

Citizens Academies: A Tool for Increasing Civic Engagement

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Executive Summary

Citizens academies are a new tool used by local governments to teach residents about the functions of local government. Additionally, they build relationships and encourage people to participate in civic functions. This study explores participants' views on the effects of attending this type of program with respect to their post-academy civic activities. Results show that, while citizens academy participants are often more engaged before participating in the program, citizen engagement increases significantly across civic indicators for almost all participants.

Introduction

As public administration moves toward a collaborative relationship with citizens it is vital that citizens are knowledgeable about local government services and how they can have a stake in the actions government takes (Callahan and Yang, 2005, 1). It is important to teach citizens “about the necessity of government practices (red tape, etc.),” as well as “how to work within the system and to work with the system” (King, Feltey, and Susel, 1998, 324).

Citizens academies are one way that local governments are working to “educate citizens, build positive relationships, and increase communication between government officials and citizens, as well as inspire future municipal leaders” (Florida League of Cities, 2008, 3). These civic education programs often include presentations from various departments as well as fieldtrips and tours to see local government services in action. For the purpose of this research, citizens academies are distinct from other civic education programs that educate citizens about a specific type of government service such as police, fire, or planning.

Citizen participation initiatives come with challenges including cost, time, citizen cynicism toward government, and lack of representation of participants (Irving and Stansbury, 2004, 58). The cost of implementing a citizens academy must be weighed against what the locality hopes to gain from the initiative.

One of the goals of these citizens academies is to improve the civic engagement of participants. This happens by “working to make a difference in the civic life of our communities and developing the combination of knowledge, skills, values and motivation to make that difference” and, “means promoting the quality of life in a community, through both political and non-political processes” (Ehrlich, 2000, vi). Research on civic engagement, including the North Carolina Civic Health Index, there are five common measures of civic engagement: volunteering, working with neighbors, voting, talking about politics with friends and family, and making a contribution over \$25 show that civic engagement covers a broad spectrum of activities beyond just political processes (North Carolina Civic Health Index, 2010, 7).

Much of the research on citizens academies has been descriptive accounts of what these academies offer to the participants and the topics that are covered in the sessions. The Florida League of Cities and the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) offers profiles of citizens academies across the United States. These profiles include a description of program components and some anecdotal advice on how to implement a citizens academy. The School of Government at the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill, building upon work done by the North Carolina City and County Management Association, offers a resource guide on citizens academies that includes practice information such as sessions to offer and costs associated with the program. No research has been done on the impact these programs have on participants.

This paper explores the extent to which citizens academies affect the civic engagement of participants and what is the nature and extent of that effect? The findings presented are intended to inform local governments currently operating citizens academies as well as those considering citizens academies of the impact these programs can have on participants.

Methodology

An electronic survey of past participants in long standing citizens academies was fielded in November and December, 2010. To gain a better understanding of the effects citizens academies have on the civic engagement of participants, the survey asked past participants if their participation in certain civic activities has increased, not changed, or decreased since completing the citizens academy.

The indicators of civic engagement used in the survey came from a literature review on civic engagement, the US Census Current Population Survey (Voting, Volunteering, and Civic Engagement Supplements), the Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, and a content analysis of the stated goals of the local government programs included in the study. From this research, questions were written to cover participation with local government, volunteering and engagement, political participation, staying informed, and advocating for a position. A full list of questions can be found in Appendix A.

Participants from five North Carolina and one Florida local government citizens academies constituted a convenience sample chosen due to accessible contact information for academy alumni and readily available data about program content. Programs in the sample are: the Catawba County University, the City of Asheville Citizens Academy, Durham City/County Neighborhood College, Gainesville 101¹, Kannapolis Citizens in Action (CIA), and the Town of Cary School of Government. These programs are all well established and long standing citizens academies. Table 1 outlines some features of the programs selected for this research. A detailed description of these programs can be found in Appendix B. Each of these citizens academies agreed to share alumni contact information.

