

Behind the Dais: How Local Leaders Decide

Laura Hampton

Doctor of Business Administration

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Acknowledgments

Survey & Interview Participants

Your voices shaped this
research

Council & Board Members

Thank you for your service
and leadership

Community Impact

This work is stronger because of you

The Problem We Face

General Problem

Ineffective decision-making among U.S. local government leaders

Result: Flawed policies and programs

VA-Specific Problem

Possible ineffective decision-making by Virginia's elected local leaders

Impact: Threatens financial health of municipalities and residents



Research Timeline





Scale of Local Government

< 19.5K

*US Counties &
Cities*

Incorporated areas
nationwide

324

*Virginia
Localities*

Counties, cities, and
towns

~ 216

VML Members

Local governments
with 11 paid staff

Research Sampling Strategy

Proposed Sample

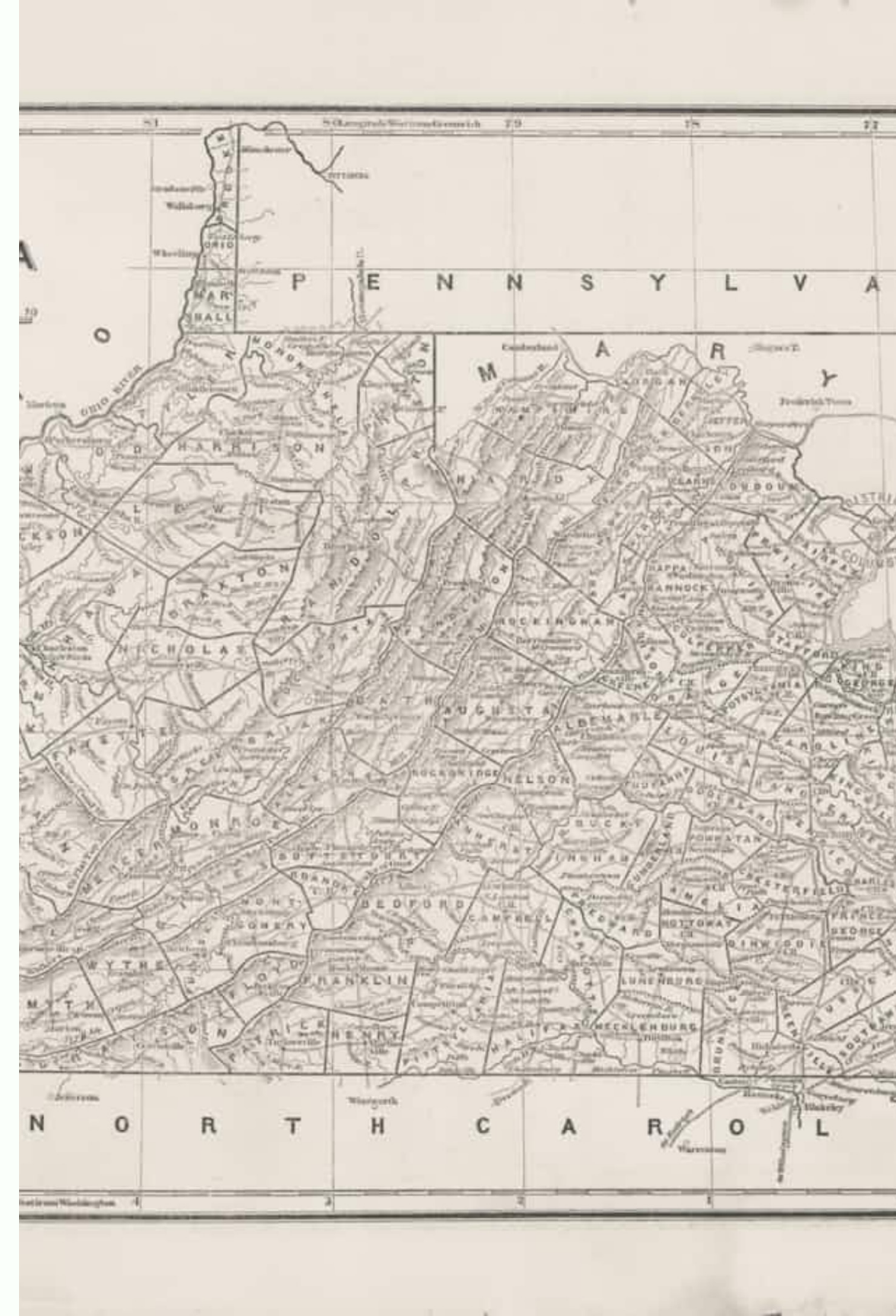
- 1 VML member from each of 10 regions
- VML staff participation included

