Citizen Academies: Promoting Civic Education, Civic Engagement, and Social Capital

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Extensive attention has recently been devoted to Americans' low level of political knowledge, lack of civic engagement, and declining levels of social capital. These trends have caused concern among scholars who see the American public falling far short of democratic ideals. This concern has spurred interest in various civic education programs including internships, collaborative research projects, community service, and experiential learning activities which might help reverse the decline in civic engagement. One such program that has been adopted by municipalities and a few counties is a "citizen academy," a program designed to promote civic knowledge about local government, encourage civic engagement, and build closer relations between the governed and those that govern. This exploratory research employs an experimental pre-test / post-test design to assess the effectiveness of a "citizen academy" program in promoting civic education, while also evaluating the program against the "best practices" described in the civic engagement literature. The results show Citizen Academies to be well suited for bridging diverse subgroups and effective in promoting civic engagement.

Introduction

The Marist Institute for Public Opinion (2010) recently released the results of a poll indicating that 26% of United States residents could not identify the country from which the United States declared independence. The results were even more alarming when restricted to young people aged 18 to 29: a full 40% of the respondents either indicated they were "unsure" of the answer or incorrectly identified the country. Among the incorrect responses were China, Japan, and Mexico.

The poll—released two days prior to Independence Day 2010—received much publicity, but its findings are similar to those uncovered by scores of academic studies over the years (e.g., Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; Astin et al., 1997; Niemie and Junn 1998; Dudley and Gitelson 2003). Although scholars have devoted far less attention to Americans' knowledge about local government, the work that has been done suggests that their knowledge of

local government is even lower than their knowledge of national government (e.g., Carter and Teten 2002, 456; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996, 78). Citizens of the United States, according to a considerable body of evidence, are characterized by low levels of civic education and engagement.

These findings, elaborated on below, point to the need for effective programs that promote both civic education and engagement. Accordingly, this exploratory research highlights the potential effectiveness of "citizen academy" type programs undertaken by municipal and (to a lesser extent) county governments to promote civic education, civic engagement, and social capital.[1] This work closes by discussing "best practices" and offering suggestions for replicating such programs across the country.

Literature

Democratic theorists have long recognized the importance of an educated and engaged citizenry to the proper functioning of a democratic regime. In *On Liberty* (1956), John Stuart Mill argued that citizens should be actively engaged in their government, even if they are less capable than elected officials. It is, according to Mill, "desirable….as a means to their own mental education—a mode of strengthening their active faculties, exercising their judgment, and giving them a familiar knowledge of the subjects with which they are thus left to deal." This engagement, Mill noted, was of particular recommendation for "free and popular and local municipal institutions" (133–134).

This spirit was ably taken up in the 20th century by John Dewey, who took a broad view of the concept of citizenship as "all the relationships of all sorts that are involved in membership in a community" (quoted in Farr 2004, 14). Charles Merriam was perhaps more to the point: "Civic education is the basis of a democratic system" (Merriam 1934, xi). In fact, Merriam particularized on the importance of educating citizens on "emerging problems" of government, including "metropolitan areas" and "public administration" (xiii). Excluding such topics from civic education, Merriam

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[1] There is no inventory detailing the number of citizen academy type programs currently offered. According to staff at the Texas Municipal League, the number of cities currently offering such a program is fewer than ten, possibly fewer than five. Only one county in Texas is offering such a program (the program described in this research), although two counties in Florida offer similar programs. According to staff at both the Arkansas Municipal League and the Arkansas Association of Counties, no such programs are offered in Arkansas.

notes, is "to omit the whole foundation upon which the superstructure rests" (xiii).

Malone and Julian (2005) summarized their own review of the normative literature, noting, "[t]he mantra from Jean Jacques Rousseau to Thomas Jefferson from Gabriel Almond and Sidney Verba to Benjamin Barber, has been that active participation facilitates procedural democracy, and thereby leads to a more vibrant substantive democracy" (771).