Table 1: Characteristics of Citizens Academies Included in Study

Citizens Academy	Years Offered	Number of Sessions	Times	Average Enrollment	Tuition/Fees
Catawba County University	2009-Current	2	Tuesday/Thursday (10am-3pm)	18	None
City of Asheville Citizens Academy	2004-2008	9	Mondays (6-9pm)	25	None
Durham City/County Neighborhood College	2003-Current	10	Thursdays (6-8:30pm)	30	\$30 (scholarships available)
Gainesville 101	2005-Current	6	Wednesdays (9am-12n)	25	None
Kannapolis Citizens in Action (CIA)	2006-2009	8	Tuesdays (6-8pm)	15	None
Town of Cary School of Government	2003-Current	8	Wednesdays (6-9pm)	24	None

A total of 132 citizens academy alumni (of the total of 373 contacted) responded to the survey for an overall response rate of 35%. There was a wide range of response rates for each of the programs as seen in Table 2.

Table 2: Response Rates by Citizens Academy

Citizens Academy	Number of Responses	Response Rate	Percent of Total Response
Catawba County University	5	19%	4%
City of Asheville Citizens Academy	2	10%	2%
Durham City/County Neighborhood College	41	28%	31%
Gainesville 101	24	73%	18%
Kannapolis Citizens in Action (CIA)	5	50%	4%
Town of Cary School of Government	55	40%	42%

¹ The researcher is a graduate of the Gainesville 101 Citizens Academy but did not participate in the survey.

The results of the survey are skewed toward the programs with the highest number of responses. These programs (Town of Cary School of Government, Durham City/County Neighborhood College, and Gainesville 101) provided the majority of potential respondents and therefore are heavily represented in survey responses.

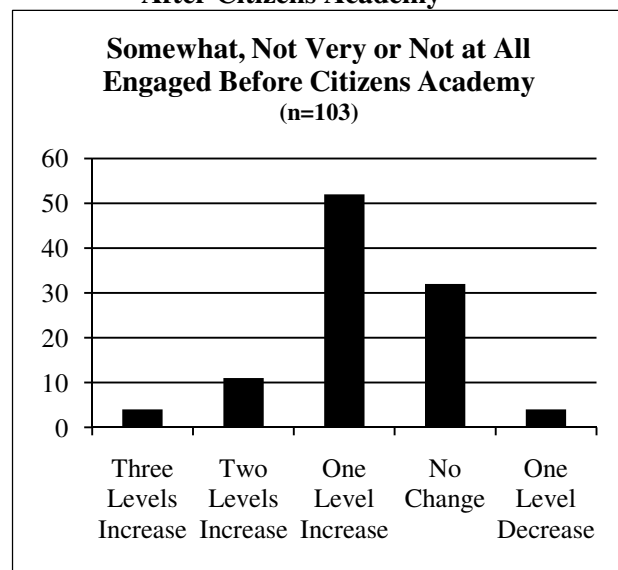
Survey responses were then analyzed for variance in the change in civic engagement by the type of program attended, the period of time since completing the program, and demographic information.

Results and Analysis

Survey responses show that citizens academy participants are a rather homogeneous group. Approximately 70% of respondents are over 40 years old and only 3% have an income under \$25,000, with over 62% earning over \$75,000. Only 16% reported to be non-white. A majority (57%) has lived in their community more than 10 years, but a small number (4%) are new additions to their community, reporting to have lived in their community for less than two years. This is consistent with data from the North Carolina Civic Health Index which shows that the civically engaged in North Carolina are generally older, white, wealthy, and college educated (North Carolina Civic Health Index, 2010, 11).

The results of the survey indicate that participants experienced a statistically significant² increase in participation in civic activities after taking part in a citizens academy. While the survey shows that citizens academy participants are highly engaged before attending (with 64% of survey respondents saying they were “very” or “somewhat” engaged before the citizens academy), the increase in civic engagement is most profound for participants who rated themselves “not at all” or “not very” engaged before attending the citizens academy. Thirty-seven percent of the respondents rated themselves as being “not at all” or “not very” engaged in community affairs before attending the citizens academy. That number dropped to only seven percent after attending the program, an 80% decrease. Figure 1 show the amount of change in the level of engagement for those who reported being “somewhat,” “not at all,” or “not very” engaged before the citizens academy. The largest number showed a one level increase (i.e. from “not at all” to “not very” or “not very” to “somewhat”) in engagement after the citizens academy.