Actual Sample

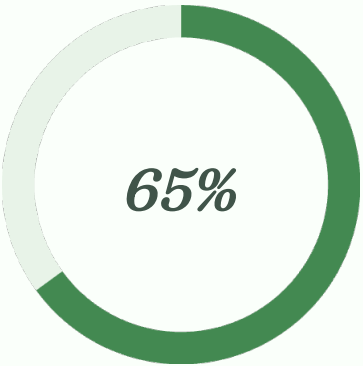
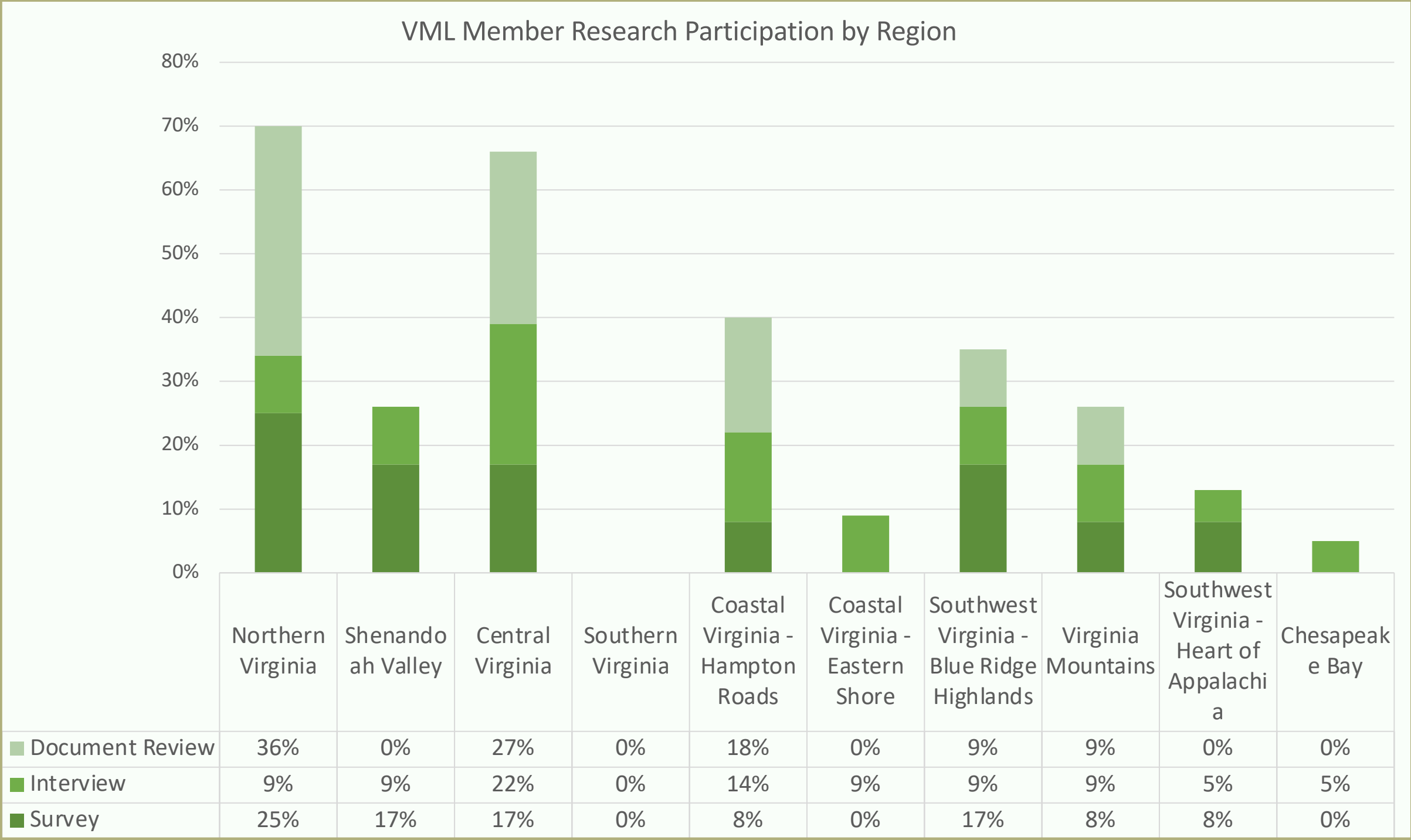
- 1 VML member from 9 of 10 regions
- VML staff successfully included



Map Source: <https://www.virginia.org/places-to-visit/regions/>

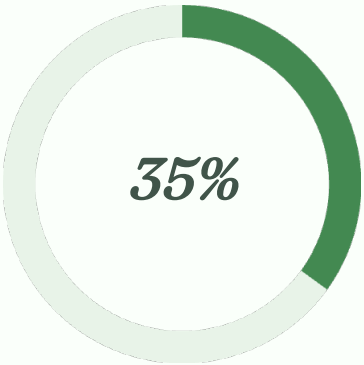


Data Sources & Regional Participation



Locally-Elected Leaders

Interview participants



Executive Leadership

Paid professional staff

Bottom Line Up Front

Research Period: June 2023 - May 2024

Research Inputs

- **7 of 10 regions:** Survey responses
- **9 of 10 regions:** LEO and executive leadership interviews
- **134 documents:** Minutes, transcripts, training materials