Unfortunately, even early empirical studies of the state of civic knowledge and engagement offered mostly (or wholly) discouraging results. After reviewing survey results, Hyman and Sheatsley (1947) put it baldly when they identified a "Hard Core of Chronic Know Nothings" (412) within the American public, a finding that subsequent studies have done little to contradict. Converse (1975), for example, called Americans' levels of political information "astonishingly low" (79; see, also, Campbell et al. 1960). In fact, Americans' lack of knowledge has, at times, proved so "astonishing" that pollsters have created a "cottage industry, with one researcher after another trying to find a more absurd example of what Americans do not know about politics and government" (Niemi and Junn 1998, 5).

No doubt this cottage industry partially motivated Delli Carpini and Keeter (1996) to admonish their colleagues to "guard against overgeneralizations that caricature what is a fairly complex pattern of knowledge and ignorance" (49). Of course, shortly after issuing their admonition, they simplified things by contrasting the number of Americans in the 1950s who could identify the Secretary of State with those who could identify who said "Hi yo Silver, away" (102, 74; see also Pew 2007). Ultimately, they concluded that "there is a consensus that most citizens are politically uninformed," a conclusion reiterated by Delli Carpini in a more recent review of sixty years of literature (2009, 22, 24–25).

At least minimal information is necessary even when voters use heuristic shortcuts in their decision-making process (see Lodge, McGraw, and Stroh 1989; Lodge and Taber 2000), but most democratic scholars find higher levels of political knowledge desirable. Apart from leading to improved decision making, greater political knowledge results in a greater sense of efficacy (Campbell, Gurin, and Miller 1954; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), an acceptance of broad democratic norms (Stouffer 1954; Sullivan, Piereson, and Marcus 1982; McClosky and Zaller 1984; Sniderman et al. 1989; Marcus, Sullivan, Theiss-Morse, and Wood 1995; Nie et al. 1996; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996), and increased rates of political participation (Junn 1991; Verba,

Schlozman, and Brady 1995; Delli Carpini and Keeter 1996; for an international comparison including the United States, see Milner 2002).

By encouraging support of democratic norms and diverse participatory acts, political knowledge is also intertwined with the concept of social capital (Milner 2002; Levine 2007; Dellin Carpini 2009), although the precise causal relationship between the two variables is uncertain (Levine 2007, 47–48). What is clear is that social capital is related to concepts such as education (Furstenberg and Hughes 1995; Rahn and Transue 1998; La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998; Uslaner 1998; Putnam 2000; Nie and Hillygus 2001; Putnam 2001; Milner 2002; Levine 2007), political participation (La Due Lake and Huckfeldt 1998), social and governmental trust (Putnam 1995; Rahn and Transue 1998; Uslaner 1998); and more efficient governments (Putnam 1993; Knack 2002; Goldfinger and Ferguson 2009).

As greater scholarly attention has been given to Americans' woeful store of political knowledge and (apparently) declining social capital, there has been a corresponding increase in the study of the effects of civic education in and out of the classroom. Contrary to some early works on socialization (e.g., Langton and Jennings 1968), more recent work suggests strongly that simply taking additional civics courses increases civic knowledge, both in high school (Niemi and Junn 1998; Nie and Hillygus 2001) and in college (Hillygus 2005).

More difficult to assess are programs that take place outside of the regular school curriculum. These programs focus on diverse academic subjects, cut across high school, college, and the community, and take on forms such as internships, community service, experiential learning and various hybrids, making testing and generalizations difficult. Moreover, some of the programs are voluntary, others are required, and Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman (2000) even include "mandatory voluntarism" as a program type (48).

Nevertheless, a considerable body of work suggests that such projects can be effective in promoting civic knowledge, civic engagement, and perhaps even building social capital (Niemi and Junn 1998; Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman 2000; Levine 2007, especially ch. 7). A review of research on previously implemented and ongoing programs by secondary schools or institutions of higher-education suggests that the most effective programs:

- Relate directly to political or governmental processes (Ehrlich 1999; Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman 2000; Malone and Julian 2005; Rogers 2011),

- Promote active learning, with discussions of the program both prior to and following implementation, interactive exercises, and simulations (Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman 2000; Ball 2005; Malone and Julian 2005; English 2011),

- Offer sufficient contact time for learning and value acquisition (Niemi, Hepburn and Chapman 2000; Ball 2005; Levine 2007, especially chs. 7–9), and

- Incorporate lessons of leadership and professionalism (Malone and Julian), and

- For college students, the programs should be "true collaborations among students, professors, and community members" (Levine 2007, 175; Howard and Nitta 2011).