Figure 1: Change in Level of Engagement After Citizens Academy



An analysis of the specific civic activities that were addressed in the survey shows that there is an increase in all civic indicators after participation in the citizens academy. While almost 99% of respondents said that their participation in each of these activities stayed the same or increased, there was a large range of the amount of increased participation in each of those activities. A full list of the civic engagement indicators and the percentage of survey respondents that reported an increase can be found in Appendix C.

² A Paired Samples T-Test was performed with the increase in engagement after the citizens academy significant at the .000 confidence level.

The civic activities with the largest increases after participating in the citizens academy were:

- Visiting local government websites, Facebook pages or newsletters to stay informed. (67%)
- Working with others in your community to fix a problem or improve conditions in your community or elsewhere. (57%)
- Talking about current events or things you have heard about in the news with your family and/or friends. (48%)
- Serving on committees of community groups or organizations. (47%)

The civic activities with the smallest increases after participating in the citizens academy were:

- Taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration. (6%)
- Running for office. (7%)

The findings indicate that citizens academies have a greater impact on community activities such as volunteering or serving on committees and a much smaller impact on political activities such as running for elected office or taking a stand about a political issue.

Comparing these results with the North Carolina Civic Health Index shows that citizens academy participants are reporting increases in the civic activities in which North Carolinians are currently lagging behind. For example, only 38% of North Carolina residents 18 and older report talking about politics with friends and family at least a few times a week (North Carolina Civic Health Index, 2010, 6). After attending the citizens academy, participants reported a 48% increase in discussing current events or things they have heard about in the news with your family and friends.

It is important to remember that only a small subset of all citizens academy participants responded to the survey. It is possible that only those with above average increases in civic engagement responded to the survey so the percentages that will have an increase in any of the civic engagement indicators is likely smaller in the overall population of citizens academy participants. On the other hand, these changes in civic engagement should not be minimized. The 7% of alumni that indicated an increase in running for office following the citizens academy represents nine new candidates that are more informed about the functions of their local government as a result of their participation in the citizens academy.

On the other hand, five participants commented in the survey that they felt that the citizens academy was a deterrent to their civic engagement or opinion of government. They reported becoming, “more aware of the fraud and abuse these elected officials perform and get away with it” and “disenchanted with local government” when the “‘talk’ doesn’t match the ‘walk.’” One participant felt that, “that the curriculum did not have the right focus to be able to attract people to participate further in the community” and another wished other topics, including the public school system were addressed.

Finally, there was no statistically significant³ correlation between the change in the reported level of engagement before and after the citizens academy and the participant’s race, age, length of time in the community, level of engagement prior to attending the citizens academy, the time since attending the program, or the specific program attended. This means that the citizens academies can have an impact on the civic engagement of all participants regardless of demographic.

³ Pearson Correlations were performed with none of the demographic factors related to the change in engagement significantly below the .3 confidence level.

Recommendations

The results of this survey show that citizens academies are overwhelmingly fulfilling their purpose of increasing the civic engagement of their participants. Any local government that is looking to educate and engage its citizens can use a citizens academy as one tool to do so. The following recommendations describe ways to best use citizens academies and citizens academy participants to best achieve these results.

1. Use citizens academy alumni as a tool to communicate with citizens.

Local government officials are very concerned about citizens who only learn about local current events through local news stations as local news tends to only report on local government when things are going wrong. If citizens academies can encourage residents to learn about current events from a variety of sources and talk about what they are learning, then the academies have the potential to break the cycle of civic apathy and low confidence in public institutions as well as promote more positive views of local government.

Two of the civic activities with the largest increases were citizens academy alumni “visiting local government websites, Facebook pages, or newsletters to stay informed” and “talking about current events or things you have heard about in the news with your family and/or friends.” This shows that alumni wish to continue to learn about the functions of local government and are sharing that information with their friends and neighbors. By keeping in touch with alumni they can become ambassadors for the local government and share information from the local government with all residents.

