

# THE ADMINISTRATOR

A PUBLICATION OF THE N.C. CITY & COUNTY MANAGEMENT ASSOCIATION

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## PUBLIC ADMINISTRATION EXPERT AND FRIEND OF NCCCMA WHITAKER RETIRES

**If North Carolina is a** state of civic-minded people, then Gordon Whitaker should take some responsibility for that. After all, Whitaker literally wrote the book on civic education. His textbook, *Local Government in North Carolina*, an introduction to civics, has been used by North Carolina public schools for years (and it was recently updated for its third edition).

Whitaker, an expert in public administration, public

leadership, collaboration and more, retired from the faculty at the UNC-Chapel Hill School of Government on July 31, 2012.



Whitaker joined the then-Institute of Government in 1997, but he worked with Institute faculty even before then as a political science

professor. He came to Chapel Hill in 1973 where he taught courses in the Master's of Public Administration (MPA) program in organization theory and in public management and leadership.

"For many years Gordon has been critically important to the MPA program," said School of Government Dean Michael Smith. "He has been its heart

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## FORE! GOOD GOLFERS



*The foursome of UNC-Chapel Hill School of Government Faculty Member **Carl Stenberg**, NCLM Member Relations Manager **Rob Shepherd**, Energy Systems Group's **Patrick Pettie** and Henderson County Planning Director **Anthony Starr** were the big winners at the NCCCMA Summer Seminar golf tournament in Asheville in June. (Photo by Christina Destafano, Henderson County Co.)*

## THE ADMINISTRATOR

*The Administrator* is a monthly newsletter of the North Carolina City and County Management Association, a professional association for city and county managers and assistant managers from counties and municipalities throughout the state of North Carolina.

For comments or suggestions, please contact Matt Lail, editor, at 919-819-3979, or email at [collards12@yahoo.com](mailto:collards12@yahoo.com).

## UPCOMING EVENTS

### International City & County Management Association Conference

Phoenix, Arizona  
October 7-10, 2012

### N.C. City & County Management Association Winter Seminar

Sheraton Research Triangle Park  
February 6-8, 2013

### N.C. City & County Management Association Summer Seminar

Craven Convention Center,  
New Bern  
June 20-22, 2013

# CAREER COMPASS 26: THE ART OF THE INTERVIEW

## By Dr. Frank Benest

*Career Compass is a monthly column from ICMA focused on career issues for local government professional staff. Dr. Frank Benest is ICMA's senior advisor for Next Generation Initiatives and resides in Palo Alto, California. If you have a career question you would like addressed in a future Career Compass, e-mail [careers@icma.org](mailto:careers@icma.org) or contact Frank directly at [frank@frankbenest.com](mailto:frank@frankbenest.com).*

**In this issue of *Career Compass*** (edited for space), Dr. Benest offers his sage advice on being your best in the job interview.

*I am looking to advance in my local government career and have been applying for mid-manager positions in other local governments in my state. I have seven years of solid experience, I am qualified for the jobs, and I have gotten several interviews based on my resume. However, I have not done well in the initial interviews and therefore have not*

*been called back for any final interviews with the hiring manager. Do you have some suggestions on how I can improve my interview skills?*

Many professionals do not perform well in an interview. Some common mistakes include:

- A lack of apparent knowledge about the requirements or demands of the position
- Talking on and on
- Not providing concrete examples
- Nervousness
- Telling jokes
- Appearing "cold."

## 13 Tips

Here are some tips to enhance your interview skills:

### 1. Practice, practice, practice

Interviewing is like any other skill—you get better with practice. While you do not want to apply for positions that don't interest you (wasting your time and the time of the agency), you do want to get some real-

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## GORDON WHITAKER, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 1

and soul.”

It’s not surprising that Whitaker would have a career focusing on public service. After obtaining an AB from Cornell College, he spent some time in Somalia with the Peace Corps.

“At the time there was a great deal of interest in trying to make the world better and the belief that government played a role in that,” he said.

After his time with the Peace Corps, he attended graduate school at Indiana University where he focused his doctoral dissertation on how public service organizations like police forces could better meet the needs of their citizens by evaluating their own organizational frameworks. Understanding what kinds of experiences citizens have had, how they evaluated their police forces, and how those differences factored across city and county lines were paramount factors in his research. As a result of this research, Whitaker and his colleagues were awarded a National Science Foundation grant to study the organization and delivery of police services across the country.

At Chapel Hill, Whitaker created the School’s Public Intersection Project to improve working relationships between governments and local

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- School of Government Dean  
**Michael Smith**

businesses, nonprofit organizations, philanthropies and faith communities.

“The boundaries between government, business and nonprofits are more blurred as there is not a sense that government needs to produce all things,” he said.