Interestingly, Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman (2000) also report that programs *arranged* by high schools are more effective than programs *mandated* by high schools (53).

For programs targeting community participants (as opposed to students), previous research has emphasized practical considerations such as moderation in enrollment size and program scope (Cole 1975) and the importance of "bridging" diverse groups (Putnam 2001, 86). To facilitate implementation of a civic education program, these "best practices" should be practical and user friendly, but they should also be informed by a theoretical framework. Not surprisingly, these "best practices" are broadly consistent with the most widely accepted framework for understanding civic participation: the civic voluntarism model proposed by Verba, Schlozman, and Brady (1995). In this model, participation is seen as a function of three variables (1) individual interest, (2) recruitment into political circles, and (3) the resources and skills necessary to participate effectively in the political world.

As we will show, the civic education program described in this research was implemented in a manner consistent with the literature's best practices, while also supporting the civic voluntarism model of political participation.

Development and Implementation of a Citizens Academy Program:

In the spring of 2007, the Director of Community Services for a Texas municipality assigned an intern from the local university to conduct a feasibility study for an annual "Citizens Academy." Although these programs are referred to by different names across the country, they are broadly designed to promote transparency in local government, build connections between citizens and municipal employees, and to educate the public on the basic responsibilities of local government.

After consulting with coordinators of such programs across the state, the student intern created a program template that followed a list of "best practices" from a public administrator's point of view: (1) limit the participants to small to medium sized groups (typically 20–35), (2) allocate sufficient time to cover local government's basic operations, while ensuring that the time commitment does not impede recruitment efforts (typically 5–10 sessions, weekly or monthly), (3) get buy-in from city staff and department heads who will be leading most of the sessions, and (4) incorporate survey feedback after each session to improve the program.

After assessing the program's feasibility, the student intern was hired as a part-time employee and charged with implementing the City's first-ever academy—named "City U."[2] In the spring of 2008, the five-week program was offered free to local residents, who attended weekly sessions addressing the municipality's major departments and responsibilities: city management, public works, public safety, community services, administrative services, finance, public utilities, and city council. The sessions were led by city staff in charge of these operations. With more than 15 hours of classroom contact hours, the program offered residents copious information, while also providing true experiential learning: participants toured the wastewater plant, attended a city council meeting, and visited several of the city's 23 municipal parks. In its inaugural season, the program was a moderate success, drawing 10–15 residents, suffering only low levels of participant absenteeism, and obtaining solid buy-in from staff.

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[2] The development of this program serves as a condensed best-practice model. The internship program (which I supervised on the university side) was the product of a newly-formed city-university partnership, and this program provided the student with a hands-on learning experience, which grew into a part-time, paid position that helped the student develop project management, budgeting, and marketing skills. Moreover, the internship provided the student with an education in local government, as well as numerous community contacts. Shortly after graduating, the student was hired by the city as a full-time employee. She currently works in a Director's position for a different local government.

The program was repeated the following year. Without consciously planning for it, that year's City U program served as an informal pilot program. With staff having experience running the program, refinements were made and greater university involvement was welcomed.

Although fewer participants enrolled in the program (n=8), the program was enhanced by the incorporation of student involvement and the administration of diagnostic tests before and after the program. Especially important was the inclusion of the diagnostic tests, which not only assured city staff of the program's effectiveness, but also allowed for an academic exploration of the program through an experimental framework.

Over the next year, the city was plagued by budget issues and high rates of staff turnover. The program coordinator left for another city; her supervisor, the Director of Community Services, took a job with the university; other staff moved on.

Rather than fold the program, new and broader partnerships were formed. The County Judge and the Commissioners Court agreed to offer the program at the county level; the city's former Director of Community Services (who originally conceived of the idea) agreed to assist with the program's coordination; and a campus organization well known locally for its community-service activities offered not only to enroll in the course, but also to assist with its implementation.

The format of the program was maintained, although the experience with City U allowed for enhancements in County U, which was held in the fall of 2009. Sessions were somewhat shorter (twelve and a half hours of cumulative in-class contact) and the content, of course, was altered to reflect county responsibilities and county officials, with the County Judge, County Commissioners, Tax-Assessor Collector, Sheriff, Treasurer, County Clerk, Emergency Services Coordinator, District Attorney, and fire fighters participating. Interactive programs such as tours of governmental facilities, testing of equipment, and question-and-answer sessions were carried over to the new program, and the name was altered to "County U."

