

An Audit of the Transparency of North Carolina County Officials

Quantitative Research Methods Course (COMM-310)
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Abstract

This research examined three questions: 1) how responsive North Carolina county officials are to requests for public documents, 2) whether officials in certain roles are more responsive than those in other roles, and 3) whether there is a relationship between counties' response rates and their different census demographics.

The research results found that 1) the average county provided about half the public documents requested, 2) officials in local schools are slightly more responsive than those in county governments, and 3) it seems there are no strong relationships between counties' response rates and their demographics.

This research found the response rate by county officials to be disappointing. Therefore this report suggests that the state post on the internet pertinent county information that it already possesses.

The purpose of this research is to measure the responsiveness of North Carolina county officials to requests for information made by common citizens.

Transparency in government is a current topic of conversation among those in the media and public affairs. This research provides objective data on how forthcoming North Carolina county officials are.

Issues addressed by this research include how well county officials respond to requests for information, whether county officials in specific roles are more or less responsive than others, and whether there might be relationships between certain county demographics and how well their officials respond. To examine these issues, the following three research questions were used:

Research Questions

RQ1: Of four public documents requested from county officials, what percentage of them will be sent in response to a common citizen's request?

RQ2: Do county officials in different roles respond to such requests at different rates?

RQ3: Are there relationships between county response rates and those counties' different demographics?

To investigate these questions, the following variables were used:

Independent Variable One—the roles of county officials

The subjects for this research were four officials for each North Carolina county: 1) the chair of the county commissions, 2) the county manager, 3) the chairs of the school board, and 4) the superintendent of schools.

This selection of subjects provided two elected officials and two professional officials per county. It also provided two officials from local education and two from county government for each county. With North Carolina having 100 counties, this selection resulted in 400 subjects.

Because the whole population of each of these four officials was contacted, the results are not a sample, but rather a census of the population's parameters. Therefore all the differences in the results are by definition statistically significant.

Independent Variable Two—County demographic information

Information on ten factors from U.S. census data was gathered for each county. These included population change, percentages of white and black residents, language spoken at home, high school and college graduation rates, people per household and per square mile, and income and poverty rates.

Dependent variable—responses to requests for public information

Each of the 400 county officials received a letter requesting public documents, written on plain white stationery and sent from a typical individual citizen with a P.O. box number for a return address [see appendix one]. Each letter requested four specific public documents regarding a specific state funded school building project for their county: 1) the application to the state for funds; 2) the state board's certification of review; 3) a listing of the checks written against the disbursement account for this project showing the check numbers, dates, amounts and terminal payees; and 4) the final report of the project. Such a request was particularly appropriate to send to the chairs of a county's school board and commissioners because both had to sign the application for state funds.

The response rate was calculated for each county in terms of the proportion of requested documents that were sent to the person who requested them. For each county, four officials were each asked for four documents. Therefore it was possible for four copies of each document (for a total of 16 documents) to be sent in reply. Nevertheless, a county's response rate was scored as 100% if all four requested documents were sent in response to our request, regardless of whether those four documents came from one or more officials in that county.

Method

The names and addresses of the 400 North Carolina county officials were found in the *2009 Directory of State and County Officials in North Carolina*. The document was compiled by the Publications Division of the North Carolina Department of the Secretary of State and was retrieved from <http://www.secretary.state.nc.us/pubsweb/direct.aspx>.

The names and dates of specific state-funded school building projects were found in *Public School Building Capital Fund – Monthly Projects Report*. This document was compiled by The Department of Public Instruction and was retrieved from http://www.schoolclearinghouse.org/otherinf/ADMFund/Monthly_Projects_Report.pdf.