Key Findings

No definitive reasons about problem statement emerged

Identified trends in leadership, knowledge, communication & decision-making

Recommendations

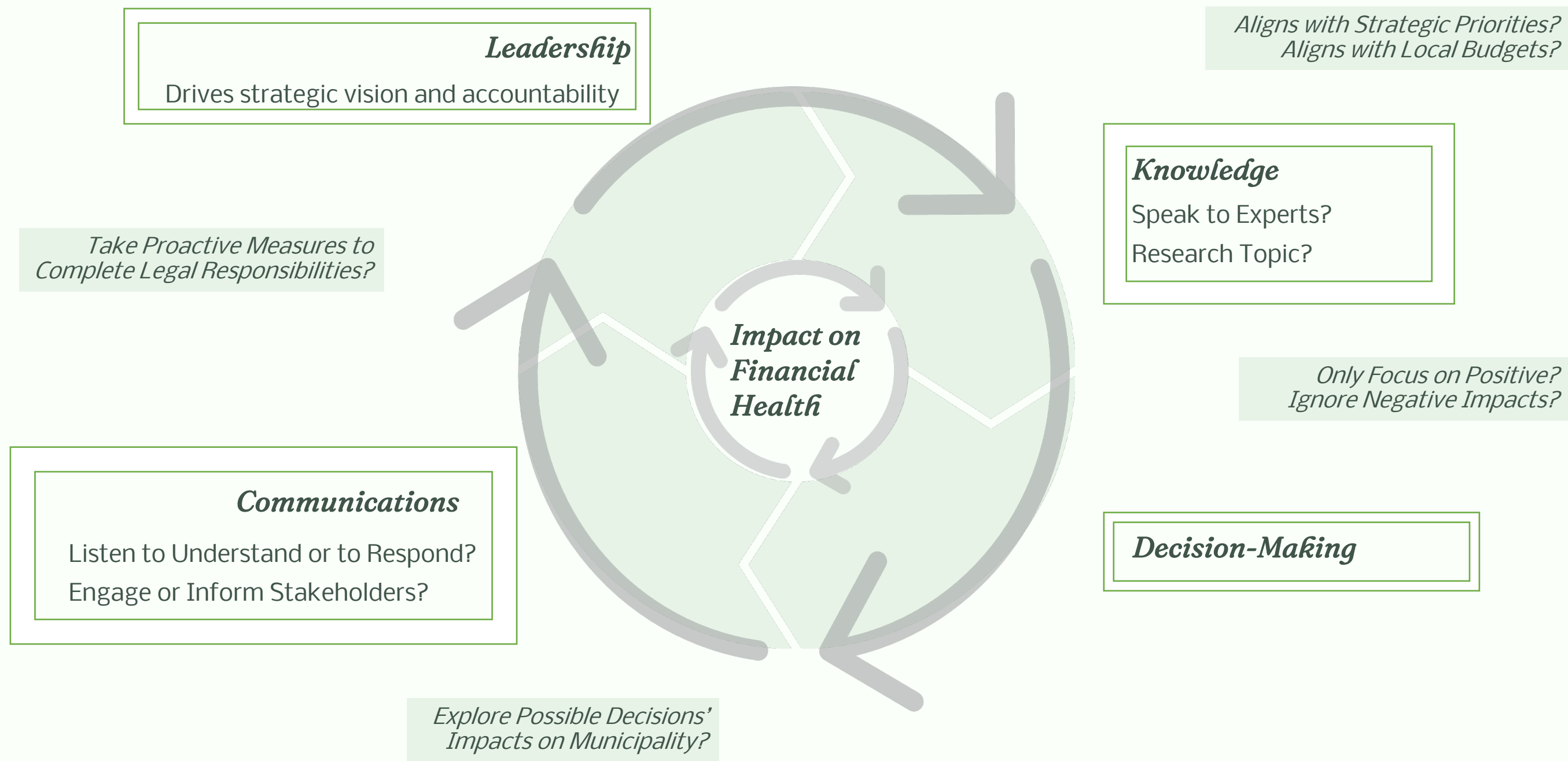
VML Working Group: Comprehensive training program development

