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Building Statewide Community- University Partnerships: *Working with the Maine Municipal Association*

by Karen Hutchins

Eric Conrad



Karen Hutchins and Eric Conrad’s “dialogue” illustrates the relationship between researchers from the University of Maine and the Maine Municipal Association (MMA). The stimulus for this unfolding relationship was the administration of a survey by the Sustainability Solutions Initiative Knowledge-to-Action group to Maine town officials about their experiences with, interest in, and preferences for university-community partnerships. Although municipal officials are interested in such partnerships, Hutchins and Conrad point out the need for improved communication and relationships with officials, so that they recognize researchers’ abilities (and limitations) in addressing municipal concerns. 🐟

The research focus of Maine's Sustainability Solutions Initiative (SSI) is on three drivers of landscape change in Maine: urbanization, forest ecosystem management, and climate change. Given Maine's history of strong local control, much of the decision making about these landscape changes takes place at the municipal level. To improve understanding of municipal agents, key decision makers, and the problems they are facing in their municipalities, the Knowledge-Action SSI team sent a mail survey to a statewide sample of Maine municipal officials. The survey gathered information about community characteristics, problems facing the municipality, and official's experiences with, interests in, and preferences for establishing community-university partnerships.

Once the results were in, we began to consider what they said about the opportunities and challenges for researchers to work with communities. As discussed here, the research findings are enlightening and the projects and relationships stemming from the survey are rich.

To capture what we learned, this "article" includes two voices: a representative of the research team (Karen) and a representative of the Maine Municipal Association (MMA) (Eric). The intent of the article is to reflect on ways that researchers and stakeholders can work together to ensure that research in Maine is responsive to the needs of communities.

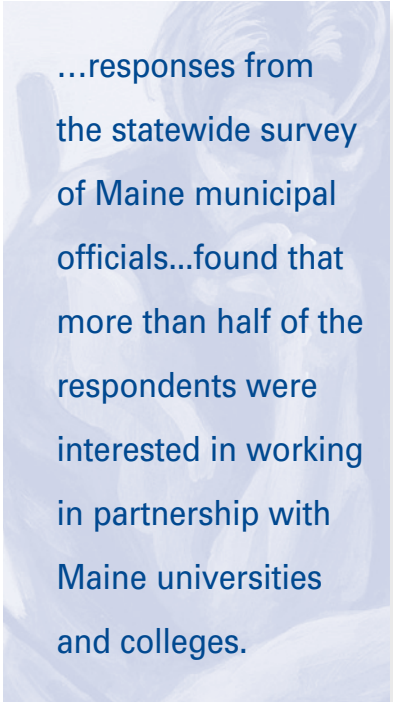
Given that it can be challenging to identify partners, will you discuss how this partnership began?

Karen: When we received responses from the statewide survey of Maine municipal officials, we found that more than half of the respondents were interested in working in partnership with Maine universities and colleges. I immediately became concerned that we could not individually partner with all municipalities or address the range of issues they were experiencing. I also realized that SSI researchers did not bring the particular areas of expertise sometimes needed to address the research needs of, for example, fire or welfare departments. The SSI research expertise is in areas such as water quality, climate change, environmental economics, education, wildlife ecology, and social psychology. Yet, we felt that it was important

to seek ways we could help—after all, we did ask for their help with our research. I then received an email from Eric Conrad, Director of Communication and Educational Services at the MMA, expressing an interest in collaborating to serve municipalities. This opened the door to new opportunities and a new way of approaching the survey responses.

After our first email exchange and follow-up conversations, I realized that we did not have to figure out how to help Maine municipalities on our own. Instead we needed to develop partnerships with organizations, such as the MMA, to help us to work with a range of communities that are addressing a variety of problems. Such partnerships offer researchers the opportunity to conduct locally informed and meaningful research that is also broadly applicable, and they provide communities and organizations with important research support for making decisions and developing solutions.