A few additional features were added. After presentations by county officials, the participants changed venues for dinner. The dinner venues included historic homes, a local arts center, a non-profit facility, a university building, and the local storm shelter. Exploring these venues proved popular, and the lengthier sit-down dinners facilitated relationship building among the participants and between the participants and elected officials.

This latter aspect was especially beneficial to students, who were able to enjoy in-depth conversations about public administration, electoral politics, or simply the news of the day.

The set up offered greater flexibility, a larger population base, additional volunteer assistance, and the added venues exposed participants to more diverse aspects of the community. With 22 participants drawn from the community and university, the format also allowed for greater methodological leverage. The ages of the participants ranged from 18 to 80, 9 of the original 22 participants were students, and the participants were almost evenly split along gender lines, with 10 males and 12 females. This diversity hints at the potential for such programs to promote bridging social capital, which Putnam describes as "harder to build" but "especially valuable" for a "democratic society" (2001, 86).

As with the City U program, County U also proved successful, with high rates of attendance, positive feedback from participants and presenters, and strong gains in knowledge and self-reported social connectedness among the participants.

Data and Methodology

The diagnostic surveys created by city and county staff were limited by the politically sensitive nature of surveying local residents about their backgrounds and their attitudes of local officials. Moreover, the survey instruments were also limited by the staff's objectives, which were primarily to assess program efficacy and ensure that participants enjoyed the program. The latter objective was satisfied largely through oral feedback and brief post-session surveys that tapped the respondents' opinions about the quality of the food, the seating, and other such items of little interest academically. The program's efficacy, on the other hand, was measured by items tapping knowledge of local government, and additional items that varied between the city and county programs.

The pre-test surveys were administered by staff just after introductions were made in the first session. The post-test surveys were administered by staff at the end of the final session. It would have been ideal to add a third wave to the experiment to determine how much knowledge was retained by the participants, but the difficulty of assembling the group restricted us to before-and-after data points.

Otherwise, the experimental design is rather tight. Although there was no control group, city and county government typically operate in a low-information environment, an assumption borne out by the low scores on the pre-test. It's unlikely that any movement from pre to post test is the result of external factors.

Of the factors that threaten the internal validity of such a design (Babbie 1998, ch. 9), the "testing effect" is the largest threat to either of the designs implemented for City/County U. The same test was administered at both time points, and the results may reflect an exaggerated improvement as a result of the subjects seeing the questions twice. Of course, this is perhaps preferable to the "instrumentation effect" that can plague results when the items are switched from pre to post test—particularly when it is difficult to find questions of comparable difficulty.

Moreover, the "testing effect" was likely attenuated in several ways. First, the pre-test surveys were relatively short, ranging between eight and nine representative items. The brevity of the surveys and the fact that the participants did not know they would be tested again likely mitigated potential priming threats. Second, the magnitude of the information provided over the five sessions was likely sufficient to overwhelm the extra attention they may have given to the first-session survey. As noted previously, the participants were exposed to 15 classroom contact hours for the city program and twelve and a half hours for the county program, and both programs generated more than 200 pages of background material provided to the participants. Furthermore, some of these experiences were intense—a tour of the county jail (including being closed in a cell) and a joyride through the community on a fire truck—experiences which were also likely to overshadow the original survey. Finally, the surveys were administered four weeks apart, a long time for subjects to remember a few survey items, especially in the midst of a high-information program.

Rather than exaggerating the effects of participants' learning, we suspect that the limited surveys actually under represent the full magnitude of the program's effect. Lacking in-depth measures of the participants' efficacy, governmental trust, or the richness of their interactions with city/county officials, it is unlikely that the surveys fully capture the participants' experiences. When possible, we will supplement the available quantitative data with qualitative reports in hopes that both types of data might hint at the potential effects of such programs.

Findings

In the previous section, it was noted that the pre and post-test surveys were skeletal; this is particularly true for the data from the city survey in 2008. The survey included seven items tapping participants' knowledge of their municipal government including items asking (1) the number of members on city council, (2) the population of the municipality, (3) the titles of two of the city's four charter officers, (4) the number of city staff, (5) the city's budget, (6) the numbers of parks in the community, and (7) what the initials GIS stood for. An eighth item asked program participants how "responsive" they believed "city government was to the needs of its citizens."