LEO Empowerment: Business-minded governance approach

LEO Decision-Making Framework



Patterns in Decision-Making Challenges

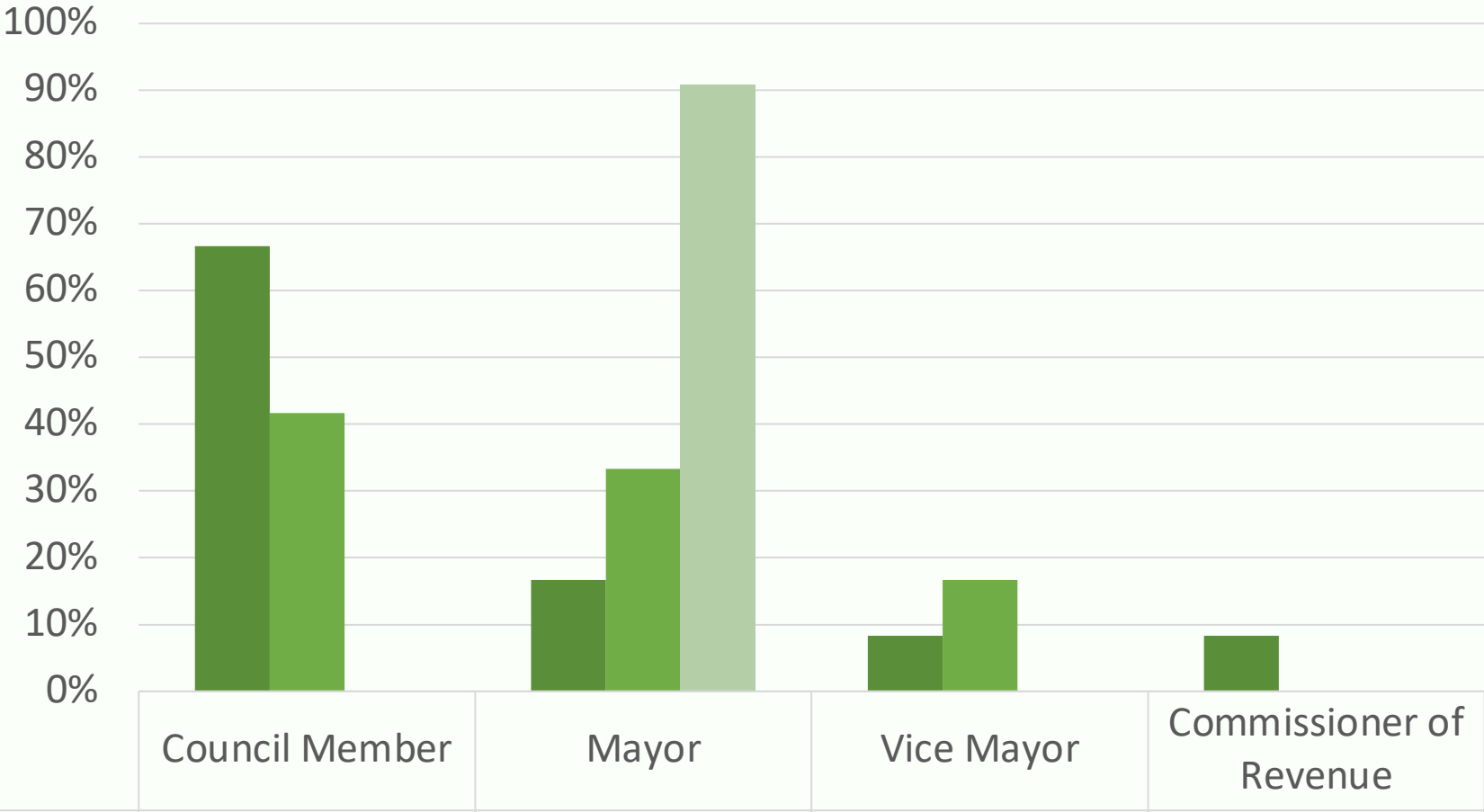


Discovered Research Themes

Theme	Subtheme	Source	Documents/Codes
Leadership	Education • Community involvement • Influence	Surveys, transcripts, minutes	128 documents
Communications	Meeting dynamics • Positive/negative patterns • Solutions	Transcripts, minutes, guides	507 appearances
Decision-Making	Information gathering • Impact assessment • Responsibility	Transcripts, minutes, guides	70 documents
Knowledge	Training sources • Leadership skills • Financial literacy	All sources	3,327 appearances