Opportunities are often also challenges. Luckily, MMA and Maine colleges and universities have similar missions to educate, and MMA employees and SSI researchers both desire to help to promote a socially vibrant, economically strong, and environmentally healthy future for Maine. However, developing partnerships can be challenging and takes time, patience, learning, and flexibility. Often, we are working on different timelines, with different resources, and with conflicting goals. Further, developing statewide partnerships requires countless conversations to figure out which collaborations are viable. Yet, when dealing with complex issues in this challenging fiscal environment, we believe partnerships are absolutely essential for conducting engaged research, establishing strong community-university networks, and developing solutions. The benefits far outweigh the challenges, and we look forward to future collaborations with MMA and other Maine organizations.



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How did the survey help you identify potential partners?

Karen: Using the MMA’s mailing list, in August and September, 2010, we mailed 2,553 surveys to municipal leaders in 499 municipalities and townships throughout Maine and included participants from 13 different municipal positions. Those surveyed include town and city managers, mayors, chief elected officials, community development, purchasing, assessing, finance, public safety, recreation, public works, welfare, code enforcement officers, and additional personnel.

The survey goals were to:

1. Gather information on the pressing issues and concerns of Maine municipalities in order to inform research practices at Maine universities and colleges.
2. Assess interests in community-university partnerships to deal with these issues.
3. Determine preferences for the structure of these partnerships (i.e., the level at which we collaboratively problem-solve, conduct research, and develop solutions) and the factors that impact these choices.
4. Begin conversations about working together to promote a sustainable future for Maine.

Among other things, the survey helped us to identify key resources for municipal officials. Results showed that more than 80 percent of officials draw on the resources of the MMA for help with day-to-day tasks. Universities and colleges, on the other hand, were rated as the least used sources for help with municipal issues. MMA offers valuable insights on and connections with municipal governments, as well as opportunities for community-university partnerships that may not have been previously possible.

Eric: We want to be honest: We were initially glad to read the survey because it cited us as the top resource for municipal officials. But there was a lot of other very useful information, as we kept reading.

One of our challenges—a challenge facing local government as a whole—is getting younger adults

interested in running for municipal office, serving in appointed positions, and working in town and city halls. The more we thought about the survey, the more we realized it offered an opportunity for MMA to work toward mutual goals with universities and colleges.

What did you learn from the survey about municipalities and their present and potential relationships with Maine universities and colleges?

Karen: From a university researcher’s perspective, I find the survey information valuable because it provides insights into municipality needs and concerns, their perspectives on Maine universities and colleges, and the potential for and challenges of working together on some of the problems facing the state. For example, results revealed that economic concerns are the most serious problems facing municipalities, specifically reductions in state funding and increasing health care and energy costs. Social issues, such as increasing unemployment, poverty, and drug and alcohol abuse, and environmental issues, such as increasing invasive insects and plants, loss of farmland, and increasing traffic congestion are also testing communities. Municipalities, like SSI researchers, are trying to manage and figure out how to solve complex, social-ecological issues. The results remind researchers that municipal officials are likely dealing with numerous, conflicting problems and that we need to be aware of and sensitive to that when working with municipalities.

In addition, we learned important information about present and potential partnerships. Only 20 percent of respondents reported working with university or college researchers, including faculty, staff, and students. Statistical analyses conducted on the survey data indicate that the belief that researchers can help solve municipality issues is a key determinant of respondents’ interests in developing community-university partnerships. Unfortunately, more than half of the municipal officials surveyed did not think or were unsure if university researchers could help them deal with the problems in their municipalities. If increased partnerships are a goal, university and college researchers must improve communication and relationships with municipal officials so that they recognize researchers’ abilities to address municipal problems.

Given SSI's interest in developing community-university partnerships and that the university was not rated as a top resource for municipalities, when Eric contacted us to discuss the survey and potential partnership opportunities, we jumped at the opportunity. Collaborating with MMA offers our team and other researchers the opportunity to work with a well-respected, knowledgeable organization that understands municipal government and has the connections with municipal agents not presently realized by the university.

Eric: We can see a lot of member (municipalities are our members) upsides to working more closely with university and college staff and students. And, we see little downside. Maine colleges and universities have expert knowledge and their students' have time and youthful energy. We feel that, properly introduced, towns and cities can start taking advantage of this. That could be especially valuable right now because towns and cities are really under the gun financially and have been reducing staff.

