrate what professionalism means -- that education and experience, commitment to high standards of integrity, and the pursuit of ongoing professional development have meaning and bring added value to the communities we serve.

# WHAT IS A CREDENTIAL?

A credential is defined as “ a designation or naming.” It is “giving an introduction.” In the case of a professional, it can be provided by the association that speaks for the profession—in our case, by ICMA. A credentialing program defines the qualifications that designate an individual as a professional in his or her chosen field. Those qualifications will presumably include a combination of education, training and experience.

# ELIGIBILITY: WHO WILL BE ELIGIBLE TO APPLY FOR THE CREDENTIAL?

To ensure meaning and value, ICMA must carefully determine who is eligible to receive the credential. Individuals who carry and use the credential must be considered ethical and demonstrate the values of the profession. Direct linkage to the ICMA Code of Ethics will be an important component of the credentialing process. The ICMA Code of Ethics requires that members behave ethically and addresses the importance of professional development in Tenet 8. Since recipients should also be experienced members of the profession, we also recommend that they be corporate members -- managers and senior assistants who have experience in professional positions in local government.

**Recommendation:**

To be eligible to receive the credential, an individual must be an ICMA corporate member, accepting the ICMA Code of Ethics and its rules of enforcement as a requirement of membership.

**Alternatives:**

1. A local government manager who belongs to a state association that has adopted the ICMA Code of Ethics and its rules of enforcement.
2. A local government manager who signs a statement indicating that he or she is willing to adhere to the ICMA Code of Ethics, including the rules of enforcement

“Local government manager” in this context means a CEO, CAO, or COO (chief operating officer) of a general purpose local government, regardless of position title, or an assistant having broad responsibilities to manage a significant component of a local government’s operations.

QUALIFICATIONS: HOW WILL MEMBERS EARN THE CREDENTIAL?

A certain combination of education, experience, and continuing professional development will be required to earn the credential.

# Education

The formal education thought appropriate for top executives in local government has evolved over the years. Today, the typical local government manager has a graduate degree, often in public administration or a related field. (71% of ICMA voting members have a Master’s and 48% are in public administration or policy) The increasing complexity of local policy issues, their organizational setting, and their social and political context, gives a premium to the more specialized training available through graduate programs in public policy and administration.

**Recommendation:**

* **The credential requires a minimum of a baccalaureate degree.**
* **The additional value of graduate training generally and graduate level training in public administration, in particular, is recognized by requiring fewer years of experience for applicants having a more advanced and specialized formal education.**

**Alternatives:**

1. Set no minimum educational requirement. This would exclude no one on the basis of formal educational achievement alone. However, the lack of a minimum educational requirement could lessen the credential’s credibility. (Few managers practicing today lack a college degree.)

2. Raise the minimum educational requirement to require either a graduate degree or, specifically, a Masters degree from an accredited public administration program. There is some merit in setting a higher minimum educational requirement, but to do so would disqualify a larger portion of ICMA’s membership, including some with distinguished records of service.

# Experience

If education teaches knowledge, experience teaches wisdom. Recognizing the complementary but distinct contributions of formal education and practical experience, an applicant for the credential must present evidence of extensive executive experience in local government.

**Recommendation:**

* **The credential requires a minimum number of years of executive service that varies depending on the education of the applicant. The recommended minimum number of years of experience are:**

**• Masters in public administration or policy: 7 years**

**• Other masters degree: 8 years**

**• Baccalaureate: 9 years**

* **To be counted toward the required accumulation of experience, the professional role must include the following executive level responsibilities in local government**:

**• Staff management**

**- Supervising the development and performance of staff in the organization.**

**- Having a continuing direct relationship with operating department heads on the implementation and administration of programs.**

**• Financial management**

**- Having significant responsibility for the preparation and administration of operating and/or capital improvements budgets.**

**- Interpreting financial information to assess the fiscal condition of the community, determine the cost-effectiveness of programs, and compare alternative strategies.**

**• Policy facilitation and implementation**

**- Having significant responsibility in the development and analysis of public policy alternatives and in the implementation of policy once adopted.**

**- Helping elected officials and other community actors identify, work toward, and achieve common goals and objectives.**