Leadership: Education & Elected Role

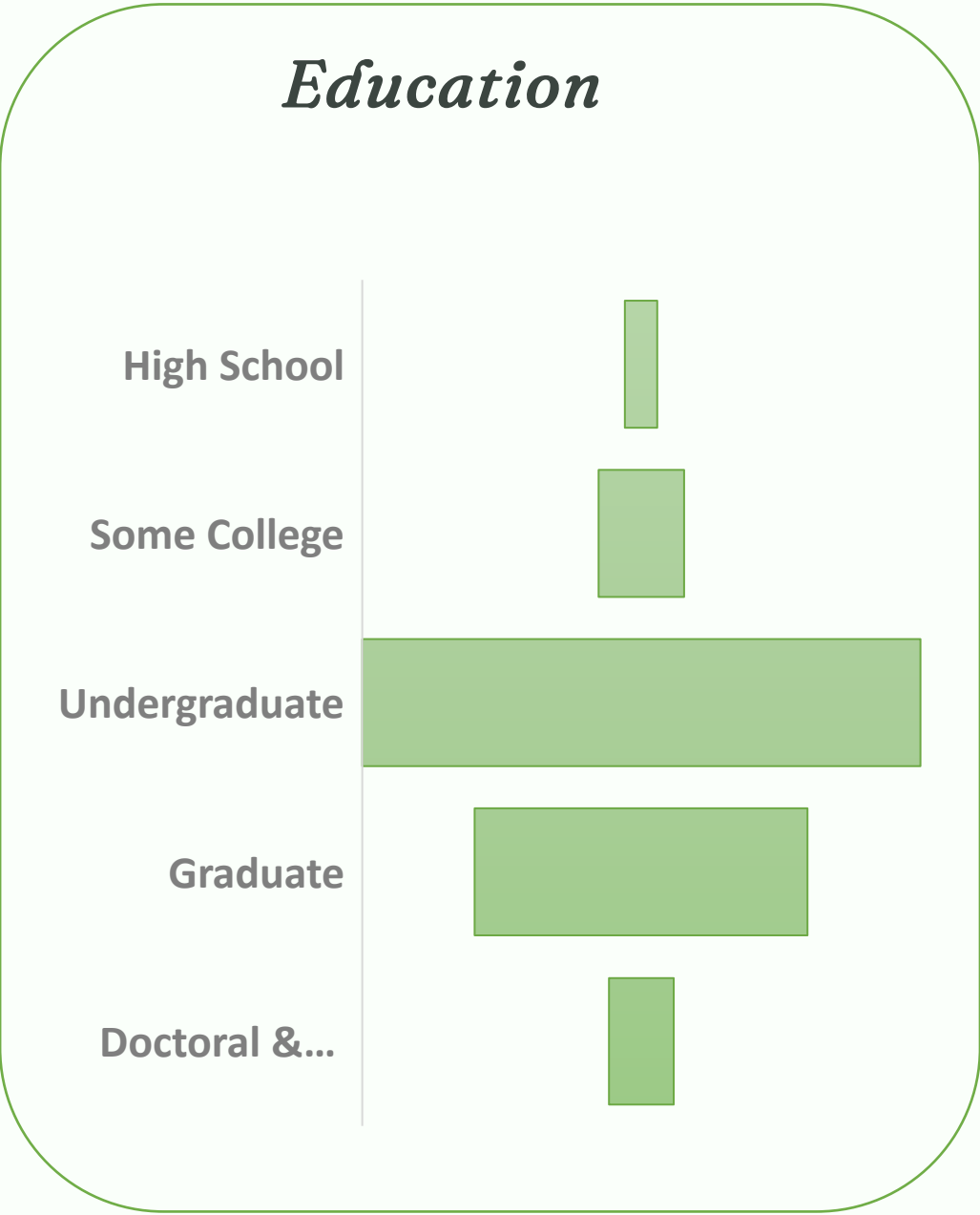
Elected Role



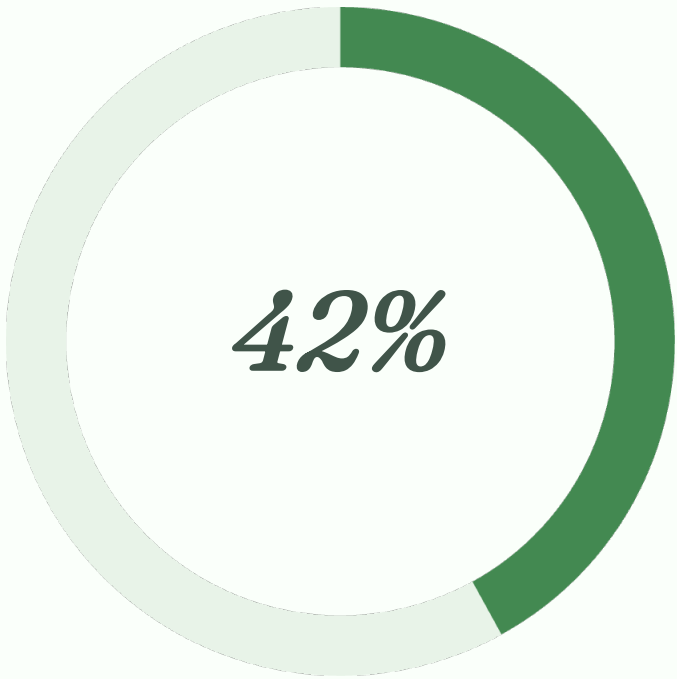
■ Survey	67%	17%	8%	8%
■ Interview	42%	33%	17%	0%
■ Document Review	0%	91%	0%	0%