Whitaker has served on the Executive Council of the National Association of Schools of Public Affairs and Administration (NASPAA) and as chair of NASPAA’s Commission on Peer Review and Accreditation. In 1997 he helped organize North Carolina’s Civic Education Consortium and received the International City/County Management Association’s Award for Local Government Education. In 2005 he received the Ned Brooks Award for Public Service, presented by the Carolina Center for Public Service. And last year he was awarded the Order of the Long Leaf Pine, North Carolina’s highest honor.

“Gordon has trained a host of city and county managers and other public administrators to do their jobs well,” said S. Ellis Hankins, League of Municipalities’ executive director. “We are grateful for his public service.”

Whitaker has been a constant at meetings of the N.C. City & County Management Association, which has made a push for more civic education in recent years. (Whitaker even created the Managing in North Carolina resource website: [www.sog.unc.edu/node/143](http://www.sog.unc.edu/node/143)).

“The great thing about living in a democracy,” he said, “is that people are engaged in governing themselves, letting government know what they need, and working with government to get things done.”

## CAREER COMPASS, CONTINUED FROM PAGE 3

world practice. The more interviews and therefore the more practice, the better you will become.

### **2. Prepare—but not too much**

To adequately prepare for the interview, you should research the following: the position, its duties and demands; the local government organization; the person to whom you will report; and the key challenges facing the department, the organization, and the community. The initial source of information is the job announcement, which typically includes the “ideal candidate” profile.

### **3. Identify your competitive advantages**

To help you prepare, it is a good idea to develop and keep updated a list of accomplishments. You can then weave the achievements into your responses to the interview questions. However, it is not sufficient to simply

promote your achievements. You need to also highlight your competitive advantages.

After you do your research, you should be able to identify what you have to offer the agency, the department, and the larger organization. In other words, what are your competitive advantages?

During the interview, you want to respond to the interview questions in such a way to assert these competitive advantages. At the very end of the interview, you may want to summarize by briefly listing what you uniquely offer.

### **4. Prepare responses for the classic questions**

During my numerous interviews to become a first-time city manager, I became adept at anticipating some of the classic questions. In advance of the interview, you, too, should identify any number of traditional questions and prepare bullet point responses. Then practice your responses.

After an interview or two, you can revise your own list of key interview questions and fine-tune

your responses.

### **5. Give concise responses yet fully respond**

In responding to a question, you should not ramble on and on (a common mistake especially if you are nervous). Give a general response to the question but also provide one specific example from your experience that supports your general response. The specific example or experience should showcase how you produced or helped produce a positive result.

### **6. Convey a professional yet friendly demeanor**

Your goal is not only to demonstrate your professional knowledge and skills, but to also create a connection with the interviewers. Try to connect with people by firmly shaking hands (don't break any fingers), looking from one person to another as you answer questions, and smiling as appropriate. Connecting on a personal level is even more

important when you get a second interview with the hiring manager.

### **7. Be truthful and authentic**

Do not try to be someone you are not. For example, if you do not have direct supervisory experience, you need to acknowledge it when asked. However, you can also provide an example of leading a group over whom you did not have formal authority or provide a situation in which you exerted a volunteer leadership role in your non-work life.

### **8. Practice with a coach or colleague**

To practice your responses and get feedback in order to enhance your performance, you may wish to schedule a mock interview with a coach, colleague or friend who acts as an interviewer. Or you can videotape your responses and a coach or colleague can critique your answers as well as general demeanor.

### **9. Debrief immediately after the interview**

Immediately following an

interview, you should jot down the questions asked and outline how you responded. Then critique your responses and note perhaps a better way to respond or a different example. A coach or colleague may help you craft a better answer to a troublesome or difficult question.

### **10. Get feedback from the interviewer or the executive recruiter**

To enhance your performance in future interviews, it is very helpful to get feedback from someone on the interview panel or from either an HR representative or the executive recruiter who sat in but did not participate in the interview. Phrase your request for feedback in the following manner—"So that I can do better in future interviews, could you give me any specific feedback on how I could improve my interview skills or better respond to the questions posed by the interview panel?" Or, "I felt that I rambled on too much. What did you perceive?"

### **11. Always thank the hiring manager**

If you get to meet the hiring manager, always send a personal note thanking the person for the opportunity to interview for the

position. In this electronic age, a personal hand-written note will help you make an impression and perhaps be a way to connect in the future even if you did not get the position.

### **12. Ask a few questions yourself**

Based on your research, you may wish to ask—if time permits—one or two selected questions at the end of the interview. Sometimes, the interview panel will ask you if you have any questions. If there is not an opportunity to do so in the first interview, your questions are certainly appropriate in the second or final interview.

### **13. Create a closing statement**

Always end with a brief closing statement. In the closing statement, you can underscore your interest in the position and why, succinctly identify your competitive advantages, and thank the panel.