

Town of Lexington Citizens' Academy

Problem Assessment

In the last 15 years, Lexington, Massachusetts has experienced a surge in diversity among its residents and has developed strategies to address the needs of the incoming population. Today, more than 20% of all residents have Asian heritage, and 23% of all public school students report a first language other than English spoken at home. The Town was eager to involve these residents in Town government; Lexington thrives on being a participatory municipality where over 70 Committees and Boards and Town Meeting guide Town staff in understanding the residents' priorities. Also during this time it was becoming more apparent that there was heavy overlap in residents serving on the various Boards and Committees. The Town wanted to get a broader rate of participation and hear a variety of opinions which more accurately reflected the community. The Town wanted to integrate the new residents into the "Lexington way" of governing, as well as reach out to existing residents who were not involved with Town affairs and encourage their participation on Committees and Boards. The Citizens' Academy, a ten-week program led by department heads and facilitated by the ICMA Management Fellow, was the response to achieving this goal of inclusive, participatory governing.

Program Implementation

Created in 2009, the Citizens' Academy was designed to expose residents to the various Town departments so they could gain a better understanding of how municipal government works. Through presentations, discussions, and visits to Town departments, participants have the opportunity to hear from Department Managers and learn about the operations of Town programs and services. It is intended as a dialogue among the elected officials, Town staff and residents. Participants discover new opportunities for public involvement and the role they can play in Town government. The Citizens' Academy is an annual project in its eighth year, held every Tuesday evening in the fall, and enrolling approximately 30 residents.

Initially, the Citizens' Academy was advertised through an insert in the tax bill, the local newspaper, the Farmer's Market, and the Town's website. The Town conducted direct outreach within the two largest organizations of residents of Chinese and Indian descent: the Chinese Americans of Lexington (CAAL) and the Indian Americans of Lexington (IAL). In recent years, the program has been so successful that many residents hear about the Academy through word of mouth.

To improve the program each year, participants complete a survey to provide their feedback on each of the sessions, the overall experience and structure, as well as general feedback for improvements. This feedback is then applied in planning the following year's sessions to best meet the needs and interests of the residents. For example, the 2015 Citizens' Academy graduates recommended supplemental workshops to go into more detail on several of the topics covered. Next year, the Town is looking into providing a workshop on the permitting process led by the Building Commissioner and an Introduction to Government and Civics workshop led by a Selectwoman.

The Citizens' Academy also serves as an orientation for the ICMA Management Fellow who acts as the Program Coordinator each year. The Fellow gets the chance to work with the department heads, learn about the intricacies of New England municipal government, and acts in a leadership role.

Costs

Costs associated with the program are minimal. They include staff time, refreshments, binders and printed materials, and graduation t-shirts: this totals approximately \$1,200 each year.

Measurable Outcomes

The Citizens' Academy has been successful in recruiting residents to Boards and Committees, educating residents about Town government, and reaching diverse populations. Of all participants of the Citizens' Academy since 2009, 15% of participants, or 24 people, joined a Board or Committee or ran

for Town Meeting after participating in the program. On average, 72% of respondents to the evaluation survey from the last three years reported that their level of involvement with the Town will “increase” after participating in the Citizens’ Academy. Participants from ethnically and racially diverse backgrounds (including Asian backgrounds) have been making up about 24% of participants in the last three years of the Citizens’ Academy. The Town is seeing more diverse participation in local government and is a better place because of it.

Lessons Learned

Organizers in recent years have learned the importance of asking for feedback from their graduating class and department heads to enhance the curriculum for the following year. This year a robust discussion occurred among participants about how to improve the 2016 Citizens’ Academy. Several ideas came up which organizers are looking into implementing in the coming years including the expansion of social media outreach and getting high school students more involved.

Another lesson learned was how complicated municipal work is in the eyes of residents. Explaining the ins and outs of Massachusetts municipal government is no easy feat and residents were frequently perplexed over the issues and details of the governmental process. Municipal staff manages challenging problems every day and naturally residents may not appreciate all the nuance and complexity of public policy. For example, Lexington is faced with growing school enrollment and is in the process of expanding schools in Town at an approximate cost of \$140 million. Residents gained a new appreciation for the challenge to the Town this issue poses. The schools need to be expanded but residents do not like having taxes raised. Town staff must work diligently to find the right solution for residents. This new appreciation participants have for municipal work helps them develop more empathy for local government and a better appreciation of the job at hand.

Conclusion

Many residents are interested in learning about Lexington's local government and opportunities to get involved, but may not know where to start. The Citizens' Academy has been an effective way to connect with an increasingly diverse population and help educate the public on the meaning of public service in municipal government.