■ Survey ■ Interview ■ Document Review

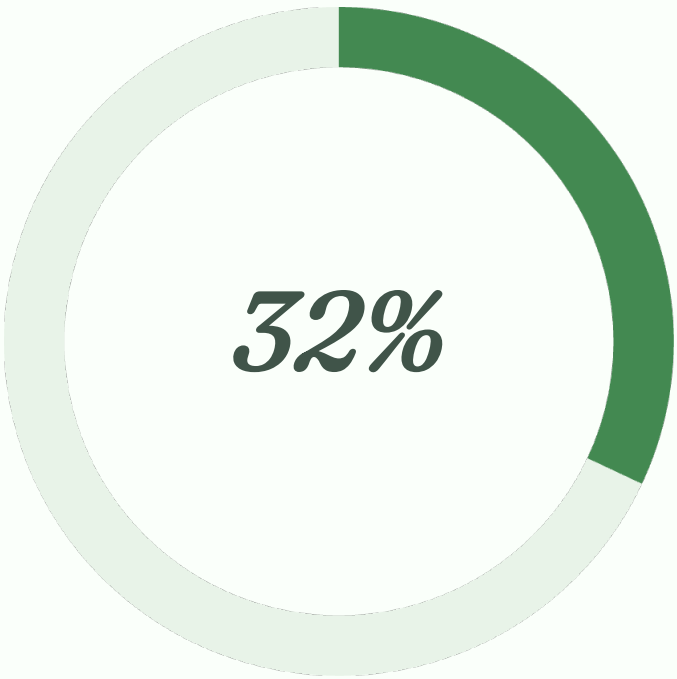
Education



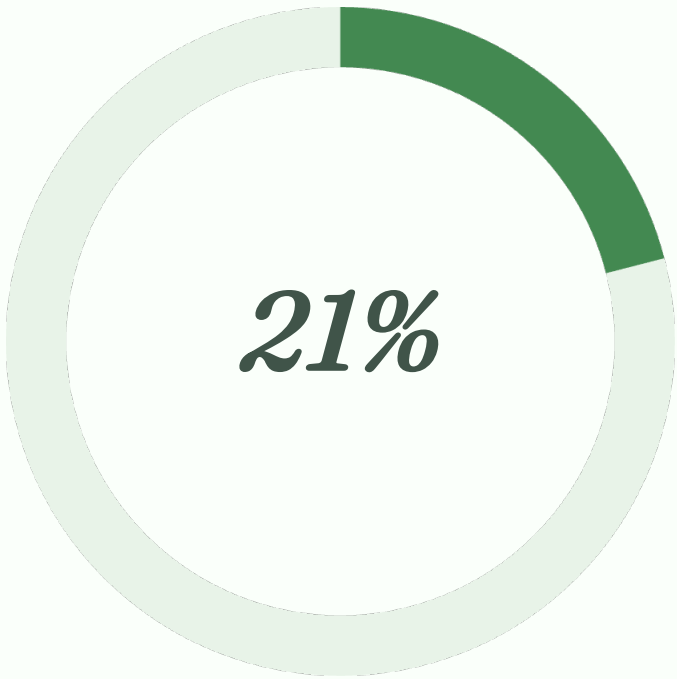
Leadership: Employment & Community Involvement