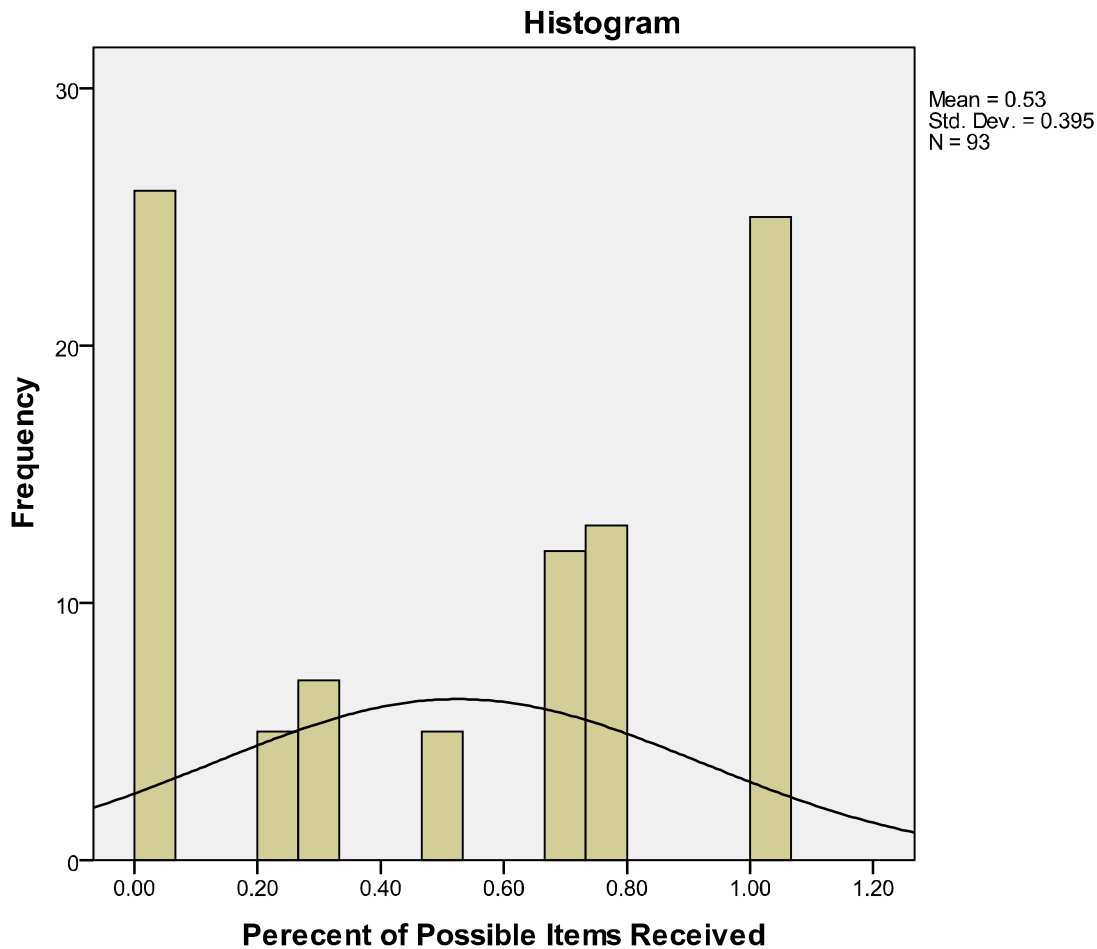
Census data were retrieved from <http://quickfacts.census.gov/qfd/index.html>.

On Feb. 12, 2010 letters were sent to the 400 county officials with requests for information on their county's specific school building projects. It was requested that that information be received within two weeks.

Phone calls were made regarding the approximately 20 returned letters with incorrect addresses. Correct addresses were found and new letters were sent, again with requests for responses to be received within two weeks

Results

RQ1: Of four public documents requested from county officials, what percentage of them will be sent in response to a common citizen's request?



About half of the items requested were sent in response from the average county. Of the four items requested, 70 percent of the requested applications were sent, 51 percent of the requested check registers were sent, 32 percent of the requested final reports were sent, and 35 percent of the requested certificates of review were sent.

Of the 100 counties to which requests for information were sent, 25 counties responded by sending all the items that were requested; 42 responded by sending some, but not all, the items that were requested; 26 responded, but sent none of the items that were requested; and seven counties failed to send any response at all [see appendix two]. The average county responded by sending 53 percent of the items requested.

