

Reflections on a four-year-old citizens academy program in Aspen, Colorado

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I rolled into Aspen, Colorado in May 2015, my Civic coupe packed to the ceiling with my personal belongings. When I stepped outside to breathe in my new home, the mountain air felt cool and refreshing.

My goal was to start a [citizens academy program](#) for the City of Aspen. Five bulleted pages detailed my duties.

Among the goals and activities for the Academy were: “acquainting participants with the programs

and problems of the community; stimulating their interest in community activities and encouraging their active participation; educate them about wide variety of community resources; help them connect with one another; and giving participants valuable personal leadership tools....”

Step one? Talk to everyone. From the moment I arrived, I began meeting with staff, advisory boards, and community members. You ever heard of a citizens academy? What do you think about offering a local government civics class for the community? What should we include? Will people be interested? What are your concerns? And for the deep thinkers: How could we make this program a true asset to the community and the organization?

Over the next several months, I dug into these questions with:

- 25 City department heads
- 20+ community organizations and organization leaders
- Three City [advisory boards and commissions](#)
- Residents, via community focus groups
- Many city government employees

Of these talks, a mere three people voiced caution about the program. Two concerns were of the nature that participants would come to argue. Imagine your community’s most cynical, critical, rip-into-your-dedicated-staff types. Now imagine they comprise the fifteen seats in your first attempt at a civic education course. Fair point.

The third concern was my favorite: **“Why would anyone even come to this?”**

As it turns out, these concerns were crucial for me to hear and use. I was determined to take them seriously. I prepared all that I could to make sure these little nightmares never arose.

In response, we were mindful of our language, our branding. We revised our marketing to attract people truly interested in learning. Our motto was not to Fight, Blame, and Disrupt; rather, we invited people to **Learn, Connect, and Engage** with civic information and each other.

Scores of meetings, hundreds of ideas, and fifteen months later, the first Aspen Citizens Academy class began in September 2016. Our class of 17 consisted of a modest [Aspen-level of] [diversity](#), despite the relative randomness of the class selection process.

Participants included folks in their younger twenties to an octogenarian. Some were residents of a few months and others were decades-long and lifelong locals. Plenty had vast experience serving on boards and volunteering, while some had no civic engagement history whatsoever. The former were open-minded. The latter donned bright eyes and impassioned interest to dive into new information.

We offer the program annually. **Each class brought new learning opportunities** - surely for participants, but *even more so for me*, as program manager.

Each month, we seemed to tweak something to make a better experience. It wasn't until a senior leader (and my program co-creator) was out of town that I dared swap his beloved U-shape seating arrangement to small group tables. My goal was to encourage more discussion and connection among participants. Participants appreciated this more sociable arrangement. So much so that we followed suit at the next session, and smiled dumbly as he noticed the change and laughed off our discreet insistence.



Original classroom layout.



Class layout after social optimization.

Most nights, a colleague and I would stay an hour beyond each session to break down the room. We'd put away tables, chairs, and food, wash dishes, take out the trash, and then some. One day, high on a citizens academy-induced sense of community, I emailed a simple ask of participants: At the next session, could you each put away one chair before you leave?

The end of that next session was alarming, and heartwarming. "One chair" translated to every chair, every table, every food dish, every item of trash, and every presentation material lying around. Participants were busily working together, an energized microcosm dedicated to pitching

in.

Breakdown time went from 60 minutes to 5. **This group of people transformed my life.** Instead of getting home around 9:30pm after a lonely and ragged housekeeping exercise, I found myself happily anxious at the end of each session. While I was frantically finalizing administrative details on my laptop, participants were playfully pulling the seat out from under me, to dutifully store it in the closet before heading out.



Class visit to Harmony Park, a neighborhood park newly completed in late 2018.

As one could gather, people truly enjoy the Aspen Citizens Academy. I could dazzle a crowd with graphs of session survey responses of consistent satisfaction. Call me anytime, and I will brag on the growing number of alumni who are now citizen board members for the City and the County.

Of the three initial naysayers, I am proud that 2.5 of them now heartily believe in the program. Matter of fact, I'd love to boast about a graduate who helped shape the program in a focus group and is now a Council Member-elect. And I'd happily indulge you in the number and quality of word-of-mouth recommendations the program has received.

And while I would do these things still, I couldn't begin to take credit for these accomplishments. It is not the email reminders, logistical coordination, or handouts that make for a meaningful program. It is the interested participants, hungry for a good square meal of information about how their City functions. It is the passionate staff presenters that engage their audience by caring about their jobs and being willing to share. It is the residents' underlying devotion to understand and support their community. They care about their parks, their streets, their utilities, and their neighbors.

It is the caring, eager people that make these programs meaningful. In four years of managing a successful citizens academy program, I have learned that they are out there. Residents are ready to learn. They want to connect with each other and with us. They want to grow and engage deeply with their local governments. And as the bureaucrats, all we have to do is provide the opportunity.