Full-Time Employed
Working while serving



Retired
Post-career service



Self-Employed
Business owners

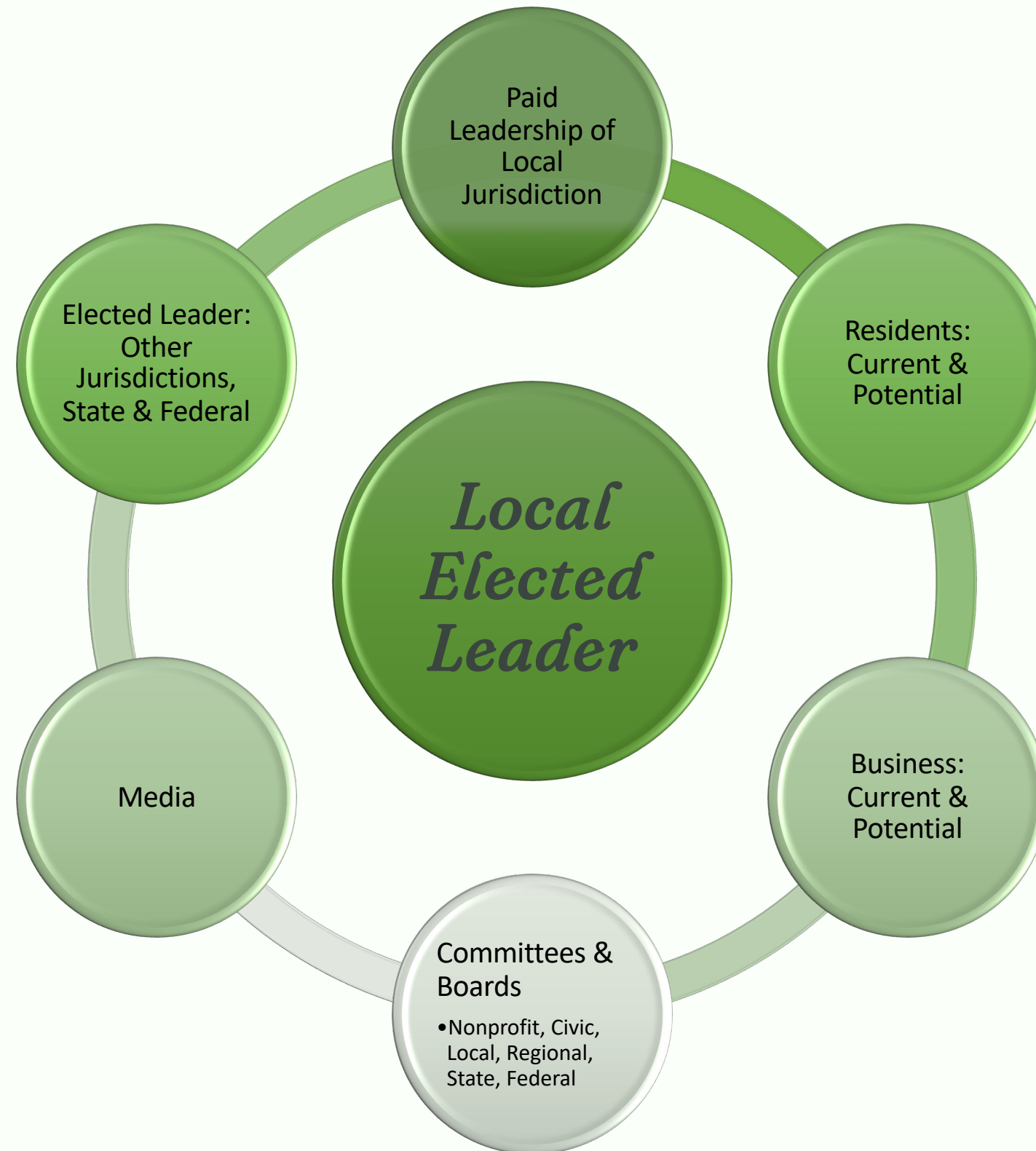


77% : Community Involvement Prior to Election

Communications

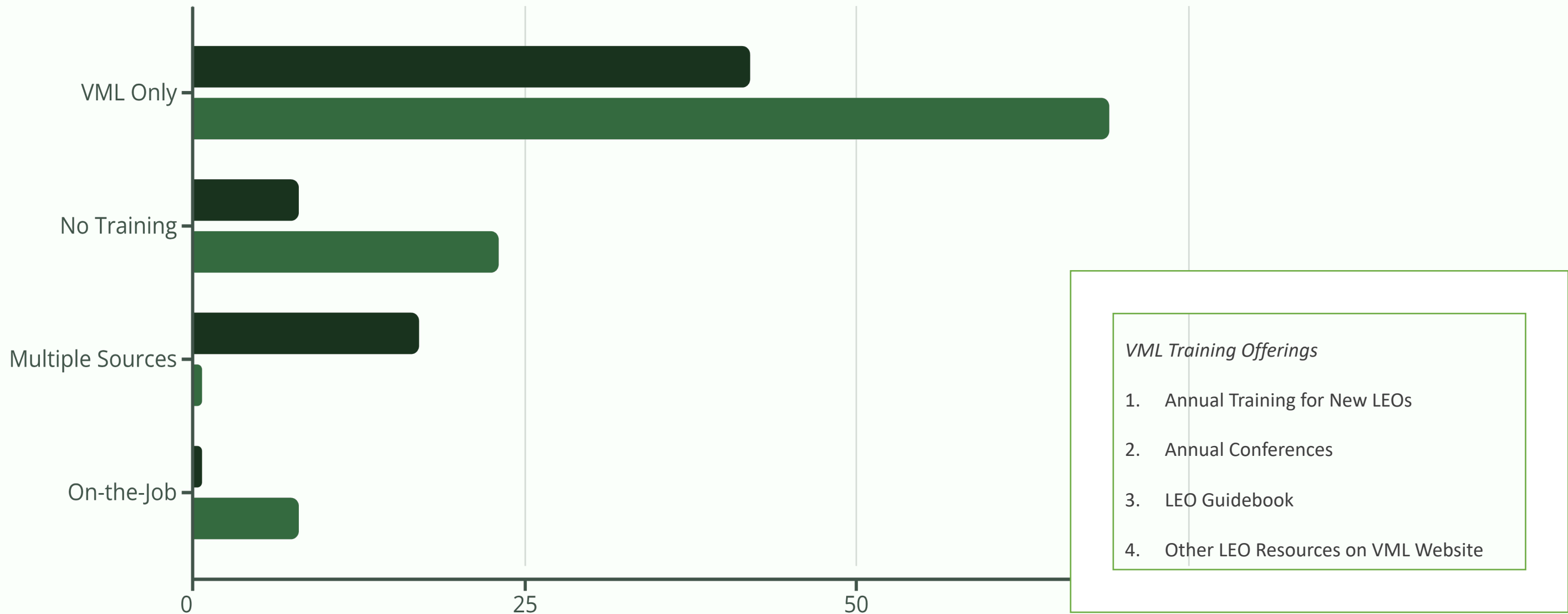
Sub Themes

- Communications & Governing Body Meetings
- Positive & Negative Communications
- Possible Solutions for Negative Communications
- Standard Operating Procedures