### • Service delivery

**- Ensuring effective coordination in the delivery of local government services by anticipating future needs, organizing work operations, and establishing timetables for work units or projects.**

**Alternatives:**

# 1. Change the minimum number of years of experience for each degree. Require more or fewer years of experience, or increase or eliminate the differential in the number of years required of applicants of different educational backgrounds. No strong claim can be made that the numbers of years of required experience proposed here are the right ones. The proposals seek to protect the credibility of the credential while not unreasonably restricting eligibility. Seven years as a manager or senior assistant seemed reasonable for demonstrating seriousness commitment to the profession and adequate executive experience prior to being credentialed. The differential between the degrees was determined by making a masters in public administration equivalent to two years.

2. Change the character of the professional roles for which experience is credited. These proposals could be relaxed or made more rigorous. The descriptions of executive experience are intended to capture the breadth and complexity of what managers and senior assistants do. Broadening what counts by crediting all general administrative experience carries the risk of issuing a credential to perform in a role in which the applicant has little actual experience. On the other hand, a strong argument can be made for counting only professional service as a chief administrative officer toward the experience requirement. Balancing competing priorities, working with elected officials and the community, leading the organization, and making high-stakes decisions are the essence of professional local government management.

# Continuing Professional Development

A commitment to continuing professional development is the hallmark of a profession. The ICMA Code of Ethics obligates a member to periodically assess his or her development needs and to devote at least 40 hours annually to professional development. The qualifications for the credential in professional local government management formalize this requirement.

**Recommendation:**

**To qualify for the credential, the applicant must:**

**• Complete the ICMA Applied Knowledge Assessment to help identify professional strengths and areas for improvement. (Senior members, e.g., those with qualifying experience of more that 20 years, are not obligated to complete the Applied Knowledge Assessment.)**

**• Complete a short application that includes:**

**- a description of what was learned from the Applied Knowledge Assessment and a plan for addressing over the next year the identified development needs- a report of the applicant’s professional development activities during the preceding year (i.e., how the 40-hour professional development obligation was met)**

**- a commitment to complete the ICMA Performance-Based Assessment within the next five years. (a waiver could be requested if a member believes that local circumstances, such as changes in the governing body or public record requirements, would create a hardship)**

**Alternatives:**

1. Increase the number of hours of professional development experiences required annually. The guideline to Tenet 8 defines the minimum of 40 hours, but the requirement could be made stiffer.

2. Require some level of “performance” on the Applied Knowledge Assessment and/or the Performance-Based Assessment. The assessment instruments were not designed to serve as “tests” but as aids to self-assessment so there is no minimum “passing” score. In any case, there does not exist an appropriate database from which a passing score could be established.

3. Allow substitution of other self-assessment tools for developing a personal professional development plan. The ICMA-developed tools are specified because they were developed with substantial input from ICMA members and are tailored to the professional challenges and responsibilities of local government managers. Other assessment tools are typically targeted toward a more general management role.

## MAINTENANCE: HOW WILL MEMBERS MAINTAIN THE CREDENTIAL?

Should the credential be issued for the professional life of its holder, or should it be granted for a fixed period subject to renewal? In a profession as dynamic as local government management, it seems logical to grant the credential for a fixed period subject to renewal. In addition, Tenet 8’s commitment to professional renewal and development indicates that the credential should be contingent on evidence of continuing self-assessment and of a conscientious practice of professional development.

**Recommendation:**

* **Issue the credential for a fixed period of five years.**
* **The credential would be renewable as long as ICMA membership is maintained, an annual report describing 40 hours of professional development has been submitted, and the ICMA Performance-Based Assessment has been completed at least once during the five years.**

**Alternatives:**

1. Issue the credential for life, subject only to withdrawal if membership is dropped or as a possible sanction for a violation of the Code of Ethics. In a strict sense, there is only a slight difference between the “lifetime credential” and the proposed policy, since the Code of Ethics states that members should pursue 40 hours of professional development annually and conduct periodic self-assessment. The proposed policy, however, formalizes the Code of Ethics guidelines. Members would demonstrate to someone else, instead of just to themselves, that they had followed the 40-hour guideline. The Code does not require members to complete the Performance-Based Assessment every five years but its completion does satisfy the Code of Ethics.