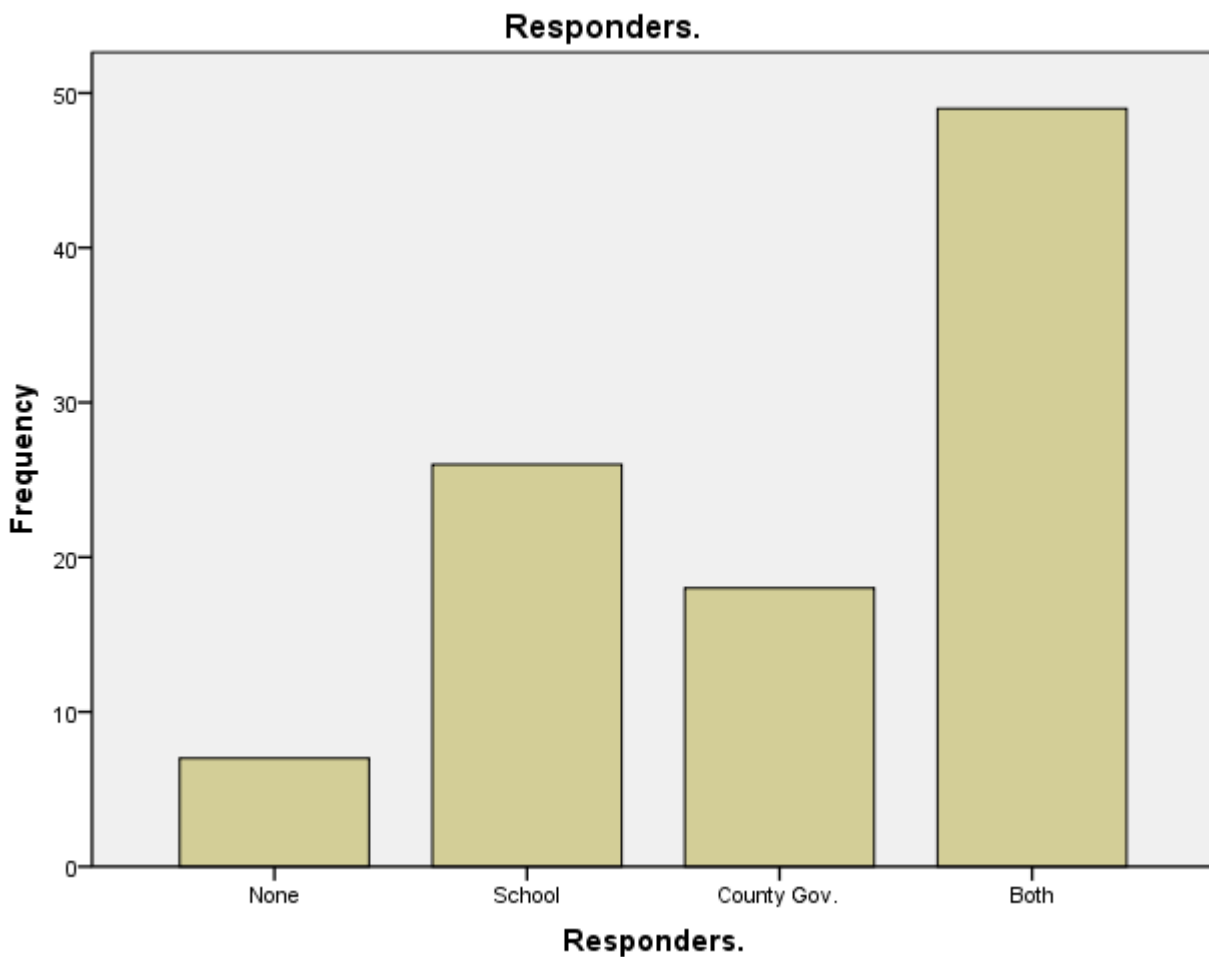
A number of the responses from county officials asked for what this information would be used. Such inquiries are contrary to state statutes (NCGS § 132-6[b]: “No person requesting to inspect and examine public records, or to obtain copies thereof, shall be required to disclose the purpose or motive for the request”). This request by public officials implied that county officials might provide different responses depending on the purpose of the information’s use.

A number of responses also asked for payment for making copies of the requested documents. State statutes permit reasonable requests for copies, but one county official requested an additional \$60 charge for overseeing the copying of the requested documents.