Knowledge: Training Sources & Gaps

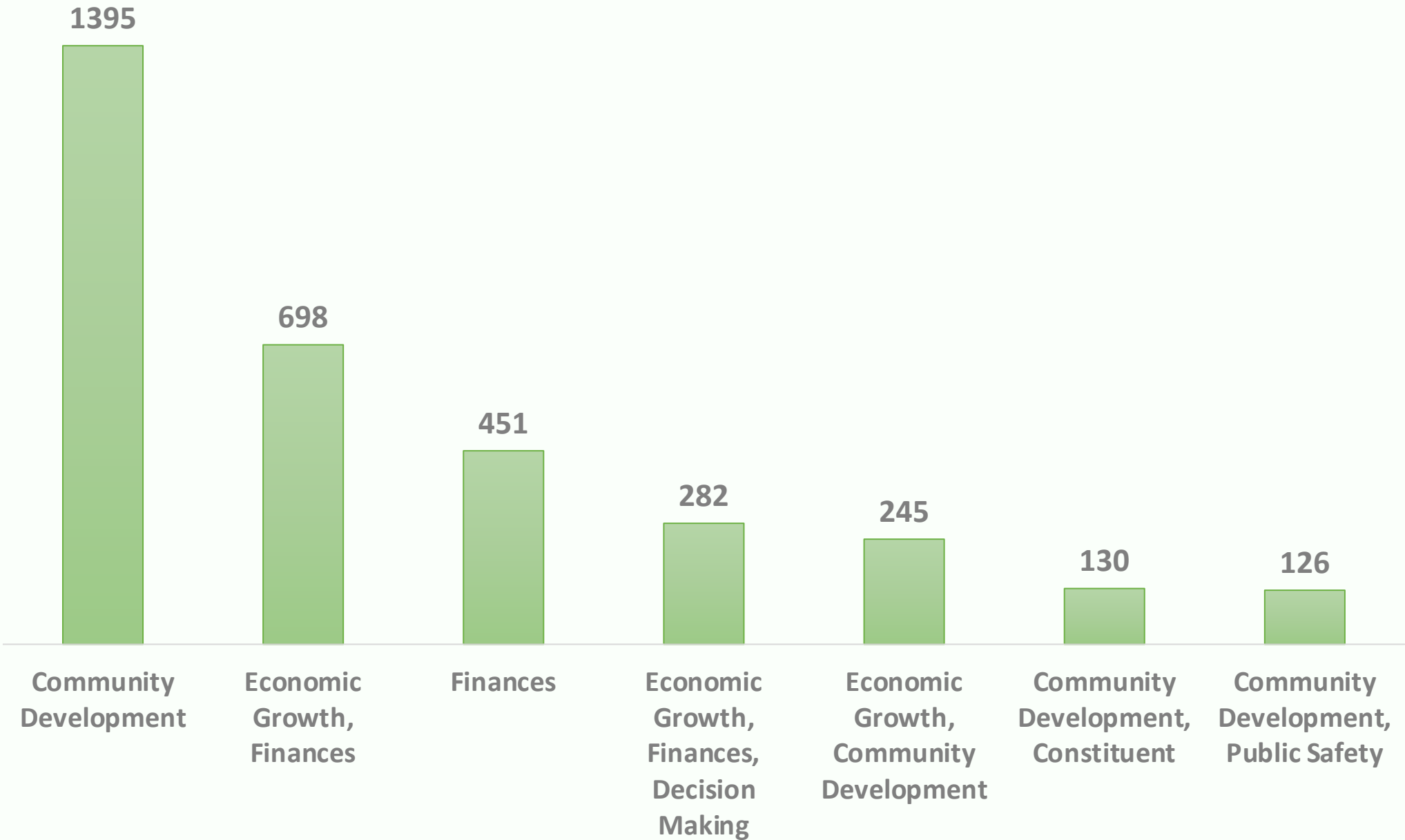
■ Survey % ■ Interview %



Critical Gap: 8% surveyed and 23% interviewed received no training upon entering office

Knowledge: Budget Focus & Experience Levels

Budget-Related Terms In Documents



LEO Experience Distribution





Conclusions & Path Forward

Research Findings

No definitive reasons for ineffective decision-making emerged from comprehensive analysis

Four key trends identified:
Leadership, Knowledge,
Communication, Decision-Making

Strategic Recommendations

VML Working Group: Develop comprehensive training program using research findings

LEO Empowerment: Transform understanding through business-minded governance approach

Future Research Opportunities

- Legislative training requirements analysis
- Public understanding of local government roles
- Executive leadership decision-making dynamics
- Changing motivations for seeking elected office



Thank You

Questions?

Contact Information

LauraHHampton@comcast.net

571-758-4181