

The Knowledge Now series features practical research on timely topics from the Colorado Municipal League.

## CITIZENS' ACADEMIES

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Citizens' academies are growing in popularity as municipalities look to expand citizen involvement in local government. Academies provide participants with an understanding of how their municipal government functions and the challenges of delivering quality, reliable services to the community.

### History and Introduction

Originating in the United Kingdom in 1977, municipal citizens' academies were created as a way to inform confused citizens about law enforcement. This model was closely followed in Orlando, Fla., in 1985, initiating the trend in the United States. Today, citizens' academies aim to encourage residents to get involved in local affairs. Many programs offer the opportunity to join alumni associations or apply for staff or volunteer positions within different departments upon graduation.

There are four main types of citizens' academies:

- general government academies,
- police academies,
- fire/rescue academies, and
- youth commissions

**General government academies** give citizens an overview of their local government and its operations. They work to improve engagement and help citizens gain a better understanding of their municipality, so that they have more access to resources that allow them to get involved in their community.

Centennial 101, for example, teaches 30 participants per session about the use of tax dollars, city planning,

infrastructure, public safety, and courts at weekly meetings. The program includes a graduation ceremony at a city council meeting and visits to the sheriff's office, fire department, and traffic operations center.

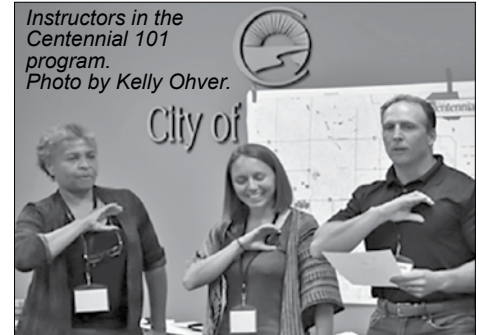
Parker Civic Academy, on the other hand, incorporates a different department into each class session to present a broad, yet informative overview of the community. Departments incorporated in these sessions range from the economic development and water sanitation departments to the parks and recreation and cultural departments.

**Police academies** aim to give participants insight into the tasks and issues officers and departments face, and work to create a stronger relationship between citizens and law enforcement. This collaborative approach to public safety allows residents to feel more comfortable and confident in their police department.

In Pueblo's five-week program, citizens spend every Tuesday and Thursday learning about patrol function, crime prevention, and community relations. Hands-on activities include SWAT and bomb demonstrations, a patrol ride-along, mock crime scenes, and a firearm simulator.

**Fire/rescue academies** focus mainly on providing information, improving relationships, and increasing understanding of major safety procedures. They also offer insight to fire department operations.

Boulder Fire Academy uses weekday evenings and an occasional Saturday to teach participants about specialty teams and wildland fire risk. Participants also explore CPR, fire



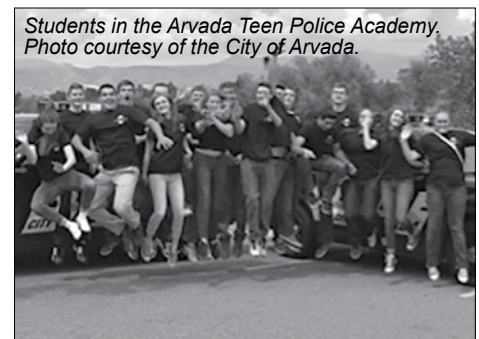
Instructors in the Centennial 101 program. Photo by Kelly Ohver.



Hands-on instruction in Charlotte, N.C. Photo by Maria Williams.



A participant in the Boulder Fire Academy. Photo by Kim Scott.



Students in the Arvada Teen Police Academy. Photo courtesy of the City of Arvada.

extinguishers, and 911 dispatches. They also include home safety inspections and marijuana retail store inspections.

**Youth commissions** often are designed specifically for teenagers, although there are a few camp-style commissions for younger children. They aim to improve understanding and relationships between youth and their communities, and work to foster interest in possible career paths and educate the community's youth on relevant safety issues.

The Arvada Teen Police Academy is a five-day academy held in the summer that teaches participants about SWAT team, building searches, crime scene investigations, and K-9 units. The high school students involved experience hands-on opportunities such as driving a patrol car and processing a mock crime scene.