How is a relationship between SSI and the MMA mutually beneficial?

Karen: Eric and I have discussed several possibilities. First, representatives of the SSI team attended the MMA annual convention this year to better understand the resources MMA provides and municipal government in general. We hope to offer a panel on community-university partnerships at next year's annual convention to showcase existing partnerships and discuss opportunities for working with other municipalities. MMA will provide the venue for and guidance on how to make these connections.

Second, one of MMA's goals is citizen education. Although their focus is on educating citizens about municipal government, we still share a similar mission to educate the people of Maine. There are numerous opportunities for collaboration on education initiatives, such as internships, trainings, curriculum development, and program development. Finally, MMA has already helped us better understand how municipal government operates and some of the groups to contact, like the Maine Town and City Management Association.

This information will help us reach multiple communities through one association. The opportunities are numerous, and we look forward to further developing this partnership.

Eric: I would agree with Karen. In time, however, Maine universities and colleges also can establish direct ties with our members, or at least with the members who are interested in having such a relationship. MMA offers many ways to reach our members: our monthly magazine; web site; e-mail newsletter; convention; stand-alone workshops; and our hands-on relationship with key municipal affiliate groups, such as the Maine Town and City Management Association. But we're also fine if our members work directly with universities and colleges.

If increased partnerships are a goal, university and college researchers must improve communication and relationships with municipal officials so that they recognize researchers' abilities to address municipal problems.

What can we learn from this partnership with MMA about the importance and potential of bringing together universities and municipalities?

Karen: This partnership provides important lessons about the mutual benefits of collaboration. In this case, MMA, universities and colleges, and municipalities are strengthened by their association. First, by expanding their resource and research networks, MMA is better able to serve municipalities and tap into the education system to improve citizen municipal education. Second, by partnering with MMA, university and college researchers are better able to access and understand the municipal officials with whom they need to work in

order to conduct engaged, solution-focused research that matters at a local level. Third, MMA has a strong legislative voice, and its employees have extensive experience working with legislators. They understand the communication and information needs of this group in a way that most university and college researchers do not. They are likely to help us understand how to improve the communication of our research in order to better inform policy decisions. Fourth, we anticipate that university and college researchers and municipal officials will gain a deeper understanding of how to work together and the benefits of the relationship, thus improving connections between universities and colleges and local decision-makers.

Finally, the partnership demonstrates the importance of identifying boundary organizations or organizations that help facilitate the communication, work, and production of knowledge between diverse groups (Cash, Borck and Patt 2006). From our perspective, MMA is a boundary organization and plays an important role in helping connect university and college researchers with municipal officials, focus resources and collaboration efforts, and promote successful and resilient networks of people who have the potential to significantly influence the future of Maine.

Eric: We concur. 🐟

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Karen Hutchins is an IPh.D. candidate in the Department of Communications and Journalism and a graduate research fellow in the Sustainability Solutions Initiative at the University of Maine.

Her research is focused on community-university partnerships, engaged research, and public participation in environmental conflicts. Karen previously worked as an advisor at Plymouth State University, NH, and York County Community College, ME.



Eric Conrad is director of communications and educational services at Maine Municipal Association. He previously worked as editor of daily newspapers in Augusta, Waterville, and Portland and as a reporter in Florida and Pennsylvania.

Top 10

New Policy-related Practices Coming out of SSI

- New practices for ensuring that research leads to action
- New ways of training and mentoring students
- New ways of training the workforce
- New ways of working across disciplines
- New ways of working with stakeholders
- New ways to develop environmental and natural resource policies (e.g., vernal pools, family forests, land-use planning)
- New ways of involving stakeholders in the design of research on societal issues in their communities
- New ways of ensuring that social science is an essential component of environmental management
- New techniques for understanding integrated problems so that better policies emerge
- New ways of bringing separate research projects together to assess their wider-ranging policy implications

"Top 10" lists provide a synthesis of common themes, methods, strategies and outcomes within SSI and reflect the collective input of more than 30 SSI faculty and students.