2. Recruit a diverse group of citizens to participate in citizens academies.

The North Carolina Civic Health Index characterizes the civically engaged in North Carolina as a small group of older, college-educated, mostly white residents and indicates a significant gap in the demographics of residents who are participating in North Carolina’s civil society with few young people, Hispanics, and African-Americans participating in groups or organizations (North Carolina Civic Health Index, 2010, 2). Survey data showed that increases in civic engagement apply to all participations as there was no correlation in the change in civic engagement with any of the demographic factors studied.

This shows that citizens academies can be used as a tool to increase the participation of populations that have less involvement. By making a special effort to recruit a diverse group of citizens academy participants, especially in demographics that are not normally represented in civic functions, local governments can work to educate all residents about the purpose of local government and encourage broad participation in government action. Citizens academies can be a training ground and bridge to higher levels of engagement for those who are less willing or able to participate.

3. Continue to research the impact of citizens academies.

While asking participants to rate their engagement after participating in the citizens academy shows impressive results, it is important to see if these results stand up to more rigorous testing. In this study respondents are self reporting their pre-citizens academy levels of engagement as well as post-citizens academy levels of engagement in the same survey. One method of further exploration on this topic would be to implement a pre-test before the citizens academy begins and then following up with participants at a specific interval following graduation.

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Appendix A

1. Select the citizen academy you attended. [Catawba County University, City of Asheville Citizens Academy, Durham City/County Neighborhood College, Gainesville 101, Kannapolis Citizens in Action (CIA), Town of Cary School of Government]

2. In which year did you attend the citizen academy?

3. How engaged were you in community affairs before attending this citizen academy? [Very Engaged, Somewhat Engaged, Not Very Engaged, Not At All Engaged]

4. Since attending the citizen academy has your participation in the following activities increased, decreased, or stayed about the same? [Increased, Not Changed, Decreased]

Participation with Local Government:

Contacting or visiting a public official to express your opinion.

Contacting or visiting a public official to ask for assistance.

Visiting local government websites, Facebook pages, or newsletters to stay informed.

Attending formal local government meetings (for example: City Council, County Board, School Board, or Planning and Zoning meetings).

Attending neighborhood meetings where community affairs are discussed.

Attending information sessions or open houses hosted by a local government.

Serving on local government volunteer board or committee.

Volunteering/Engagement:

Working with others in your community to fix a problem or improve conditions in your community or elsewhere.

Donating money, assets, or property to charitable or religious organizations

Serving on committees of community groups or organizations.

Becoming an officer of community groups or organizations.

Political Participation:

Voting in local elections.

Talking to people and trying to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates.

Wearing a campaign button, putting a sticker on your car, or placing a sign in front of your house.

Contributing money to a candidate, a political party or any organization that supports candidates.

Running for office.

Staying Informed:

Reading magazines like Newsweek, Time, or U.S. News and World Report, watching national news on television, listening to news on the radio, or reading news on the Internet.

Reading local newspapers or watching local news on television.

Talking about current events or things you have heard about in the news with your family and/or friends.

Advocating for a Position:

Contacting a newspaper or magazine, posting on a blog, or calling in to a radio or television talk show to express your opinions on a political issue.

Taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration.

Signing an e-mail or written petition about social or political issues.

5. How engaged are you in community affairs since attending the citizen academy? [Very Engaged, Somewhat Engaged, Not Very Engaged, Not At All Engaged]

6. In what other ways has your civic engagement changed since attending the citizen academy?

7. What is your age? [18-39, 40-64, or 65 or above]

8. How long have you lived in your community? [Less than two years, 2-5 years, 6-10 years, or More than 10 years]

9. What is your household income? [Under \$25,000, \$25,000-50,000, \$50,001-75,000, \$75,001-100,000, or Over \$100,001]

10. What is your race or ethnicity? [American Indian/Native American, Asian, Black/African American, Hispanic/Latino, White/Caucasian, Pacific Islander, and/or Other]

Appendix B

Catawba County University

Catawba County University will focus on different areas of County service to citizens, with an emphasis on explaining programs and services through real-life stories whenever possible, and on how the programs and services work in the southeast part of the county. Topics include an overview of the Sheriff's Office and Emergency Services, a tour of the Sherrills Ford Fire and Rescue Base, Public Health, Social Services, Library, Cooperative Extension, Technology, and the Public Information Office (Catawba County Government).