The Colorado Municipal League surveyed seven cities in the state and two national cities with successful citizens' academies. The survey included questions on ways to make the program accessible, popular, and interesting, and how to overcome common challenges that may be faced when implementing a citizens' academy.

## Program Start-up

While some programs, such as the one in Medford, Ore., have been established for more than 20 years, some were initiated as recently as 2014 and have already been successful, showing consistent turnout. Though CML surveyed all four types of citizens' academies, all programs generally had themes of improving citizen understanding and community engagement. Common goals of these programs include:

- education,
- reduction of crime through familiarity and trust,
- connection to the community, and
- debunking myths about the government or public safety departments.

Although police academies are generally the most common form of citizens' academy, other forms of academies have been just as

successful. There are multiple examples of successful general government, fire/rescue, and youth citizens' academies all across Colorado. Centennial 101, for example, is a general academy and has an extensive waiting list after being in operation for only two years.

One of the biggest factors to account for when starting a citizens' academy program is funding. It can include compensation for instructor(s), promotional costs, and materials and curriculums. Generally, the programs are free to participants and funding is built into the municipality or department's budget. Outside sources can help support the budget. For example, the City of Aurora applied for grants, established partnerships, and asked for donations from local organizations as sponsors.

Promotion is another important aspect to consider when initiating a citizens' academy. All nine programs surveyed attributed successful promotion largely to social media. Many emphasized the importance of advertising across multiple social media outlets, web, and print platforms to reach a wide range of citizens. Alumni programs create a promotion network of information and enthusiastic graduates to help publicize the program after having experienced it first-hand. Arvada's alumni group serves as an important draw for the program. Most other academies included opportunities for graduates to volunteer with the program, apply for positions on local boards and councils, or run for positions on city council, which can serve as great incentives for participation.

## Participant Selection and Program Accessibility

It is important to consider how selective the program will be and what the application process will look like. Most applications among the academies surveyed by CML required passage of a background check, personal and contact information, and an explanation of the applicant's interest in the program. Youth academies often required references and responses to a few short essay questions. While most adult programs are open to everyone, preference is

typically given to local residents. Centennial also gives preference to local business owners for admittance. If the program experiences an excess of applicants, implementing a selection process becomes important. Aurora and Parker in Colorado, as well as Charlotte, N.C., and Medford, Ore., choose participants on first-come, first serve basis, while Centennial uses a random drawing and places those not selected on a waiting list. Lakewood and Pueblo use the qualities evident on applications to select participants. If there are sufficient funds, resources, and interest, it can be helpful to add a second session, as Centennial, Lakewood, and Arvada have done.

Proper scheduling is essential for participation. Programs surveyed ranged in duration from two to 11 weeks; however, the majority of programs are seven to eight weeks long. Shorter programs are helpful for teen or youth academies, which often operate like a short summer camp. Although shorter programs can be more convenient for adult participants, they may require more hours per week or a compacted curriculum. Longer programs allow for more extensive sessions, but may be difficult for participants to commit to.

Every adult program surveyed offered classes on one or two weekday evenings per week, starting at 6 or 7 p.m. and concluding at 9 p.m. The City of Lakewood has classes offered on both Tuesdays and Thursdays to provide convenience for participants, and Aurora's Teen Police Academy offers a choice of a morning or afternoon session for participants.

## Topics and Curriculum

One of the biggest challenges many academies faced was creating a curriculum that was interesting, relevant, and transparent. Topics proven to spark community interest include gangs, drug policy, DUIs, the uses of tax dollars, how municipal government works, and public safety.

Topics should aim to educate participants on how departments function. Coordinating with department members to determine topics and how they will be taught creates a more authentic curriculum.

To present a realistic reflection of the police department, instructors at the Pueblo Citizens' Police Academy shared actual experiences as examples and avoided downplaying difficult situations. Their goal was to debunk myths and illustrate the humanity and hard work among police officers. It is also helpful to take into account attendee interest and get topic ideas from participants (past or current) themselves.

Beyond lectures and discussions, most programs offered hands-on

experiences. Police car ride-alongs, visits with K-9 units, tutorials on how to use tools such as guns and fire hoses, and tours of fire trucks and stations make great promotional points and help participants understand more about the department.

