



Building civic infrastructure requires a multi-pronged approach. It involves placing greater emphasis on public or civic spaces. It involves creating meaningful opportunities for civic dialogue and learning to take place. It involves creating opportunities for public work. It involves investing in civic institutions and efforts to build a strong community culture. It certainly involves work across the public, private, and non-for-profit sectors.

One way local governments have been working to build civic infrastructure is through offering [citizens academies](#). These civic education programs, which for the most part are solely focused on learning about one's local government, can be a very effective way to increase civic knowledge, increase and improve civic engagement, and build relationships between citizens and local government staff, as well as between citizens who otherwise would not know each other. Local government staff that run these programs report second and third order impacts of these programs so that a small cohort of, say, 25 people, end up impacting many more. This occurs in a variety of ways, but perhaps one of the most interesting is when citizens academy "alumni" act as unofficial ambassadors of the city, with their families, neighbors, co-workers, fellow congregants, etc. Individuals come out of these programs excited about opportunities to get involved with local governance as well as their newly formed friendships with staff and other interested citizens from across their community, and they often share this excitement and positive experience with others.

This effect can be thought of as accumulating dividends toward civic infrastructure in much the same way as regular, small deposits in an investment account over time can accrue and compound into an unexpectedly large nest egg. To the diligent investor, the effect of compounding interest can seem like magic. Perhaps the same can be said for citizens academies. While the investment may seem small, usually 20-25 people a year, the long-term return to the community's civic infrastructure can be outsized. In Decatur, Georgia, a kickoff meeting for a community strategic planning event had many hundreds of people show up. One of the organizers observed that a good 75% of those attendance were graduates of their [Decatur 101](#) program.

Communities that host citizens academies should be intentional about using their programs to build civic infrastructure. Just as the decision to invest in mutual funds will yield dramatically different results over time than putting the money in a savings account, building programs with an intent to build civic infrastructure will likely have greater payoffs than merely running citizens through some PowerPoint presentations by department heads. Here are few practices that many of the top programs are doing to really get the most out of their investment in citizens academies:

- Emphasizing relationship building as much as content delivery. Activities that help participants interact with each other and local government staff make a difference. Even just having a meal together before each session can help a lot.
- Having participants work on some sort of project together. Leadership Harnett (in North Carolina) has each cohort select a pretty significant community improvement project to complete together, an experience that is often one of the highlights of the program each year.

- Explicitly providing avenues for continued and/or deeper engagement coming out of the program. Some programs make sure that opportunities to serve on community boards and committees occur at the end of the program.
- Keeping in touch with “alumni” through emails, listservs, Facebook groups and so on. Some programs even have follow-up programs that take a deeper dive on specific issues (as well as reconnect participants with each other and the staff that they got to know during the first go-round).
- Utilizing alumni to oversee and improve the program. Some programs have advisory boards made up of alumni that help craft the curriculum, activities, etc. as well as become champions for the program out in the community.

These are just a few examples of what some of the leading programs are doing to use citizens academics to build and enhance civic infrastructure. What other ways you’ve seen citizens academics help build civic infrastructure? What are other investments in civic infrastructure you’ve seen made by local governments, businesses, non-profits, civic groups, churches, and educational institutions?

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*A slightly modified version of this post can also be found at the [Community Economic Development in North Carolina](#) blog.*