The results comport with what we know about Americans' levels of civic knowledge. On the pre-test, the mean number of correct answers was 3.29, with no one answering more than five questions correctly. The item tapping participants' knowledge of the city's population proved easiest, with six of the seven participants answering correctly. The population, incidentally, is posted on road signs marking the city limits. More difficult was the GIS item, which no one answered correctly, and the Charter Officer item, which six of the seven participants missed.

Most of the participants, however, did have faith in the responsiveness of city government, even on the pretest. Using a scale that ranged from "Very Responsive" to "Not Responsive at all," participants, on average, rated their city government as "Responsive," the fourth-highest point on the five-point scale.

As expected, the program had substantial effects on both the participants' knowledge and attitudes about the responsiveness of city staff. As presented in Table 1, citizens' levels of knowledge increased, on average, by 2.29 correct answers. Using a paired-t test, the finding is statistically significant at the .01 level.[3]

This change reflects an almost 70% increase in knowledge about local government, a substantively important shift upward. If even half of this

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[3] It is possible, of course, that the change scores resulting from the paired t test are not a subset of a normally distributed population. To accommodate this possibility, I have also run a Wilcoxon Signed Ranks Test (see Gravetter and Wallnau 2007). For the analysis on civic knowledge, the z score is -2.26 and a p value of .024. For the measure on responsiveness, the Z is -1.89, with a p value of .059.

increase can be extrapolated to the entirety of the material to which the participants were exposed, the program had impressive effects indeed.

Table 1. Effects of City U Program on Civic Knowledge and Perceptions of Responsiveness of City Government

	Mean, Pre	Mean, Post	Change (se)	T
Knowledge Sum	3.29	5.57	2.29 (.57)	4.04***
Responsiveness	3.86	4.57	.71 (.29)	2.5**

N=7
***indicates change is significant at the .01 level
** indicates change is significant at the .05 level

The results also reveal that participants' perceptions of local government responsiveness increased by almost 20%, an increase that is statistically significant at the .05 level. Given the extremely small sample size and the attenuated variation on pretest scores, this is an unusually strong increase, one that is suggestive of the potential impact such programs can have.[4]

Although minor, also suggestive was the strong attendance and high retention rate of the program. Out of nine residents that signed up, seven completed the program, and attendance averaged 84% over the five sessions—a rate that would be impressive in a college classroom, where students pay for and receive credit for the class.

Perhaps even more important, however, was the increased community presence of the participants following the program. Although no formal tracking mechanisms were put in place to quantify the post-program civic activities of the participants, both the program and the community are sufficiently small to allow for informal tracking. Of the seven participants who finished the program, one ran for (and won) a City Council seat; another applied for the City Secretary position (and was hired); another was appointed to the Board of Directors for a youth-oriented non-profit organization; and one of the two students that participated graduated and was accepted to a top-tier MPA program specializing in local government.

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[4] The City U program was initiated following one of the city's biannual surveys which showed generally high scores across the board. One of the weaker showings, however, was in the area of openness. The City U program, then, was a means of opening up government, while also a demonstration of the responsiveness of city staff. Hence, staff chose to ask about the concept of responsiveness because it best captured the spirit of the program. This concept also proves important in Putnam's work on Italy (1993), where he found dramatic differences in governmental responsiveness by region (73).

With these findings in mind, the County U program was formatted similar to that of City U. The pre-test survey included nine items of knowledge about county government including multiple-choice items on (1) the duties of the County Clerk, (2) the population of the county, (3) the number of members on the Commissioners Court, (4) the identity of the First Assistant District Attorney, (5) the length of the District Attorney's term, and the (6) ability to identify an unelected position from a list of county officials. Additional fill-in-the-blank items asked participants to identify (7) the inmate capacity in the county jail, (8) the number of fire fighters in the Fire Department, and (9) the county's budget.

As with City U, the pretests indicated an extremely low level of knowledge about county government. None of the 22 participants answered more than two-thirds of the questions correctly, and more than half of the respondents correctly answered three or fewer of the items. The mean number of correct answers on the pretest was 3.47, an accuracy rate of less than 40%.