Although there was no indication in the requests that they were coming from Campbell students, a number of county officials tracked down the students who made these requests. One county official wrote asking whether the student was on Campbell's women's softball team. Another county official found a student on facebook and then phoned him at home to ask about the purpose of the request. Yet another county official contacted the office of the president of Campbell to inquire about the student's request. All the students found these responses to be intimidating. The experiences were unusual enough that *The Campbell Times* ran a story on them (see appendix three).

RQ2: Do county officials in different roles respond to such requests at different rates?

Officials in local schools are slightly more responsive than those in county government.



Responders.

		Frequency	Percent	Valid Percent	Cumulative Percent
Valid	None	7	7.0	7.0	7.0
	School	26	26.0	26.0	33.0
	County Gov.	18	18.0	18.0	51.0
	Both	49	49.0	49.0	100.0
	Total	100	100.0	100.0	

Although requests were sent to only four different officials per county, responses were received from people with 56 different titles. The titles were different enough that it was impossible to tell to which request they were responding, but it was possible to tell whether the responses came from an official with the local school or with the county government. Therefore each response was coded as coming from each county’s local school, county government, or both.

Forty-nine counties sent responses from both the local school and the county government, 26 sent responses from just the local school, 18 sent responses from just the county government, and seven counties sent no response at all.

RQ3: Are there relationships between county response rates and those counties’ different demographics?

Correlations were tested between this research’s response rates per county and ten variables from the U.S. Census for each county: 1) percentage change in the populations since 2000, 2) the percentage of white persons in the population, 3) the percentage of black persons in the population, 4) percentage of homes in which a language other than English is spoken, 5) percentage of those 25 and older in the population who graduated from high school, 6) percentage of those 25 and older in the population who have a bachelor’s degree, 7) the median household income, 8) percentage of people below the poverty level, and the number of people per square mile.

Of the ten correlation tests between these variables and the counties’ response rate, only one variable from the census data was statistically significant—the percentage of white people per county ($R = .21, p = .049$). The higher the percentage of white people per county, the higher the response rate by county officials. There is a negative correlation between the percentage of black people per county and the county response rate, but it was not statistically significant ($R = -.20, p = .056$).

It is noteworthy that there were no significant correlations between these other census variables and the county response rates. There has been discussion about poorer and rural counties possibly not having as responsive county governments, but these results fail to support such notions.

Discussion

It was disappointing that so few county officials provided the public documents that were requested. What might be the cause of this lack of transparency? It’s likely that such requests are

rare. Some county officials may not be used to dealing with such interruptions in their routines. Perhaps requests from outside their own county may not be deemed as that important.

It was disconcerting that a number of county officials said that there would be a charge for making copies of this information, but failed to inform us what that amount would be. Most troubling were the county officials' requests to know how the information would be used. At the least these seemed like a delaying tactic, perhaps in the hope the requests would go away.

In the final analysis it's likely that county officials are no better or worse than the rest of us. Individuals in other areas, such as nonprofit organizations and the mass media, were also contacted. Their responses varied as much as those of public officials. The important difference is that county officials are dealing with the public's money.

Conclusion

Appendix One

[Below is the mail merge letter sent to county officials]

P.O. Box 339
Buies Creek, NC 27506
Feb. 12, 2010

«contact_prefix» «contact_first_name» «contact_last_name»,
«county» «contact_title»
«contact_address»
«contact_city», NC, «contact_zip»

Subject: Public Records Request for PSBCF project

Dear «contact_prefix» «contact_last_name»,

I am writing to request a copy of each of the following documents regarding the Public School Building Capital Fund project titled, “«project_title.»” («project_approval_date»):

- 1) the application to the state for funds,
- 2) the state board’s certification of review,
- 3) a listing of the checks written against the disbursement account for this project showing the check numbers, dates, amounts and terminal payees, and
- 4) the final report of the project.

I would appreciate it if I could receive this information by February 26, 2010.