### Overcoming Challenges and Techniques for Success

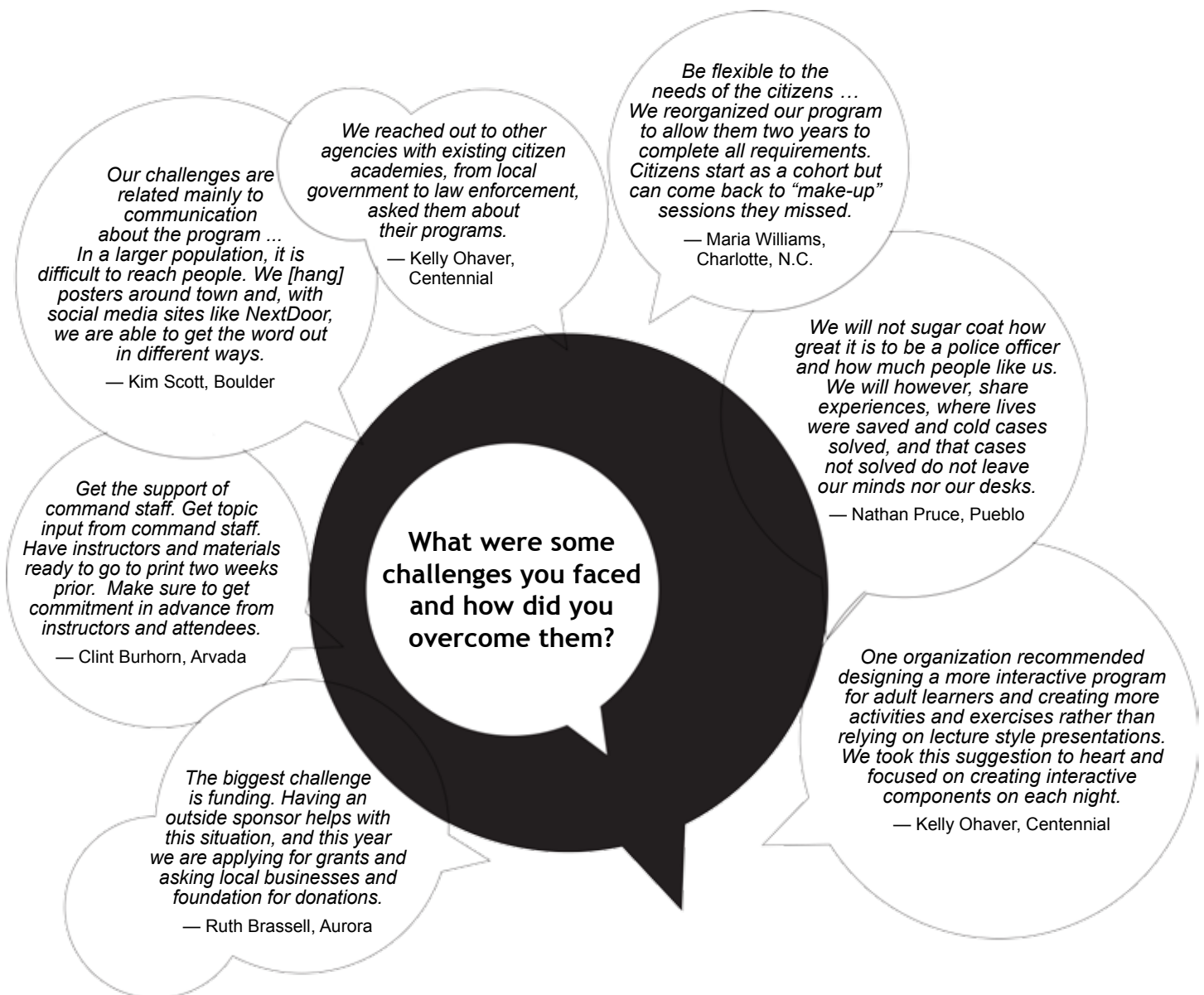
Some of the most difficult challenges mentioned by academies include:

- staffing and funding,
- promotion and advertising,

- accessibility and attendee consistency, and
- cultivating engagement and trust.

Every program will encounter challenges in becoming effective and popular citizens' academy, but all of the programs surveyed found ways to prepare for and overcome these difficulties.

When approached with careful planning and dedication, citizens' academies can be used as a means to promote community engagement and knowledge.





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