These scores changed dramatically, however, following the County U program, as presented in Table 2, below. The scores almost doubled from the pretest to the posttest, jumping to 6.82 following the program. Using a paired-t test to gauge statistical significance, the change was significant at the .01 level.[5]

Table 2. Effects of County U Program on Civic Knowledge

	Mean, Pre	**Mean, Post**	**Change (se)**	**T**
Knowledge Sum	3.47	6.82	3.35 (.40)	8.35***

N=17
***indicates change is significant at the .01 level

The posttest also included three additional items tapping participants' feelings about the County U experience. The first two additional items asked participants to rank, on a five-point scale, their level of agreement with the following statements: "I feel more knowledgeable about the operation of county government following the County U program" and "I feel more connected with my county officials following the County U program." A final item asked respondents to indicate on a four-point scale how "rewarding" the County U program was for them.

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[5] Using the Wilcoxon Signed Ranks t test, the Z is -3.55, with a p value of .000 (see, also, endnote 3).

The results, as presented in Table 3, suggest that at the very least, the participants find the program effective and personally rewarding.

Table 3. Perceptions about County U Experience

Item	Mean (sd) / n
Feel More Knowledgeable (five-point scale)	4.95 (.23) / n=19
Feel More Connected (five-point scale)	4.75 (.44) / n=20
Rewarding (four-point scale)	3.95 (.23) / n=19

Moreover, these items suggest that the program works to increase civic knowledge and social capital.

For the coordinators of the program, the program's efficacy in expanding networks and building relationships was especially apparent. In comments following the final session, for example, 70% of the participants indicated that "meeting officials" or "interacting with the people" were the highlights of the program. Moreover, it was obvious to the program coordinators that participants were able to develop relationships across racial, gender, and life-cycle lines. Such relationships, which forge "bridging social capital," should be a key component of future research on such programs.

Also of interest were differences in political knowledge between males and females. This "gender gap," with women trailing men in political knowledge (but leading them in nonpolitical volunteer rates) has appeared in previous studies (Niemi and Junn 1998, 104–9; Niemi, Hepburn, Chapman 2000; Pew 2007). We found similar results in this study, as demonstrated in Table 4, although the small sample size and the lack of control variables makes generalizations treacherous.

Table 4. Political Knowledge Rates by Gender

Gender (n)	Pre-Test Knowledge	Post-Test Knowledge	Change	Feel More Knowledgeable
Males (8)	3.88	7.1	+3.23	4.9
Females (12)	2.93	6.1	+3.17	5

As the table shows, women trailed men in political knowledge on both the pretest and posttest, with both groups feeling that they became more knowledgeable as a result of the program.

The breakdown between students and local residents is also worth noting. While differences between the residents and the students in terms of political knowledge is to be expected, perhaps more intriguing are potential differences between the students actively involved in implementing the program and those that were recruited through university flyers and other communication methods.

The students that assisted with the implementation of the County U program had been heavily involved in past community service projects, and we expect that their pretest knowledge scores will surpass the students who enrolled as participants and perhaps even surpass the knowledge levels of the local residents. The results are presented in Table 5.

Table 5. Knowledge Levels among Local Residents, Student Organizers, and Student Participants

Group (n)	Mean Knowledge, Pre	Mean Knowledge, Post	Mean Change
Local Residents (9)	3.22	7.33	+4.11
Student Organizers (4)	4.25	7.5	+3.25
Student Participants (4)	3.25	5.00	+ 1.75

Interestingly, the students actually scored higher than local residents on the pre-test. Subsequently, however, the local residents showed the greatest improvement, followed by the student organizers, with the student participants, as expected, trailing. Although again plagued by small sample sizes, the findings perhaps reflect differences in motivation and interest that distinguish students who implement a program and those that enroll in the program.

Finally, as with the City U program, the qualitative data strongly supported the quantitative results described above. In addition to overwhelmingly positive comments about the program, the participants appeared to become more involved in the community. Among the local residents, one participant began regularly volunteering at a local museum—a site that served as a dinner venue during the program. Another participant, the director of a local non-profit, approached the county the following year with a plan to contract services for after-school activities for teenagers. The proposal was accepted. Two other participants led a successful effort to elect a challenger to the position of County Commissioner the following year, and another participant was appointed to an Emergency Services District Board.

