

Making Your Sessions Engaging and Fun

*From the North Carolina City & County Management Association
Adapted by the UNC School of Government*

Selecting the Program Coordinator

The person selected to coordinate a citizens academy in larger communities is often the public information director or a communications specialist. Smaller communities may not have the same depth in their staffing, so the selection of a staff member to take on this responsibility should be based on the individual's skills, rather than job title. The coordinator needs to be a “people” person who enjoys contact with the public, is extremely well organized, and, if not readily accessible during the day, is conscientious about responding promptly to phone calls and e-mails. The person also must have the confidence of the board and administrative staff and have a comfortable working relationship with department heads.

In most cases, the coordinator has a key role in mapping out the overall program, such as helping department heads to narrow the topics to be covered and brainstorming hands-on activities for the participants. In addition, this person usually acts as facilitator for each session: introducing the speakers, serving as time-keeper for presentations and breaks, and moderating the question-and-answer periods.

Icebreakers

If you've done a great job at recruiting, you will have a diverse group of citizens taking part in your program. Some will be quite comfortable in social situations while others may be slower to participate. Icebreakers are quick exercises that relax the group and help to put everyone on an even footing. It's easy to ask each person to introduce themselves and share some basic personal information, but even this simple activity can be stressful for introverts.

Ideas for Engaging Activities

Most programs spend a good portion of each session in information exchange, relying on verbal presentations or presentations supplemented by PowerPoint slides. This technique may be the best way to cover a lot of territory, but it's important not to spend the entire time in such a format.

The possibilities for interactive activities are limitless. Presenters should be encouraged to be creative. Here are some ideas:

- *Short brainteasers or quizzes covering interesting facts and figures about a department*

Use this approach to open a presentation or as the format for the entire presentation (i.e., answering each question and elaborating on related aspects of the service provided). The presenter may award a token prize to the participant who does best at answering each question or the overall quiz.

- *A quick tour of a department or facility*

Equipment and materials can help explain your staff's job more clearly than anything you can say. You might consider a viewing of the planning or inspections department's rolls of plans, the row of North Carolina General Statutes in the attorney's office, or the bank of electronic equipment at each station in an emergency communications center. A related idea is a behind-the-scenes tour of a public facility such as a stadium or civic center.

- *A demonstration of department equipment*

Some communities show participants their public works equipment in action, allowing division heads or lead operators to explain what they're doing. Another program puts participants on the line of a recycling facility so they can see, firsthand, how the process works.

- *Informal interaction with department employees*

The best example of this approach is perhaps participants enjoying a real fire station meal with a crew of firefighters.

- *A group exercise related to the department's work*

Two common examples are a budget-balancing assignment and a planning activity about a proposed development. Both exercises help make the point that issues confronting staff and elected officials are rarely simple: many situations force a choice between competing priorities (i.e., park improvements vs. more library materials, more shopping options for citizens vs. more traffic for nearby neighborhoods, etc.).