Sincerely,

«student_name»

Appendix Two

COUNTIES	SOURCE OF RESPONSE	Application received	Check register received	Final report received	Certificate of review received	PERCENT RESPONSE
Alamance	Both	1				100%
Alexander	School	1	1	1	0	75%
Alleghany	County Gov.	1	0	0	0	25%
Anson	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Ashe	School	1	1	1	1	100%
Avery	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Beaufort	Both	1	1	1	0	75%
Bertie	Both	0	0	0	0	0%
Bladen	School	0	0	0	1	25%
Brunswick	County Gov.	1	1	0		67%
Buncombe	Both	1	1	0		67%
Burke	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Cabarrus	Both	1	1	1		100%
Caldwell	None					
Camden	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Carteret	Both	0	0	0	0	0
Caswell	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Catawba	County Gov.	1	1	1	1	100%
Chatham	School	1	1	0		67%
Cherokee	None					
Chowan	County Gov.	1	1	1		100%
Clay	School	1	1	1		100%
Cleveland	County Gov.	1	0	0		33%
Columbus	None					
Craven	County Gov.	1	0	0		33%
Cumberland	Both	0	0	0	0	0%
Currituck	Both	1				100%
Dare	Both	0	0	0		0%

Davidson	Both	1	0	0	1	50%
Davie	School	1	1	0		67%
Duplin	County Gov.	1	0	1		67%
Durham	County Gov.	1	0	0	0	25%
Edgecombe	School	1	1	0	1	75%
Forsyth	County Gov.	0	0	0	0	0%
Franklin	Both	1	1	0	1	75%
Gaston	Both	1	1	0	1	75%
Gates	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Graham	Both	0	0	0	0	0%
Granville	Both	1	0	0		33%
Greene	Both	1	1	1		100%
Guilford	County Gov.	1	1	0		67%
Halifax	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Harnett	Both	1	1	0		67%
Haywood	Both	1	1	1		100%
Henderson	Both	1	1	1		100%
Hertford	Both	1	1	0	0	50%
Hoke	None					
Hyde	Both	0	0	0	0	0%
Iredell	County Gov.	1	1	1		100%
Jackson	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Johnston	Both	0	0	0	0	0%
Jones	None					
Lee	Both	1	1	1	1	100%
Lenoir	School	1	1	1		100%
Lincoln	County Gov.	1	0	0	0	25%
Macon	Both	1	1	1		100%
Madison	School	1	1	1	1	100%
Martin	County Gov.	1	0	0	1	50%
McDowell	Both	1	0	1	1	75%
Mecklenburg	County Gov.	0	0	0	0	0%
Mitchell	Both	1	1	0	1	75%
Montgomery	Both	0	0	0	0	0%
Moore	Both	1	0	1	1	75%
Nash	Both	1	1			100%
New Hanover	Both	1	1	1		100%
Northhampton	County Gov.	0	0	0	0	0%
Onslow	Both	1	1	0	0	50%
Orange	Both	1	1	0	1	75%
Pamlico	Both	0	0	0	0	0%

Pasquotank	Both	1	1	0		67%
Pender	County Gov.	1	1	1	1	100%
Perquimans	None					
Person	Both	1				100%
Pitt	Both	1	0	0		33%
Polk	School	1	0	1		67%
Randolph	Both	1	1	1	0	75%
Richmond	School	1	1	0		67%
Robeson	County Gov.	1	1	1	1	100%
Rockingham	Both	1	0			50%
Rowan	Both	0	1	0	0	25%
Rutherford	Both	1	1	1		100%
Sampson	Both	1	1	1		100%
Scotland	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Stanly	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Stokes	Both	1	1	0		67%
Surry	Both	1	0	0		33%
Swain	Both	1	0	0		33%
Transylvania	Both	1	1	0	1	75%
Tyrrell	Both	0	0	0	0	0%
Union	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Vance	School	1				100%
Wake	Both	1	1	0	1	75%
Warren	None					
Washington	Both	1	1	1	1	100%
Watauga	School	1	1	1		100%
Wayne	Both	0	0	0	0	0%
Wilkes	Both	1	1	1	0	75%
Wilson	School	0	0	0	0	0%
Yadkin	School	1	0	0		33%
Yancey	County Gov.	1	1	0		67%

Some of the cells above are blank because no official for that county responded or because that document was not available for that county's project.