Student engagement following the program was even more striking. One student was hired as the assistant to the City Manager, while another was hired by the city library. Three of the students applied for and were selected as interns by local government agencies. One of the students applied to and was accepted at a top-tier MPA program, and another was selected as a board member for the local arts center — again, a site that served as a dinner venue during the program.

Taken together, these findings suggest that, statistically speaking, city or county led Citizen Academies have the potential to increase civic knowledge to a considerable degree, while perhaps improving perceptions of government responsiveness, and providing rewarding opportunities for civic engagement. The program is also provides clues to how such programs might be implemented and managed to maximize gains in political knowledge and civic engagement. It is to these topics that we turn in the next section.

Conclusions and Discussion

In creating our version of a citizen academy, we tried to ensure that our design and recruitment was consistent with the civic voluntarism model, which suggests that civic participation results from: (1) individual interest, (2) recruitment into political circles, and (3) the resources and skills necessary to participate effectively in the political world.

Students were recruited through marketing and direct communication with promising students, but no extra credit or regular credit was offered — thereby ensuring that students had at least a threshold of interest and motivation. Local residents were also self selected, responding to marketing through various media — again ensuring a modicum of interest and motivation. Once enrolled, the students and local residents were placed in the midst of political circles, interacting with elected officials and governmental leaders who, in turn, helped participants identify resources and develop skills that enable citizens to participate effectively in the political world.

Of course, given the self-selected nature of the sample, it's possible that the participants would have sought information about their local government, pursued face-to-face meetings with their local leaders, arranged tours of their city/county offices, or otherwise increased their knowledge of local government. At the very least, however, these programs facilitated such efforts and did so, as the data indicate, in an efficacious manner.

Despite the small samples used in the statistical analyses, the results presented here offer clear evidence of the potential of such programs to increase political literacy and civic engagement—findings that support the civic voluntarism model. Both the City U and the County U programs resulted in statistically significant and substantively impressive gains in political knowledge, gains that cut across both student and resident subgroups.

Even without extensive data about other political attitudes and behavior, it's important to emphasize the importance of increasing political knowledge. Knowledge increases efficacy, improves decision making, and facilitates greater participation. As Delli Carpini (2009) recently noted, "In short, factual knowledge is the anchor that tethers attitudes to each other, to behavioral intentions, and to the empirical world" (28).

Moreover, this research offers supplementary data suggesting that citizen academy type programs help participants develop positive feelings about government responsiveness (at least at the municipal level), increase their stock of social capital (as measured by their feelings of connectedness following the County U program), and associate civic engagement with positive, rewarding experiences. Anecdotally, there is evidence that participation led to continued and perhaps expanded civic engagement— through volunteering, campaigning, employment, or board service—for both students and local residents.

These programs also provide a model for other civic education projects in both design and management. First, following the experiences of the City U program, County U was consciously structured in such a manner as to ensure a collaborative exercise among university coordinators, county officials, local residents, and college students—a structure suggested by Levine (2007).

This program extends that structure, however, in giving advanced students leadership roles in the program's implementation. Although the results were limited by sample size issues, the data suggest that these students' ownership in the program may have paid off with increased political knowledge relative to other students.

More broadly, this design allowed for various subgroups to interact with other subgroups in dynamic ways. The student organizers, for example, served as models to the student participants, while county officials served as

models to both groups of students and to local residents. The result was diverse subgroups interacting constructively, helping create "bridging social capital" which, in turn, engenders trust and cooperation.

Participants' direct and extended interaction with county officials also provided lessons in leadership and professionalism, another of the suggested "best practices." These interactions appeared to persist beyond the duration of the program. The student organizers, for example, later partnered with county officials on a community event featuring county officials, and the County Judge served as a reference for one of the students who, following graduation, applied to a large law firm.

In their review of civic engagement projects for high-school students, Niemi, Hepburn, and Chapman (2000) report that the largest gains in civic engagement appear to be generated by programs with the largest time commitment. While extensive time commitments (up to 300 hours) might be appropriate for projects such as internships, large time commitments are less appropriate for programs that do not pay or offer course credit—especially when targeting college students.[6]

Moreover, our statistical results and our personal observations suggest that time commitments of 12–15 hours can meaningfully increase political knowledge while also accommodating time for personalized interactions and relationship building. In short, it appears that with regard to service education projects, time is relative—relative to the project, to the target audience, and to the resources available for the program's implementation.