City of Asheville Citizens Academy

The academy gives citizens a behind-the-scenes familiarity with community services, the chance to meet and make connections with other civic-minded residents, and the knowledge and personal contacts to become effective leaders in their neighborhoods. Topics include: Introduction to municipal government, Planning, Police and Fire Protection, Street Services, Economic Development, and Water Resources (Urban News, 2008).

Durham City/County Neighborhood College

The Durham City-County Neighborhood College is a unique educational program offered by Durham City and County governments. It is a nine-week series of classes that will provide information on key City and County services. Participants will have a chance to meet and interact with City and County staff, and learn things about government that they've always wanted to know but didn't know whom to ask! Sessions include: Introduction to City and County Services, Neighborhoods – A Simple Definition of Community, Emergency Services, Safety, Development, Budget and Finance, Health and Human Services, Environment, and a Tour of Durham (Durham County Government).

Gainesville 101

Go behind the scenes at Gainesville's Police Department, Fire Rescue Department and Gainesville Regional Utilities. Learn the structure of city government at City Hall and more. You already live in the best city in America, now you can learn how it works, and make it even better! Sessions include: Governing the City, Connecting Our Community, It Starts in Parks, Protecting the Public, GRU: More than Energy, Building a Better Gainesville (City of Gainesville, FL).

Kannapolis Citizens in Action (CIA)

The program provides citizens with the opportunity to learn more about how their city government functions. Each session will spotlight a different City department where department heads will present information to the public on their inner workings. Sessions include: The Big Picture, Economic Development, Parks and Recreation, Planning, Police Department, Infrastructure, Show Me the Money, and Fire Department (City of Kannapolis, North Carolina).

Town of Cary School of Government

The Town of Cary School of Government provides the community with an opportunity to learn how municipal government functions, what services are provided, and how citizens can become involved. Students get a behind-the-scenes look at Town government structure, culture and decision-making. Sessions include: Introduction to Town Government, Community Planning – Planning for Quality of Life, The Development Process: Application of Community Planning to the Development Process, Budget and Finance – Making Sense with the Dollars, Municipal Services: Public Works, Utilities, and Public Safety (Town of Cary, North Carolina).

Appendix C

Participation Local Government

Contacting or visiting a public official to express your opinion.	43%
Contacting or visiting a public official to ask for assistance.	36%
Visiting local government websites, Facebook pages, or newsletters to stay informed.	67%
Attending formal local government meetings (for example: City Council, County Board, School Board, or Planning and Zoning meetings).	41%
Attending neighborhood meetings where community affairs are discussed.	39%
Attending information sessions or open houses hosted by a local government.	37%
Serving on local government volunteer board or committee.	36%

Volunteering/Engagement

Working with others in your community to fix a problem or improve conditions in your community or elsewhere.	57%
Donating money, assets, or property to charitable or religious organizations.	30%
Serving on committees of community groups or organizations.	47%
Becoming an officer of community groups or organizations.	40%

Political Participation

Voting in local elections.	22%
Talking to people and trying to show them why they should vote for or against one of the parties or candidates.	39%
Wearing a campaign button, putting a sticker on your car, or placing a sign in front of your house.	28%
Contributing money to a candidate, a political party or any organization that supports candidates.	22%
Running for office.	7%

Staying Informed

Reading magazines like Newsweek, Time, or U.S. News and World Report, watching national news on television, listening to news on the radio, or reading news on the Internet.	22%
Reading local newspapers or watching local news on television.	29%
Talking about current events or things you have heard about in the news with your family and/or friends.	48%

Advocating for a Position

Contacting a newspaper or magazine, posting on a blog, or calling in to a radio or television talk show to express your opinions on a political issue.	21%
Taking part in a protest, march, or demonstration.	6%
Signing an e-mail or written petition about social or political issues.	32%