

More Engagement Than We Give Credit For: The Case of Citizen Co-Producers

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There is a somewhat widespread notion that citizens by-and-large just aren't that engaged in community affairs, particularly local government affairs. I often hear local government observe that when they try to engage citizens they only see a small handful of people and that there is a "silent majority" that they rarely, if ever, see. But what if engagement is more widespread than we think? I'd like to suggest that perhaps that is the case, particularly when you stop to consider [co-production](#) as a form of deep community engagement with local government.

Co-production, sometimes also called [co-creation](#) or [co-delivery](#), describes—just as the term implies—times where public services are produced through the joint efforts of government and the public. Co-production is quite common. Professor John Clayton Thomas goes so far as to say "the work of government now entails producing services *with* the public more than delivering services *to* the public" ([Citizen, Customer, Partner](#), 2012, p. 85). Really? More public service involves

partnering with citizens than straight-up delivery to citizens? With so-called apathetic citizens?

Well, yes. Particularly at the local level I would argue. Think about the services you receive from your local government. Would a municipal recycling program even be possible without households sorting out their recyclables and taking them to the curb on designated days in a special bin? How many libraries do you know of that operate completely with paid employees? I've never seen one. Library volunteers are integral parts of our community libraries.

How about parks and recreation? As a volunteer coach for more than 10 years now I can assure you that youth sports programs would not be possible without the tireless efforts of many volunteer coaches, managers, coordinators, etc. The [City of Mebane](#) where I live boasts a terrific soccer club that is a partnership between the non-profit soccer association and the City's recreation and parks department. Fees are kept low because of hundreds of volunteers and the partnership of the City. The same is true for baseball, basketball, and other recreation programs that benefit many, many people in the community.

The point here is that while it is true that community engagement can appear low (sometimes) in terms of voter turnout or even turnouts at public meetings or other formal engagement efforts, that does not mean community members are not engaged with their community generally or local government(s) specifically. When people volunteer at the school, the library, the neighborhood watch group, the youth sports programs, et cetera, *they are co-producing public services with local governments*. They are partners in public service!

Do most citizen volunteers see it that way? Probably not. Maybe they should though. Maybe if they realized that what they were doing with their time was partnering with *their* local government to produce something of public value, they'd consider themselves more engaged and also recognize the manifold ways local governments *engage them* in public service, beyond asking them to come to a public meeting. And perhaps local governments could better recognize the contributions of citizen co-producers and even think about leveraging those avenues of engagement during times they are seeking to engage citizens about important community decisions. I would love to hear examples of this kind of leveraging of co-production for other kinds of engagement.