A benefit of a program such as City U or County U is that the material is obviously related directly to political and governmental processes. This helps not only with marketing the program, but it has obvious benefits in ensuring that students and local residents see the relevance of the political and governmental world to their lives.

The County U program probably offered a clearer view of the close connection between politics and administration at the local level, because the vast majority of the top county administrators are also elected officials. But even the City U program incorporated the City Council into the program and discussed the roles of council and staff in a council-manager system.

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[6] Some of the municipal-led Citizen Academies in Texas do have lengthier sessions (often four hours) or more sessions (up to ten), but these programs do not target college students.

The City / County U programs are also ripe for interactive learning exercises, simulations, and other experiential learning activities. A hike in the park, for example, can be used to help citizens understand the responsibilities of the park crew, but also to spur discussion on environmental issues and land-use management.

In short, a citizen academy of the City U or County U variety can be developed in a manner consistent with current best practices, while also being easily modified to suit local circumstances.

Of course, there are challenges in implementing such a program. The budget for these types of programs can range from $500 to $5,000 and, although that is small relative to an entire city or county budget, these types of programs are often the first to be cut in lean economic times.[7]

Perhaps the biggest challenge is getting buy in from municipal or county leaders. The program needs a champion within the organization. For a city, the ideal champion is the City Manager or an Assistant City Manager—someone in a position to convey to all the staff that the program is a priority. For counties, which are characterized by a plural executive structure, broader cooperation is needed, although the County Judge and County Commissioners are probably the best place to begin.

Even if buy in is achieved, difficulties are posed by those department heads ill-suited for public presentation. A flexible curriculum, however, can overcome these difficulties by replacing formal presentations with small-group breakouts or interactive exercises.

Broadly speaking, problems are also posed by what Robert Merton called the Matthew Effect, taken from Matthew 25: 29: "For to all those who have, more will be given, and they will have an abundance; but from those who have nothing, even what they have will be taken away." In short, it is a problem of the rich getting richer while the poor get poorer. For cities already rich in social capital, building a coalition to sponsor a citizen academy might not be a problem. For those communities where civic engagement programs are most needed, however, it might be difficult to build a coalition and gain the broad buy in that is necessary for a citizen academy to be successful.

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[7] The budget for our program is less than $1,000. The cost of notebooks, name tags, and other supplies is less than $200. Meals for the participants cost between $150 and $200 per week, although we were able to have two of our meals sponsored.

A similar problem is posed when considering student involvement in a citizen academy. While the County U program described in this research had both student organizers and student participants, both groups were self-selected and (probably) more motivated than the average student. For the program manager—and for the academic researcher—it's not clear what kind of outcomes will result when students are recruited through academic assignments or extra credit.

For the researcher, this might seem to be a simple matter of offering extra credit to students for attending an existing program. Most programs, however, have selection criteria for participation and some of the programs have explicit caps on "student spots."

Even if an existing program did agree to accommodate large numbers of extra credit students, the dynamics of participant interaction will likely be affected by the large number of students—especially students who are not motivated to attend the program by an interest in the subject matter. This not only has ramifications for the program manager and enrolled local residents, but it will also affect the external validity of the results—the researcher's ability to generalize the results to any other existing program.

Another alternative is to bring the local officials into academic classrooms for presentations rather than attempting to integrate large numbers of students into an existing program. Although this precludes the immediate development of bridging social capital, it is ideal for initial research into the question of what effect a locally-oriented civic education classes can have on students' political knowledge and engagement.

This flexibility is one of the virtues of a local citizen academy type program. It can be offered in cities or counties both large and small, with or without a student focus, while still promoting civic education and engagement for those who do participate. Moreover, it is one of the few civic engagement programs to focus on local politics and local government, a largely ignored domain in the field of political literacy and political engagement. By offering a focus on the local level, these programs are not only promoting civic engagement, but they are also reincorporating what Charles Merriam referred to as the "whole foundation upon which the superstructure rests."

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