2. Change the number of years before the credential must be renewed. The five-year duration was chosen to coincide with the requirement for completing the Performance-Based Assessment.

Five years seems a reasonable amount of time that also takes into account the possibility that the member could take a new job or have significant turnover in their elected officials. The Performance-Based Assessment is best completed during a time of relative stability.

**TITLE: WHAT WILL THE CREDENTIAL BE CALLED?**

ICMA will grant the credential as a professional title that can be used on resumes or as part of an individual’s signature in professional correspondence. It will be important to select a title that is clearly descriptive and that elected officials and citizens will be able to recognize and value.

**Recommendation:**

**ICMA-PCM ICMA Professional Community Manager**

This option maintains the key connection to ICMA and its long-standing commitment to the Code of Ethics and is meaningful to international members as well as US members.

**Alternatives:**

1. CPM Credentialed Public Manager
2. PLGM Professional Local Government Manager
3. PCM Professional City/County Manager

**ETHICS: HOW WILL THE CREDENTIAL RELATE TO ENFORCEMENT OF THE ICMA CODE OF ETHICS?**

The credential is voluntary. It should serve as a designation of integrity as well as professional competence. Therefore, there should be a direct connection between the credential and adherence to the Code.

For members who engage in the voluntary credentialing program, spending 40 hours per year in professional development will now become a requirement and not just guidance. A member who fails to complete the 40 hours will be allowed to seek an extension or withdraw from the credentialing process without violating the Code. A falsification of credentials would be regarded as a violation of the Code of Ethics under Tenet 3 and the guideline that addresses credentials. That guideline, which now focuses on accuracy in applications for employment, may be amended to clarify its applicability to the ICMA credentialing program.

Most importantly, the credentialing process must address those circumstances where a member granted a credential is found to have committed a violation of the ICMA Code of Ethics. These circumstances would occur when a member who has received either a public or private censure applies for the credential and when a credentialed member is sanctioned for a code violation. Would the credential be withdrawn by ICMA, in what circumstances, and through what process?

**Recommendation:**

Grant the Committee on Professional Conduct the authority to review and recommend the removal of a member’s credential as one of the sanctions available for violations of the ICMA Code of Ethics under the Rules of Procedure for Enforcement. No loss of credentialing would become final without the consideration and approval of the Executive Board.

**ADMINISTRATION: WHO WILL ADMINISTER THE PROGRAM AND HOW?**

Ultimate responsibility for the program will rest with the ICMA Executive Board as the Association’s elected governing body. The board will issue the credential, but can engage other members in the credentialing process. It will be important to establish a process that is conducted by peers, that involves staff in a supportive role on basic administration only, and that is as streamlined as possible to keep costs down. Program materials will be provided through ICMA’s Web Site and members will be encouraged to access and submit information via the Internet. In addition, the program will need to be sensitive to issues of both affordability and accessibility so that it enhances the diversity of the profession and does not create financial, geographic, or other barriers to participation.

**Recommendation**:

* **Create an administrative body of 5-7 members to advise on implementation issues and on granting credentials.** Since the ICMA Executive Board’s current responsibilities are already quite demanding, it would be helpful to have a separate body focus on the implementation of the program and advise the board on how to ensure its success.
* **Work with state or affiliate associations interested in appointing peer review panels to advise the administrative body on the granting of credentials.** Start with selected associations to explore how a partnership could work. Larger state associations with significant staff support would be likely candidates for this exploration. This partnership could be modeled on the process followed in appointing fact-finding committees to investigate ethics complaints**.**

**PROCESS: HOW WILL THE BOARD INVOLVE THE MEMBERSHIP IN THE DEVELOPMENT OF THE PROGRAM?**

The ICMA Executive Board is committed to ensuring that the membership has ample opportunity to provide input on the development of this program. The business meeting at the annual conference in Cincinnati provided the first large-scale opportunity. Between January and July 2001, the board will use a variety of tools to solicit feedback and encourage discussion.

* State and affiliate organizations will be asked to schedule time at their meetings for members to discuss key issues from this paper.
* Elected officials will be asked to participate in focus groups on the proposed program.
* A mailed survey in the spring will allow all interested members to communicate their views.
* Regular feedback on what members are saying will be provided in the *ICMA Newsletter* and on ICMA’s Web site.