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Hosting a Civic Leadership Academy on Your Campus

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Abstract

This article explains how to design and host a Civic Leadership Academy on a college campus. The author provides detailed advice regarding topics, speakers, and central talking points, while also guiding readers through a series of questions they should ask—and answer—before hosting their own leadership academy. The academy covers a wide range of topics appropriate for campus and off-campus audiences, ranging from novices to experienced civic activists. Topics include: critical thinking, fake news, contacting elected officials, the policymaking process, protesting, and community problem solving. The model can be adopted in whole or in part, and the author provides added value by incorporating hyperlinks to key resources, including actual footage of all six academy sessions described. This brief article provides everything one needs to know about hosting a successful Civic Leadership Academy on their campus.

Hosting a Civic Leadership Academy on Your Campus

Getting Started

One of the greatest joys of being a professor is the frequent opportunity to use scholarly expertise and teaching skills to engage both students and the broader community in learning experiences that foster civic knowledge, identity, and engagement. As noted in [Teaching Civic Engagement](#), published by the American Political Science Association, civic education takes place both inside and outside the classroom. Political science professors and other faculty are well positioned to facilitate civic learning. This brief article highlights a Civic Leadership Academy that I designed on my campus, Indiana University (IU) South Bend, to bring people together to gain valuable information and advice around promoting civic leadership. Many people have asked me how they can replicate this academy on their own campuses, and I offer this piece as a useful resource. This article summarizes the topics covered in IU South Bend's academy and provides a checklist of questions to answer before launching your own academy. Readers who wish to learn more about IU South Bend's spring 2017 Civic Leadership Academy can access a video recording of each event in the campus's [Civic Leadership Academy Video Archives](#).

Based on community requests, student interests, and media headlines, the [American Democracy Project at IU South Bend](#) determined that we would highlight the following topics during our spring 2018 Civic Leadership Academy:

- "Facts Matter: A Guide to Critical Thinking"
- "Real News vs. Fake News: Know the Difference"
- "Contacting Elected Officials: Influencing Decision Makers"
- "The Legislative Process: Influencing Local, State, and National Policy Debates"
- "Protest 101: Making Your Voice Heard"
- "Solving Community Problems: A Step-by-Step Guide"

These topics were the subject of numerous questions and discussions at past events and in courses, and they fit well with the model of civic leadership that former U.S. Senator Bob Graham laid out in [America, The Owner's Manual](#), a step-by-step approach to community problem solving that I teach in my classes.

We then determined the agenda of each academy session, including specific topics to cover. Once again, we drew upon questions that people were asking us, [Graham's book](#), and our observations about the critical skills needed in today's political world. We designed each session as a moderated panel discussion, followed by audience Q&A.

Session 1

The first session, "[Facts Matter: A Guide to Critical Thinking](#)," featured professors of psychology, philosophy, rhetoric, and communication studies. Topics related to:

- the difference between facts and opinions;
- the difference between claims and arguments;
- the importance of the scientific method;
- common rhetorical devices designed to mislead;
- how to recognize and avoid logical fallacies;
- the problems of confirmation bias and tribalism;
- key resources for fact checking political claims; and,
- how to talk to someone who disagrees with you.

Key lessons from this session included the difference between an unsupported assumption, opinion, or belief, and a clearly stated, testable, falsifiable claim. Panelists stressed the need to support claims with evidence in order to build a compelling argument. The speakers provided examples of common logical fallacies, including the straw man fallacy, appeal to ignorance, ad hominem attacks, and appeals to emotion—including fear. Panelists also provided examples of the red herring argument, questionable cause, hasty conclusion, and inconsistency. Finally, panelists warned against over-reliance on conventional wisdom or common practice as a way to justify beliefs or practices. They noted that everyone can fall prey to confirmation bias, a tendency to be less critical of arguments that match our own biases and beliefs. The speakers also stressed the importance of seeking multiple perspectives and sources of information, and avoiding an "us versus them" mentality. Additionally, the presenters stressed the need to fact check stories and memes before sharing them, to reach out to those with opposing views in ways that foster a search for common values, and to explore critically the root causes of significant differences of opinion and worldview.

Session 2

The second session, "[Real News vs. Fake News: Know the Difference](#)," featured a political columnist, multi-media journalist, editor, and public relations expert (the last two of whom teach in IU South Bend's mass communications program). Topics covered in this session included:

- what is and is not fake news;
- the danger of fake news;
- the political deployment of the "fake news" label;
- the role of the media in U.S. politics;
- how to spot fake news sites and stories;

- how to verify facts before spreading fake news;
- how to call out fake news and keep your friends; and,
- the difference between news and satire.

Key lessons from this session included the difference between a reputable media outlet or journalist that misstates a fact but then prints a retraction, versus those who share information they know to be false for personal, professional, economic, or political gain. Panelists noted that some politicians deploy the “fake news” label to silence or discredit critical stories or media outlets.

Panelists provided a variety of techniques that can be used to spot fake news sites and stories, stressing the technique advocated by Mike Caulfield, a Washington State University professor who heads the [American Democracy Project](#)’s national [Digital Polarization \(DigiPo\) Initiative](#). Caulfield advocates “[four moves](#)” when fact checking information. First, check for previous work; see if someone else (e.g., [Politifact](#), [Snopes](#), [factcheck.org](#), or even [Wikipedia](#)) has already fact checked the claim or provided a synthesis of research. Second, go “upstream” to the original source to understand the trustworthiness of the information. Third, “read laterally”; find out what other people say about the source (e.g., outlet, author, publisher, etc.). The truth is in the network. Fourth, circle back. When getting lost or hitting dead ends, start over using the information you have gained from the original search. A follow-up search will involve better search terms and new approaches that may prove fruitful.

The audience was particularly interested in how to point out fake news to friends and colleagues who have shared it without losing professional relationships or friendships. Panelists struggled to answer this question but suggested that kindly pointing to a fact-check site often helps with well-intentioned posters. A message that does not attack the intelligence of the poster can be helpful (e.g., “This author is a compelling writer, and I bet many people were fooled by his strongly worded article. Alas, this story is not actually true”—with a link to a reputable fact check). All panelists noted the fundamental importance of doing what we can to stop the spread of fake news, including being more diligent about not sharing such stories ourselves. Of course, our presenters also reminded attendees that some news is meant to be satire. The outraged comments found on any social media sharing of a story from [The Onion](#) or [The Borowitz Report](#) suggest that many people are not aware of this fact.

Session 3

The third session, “[Contacting Elected Officials: Influencing Decision Makers](#),” featured politicians with experience on the city council and county council, as mayor, and in the state legislature, as well as the district representative for our local congressperson. Topics included:

- how to identify your elected officials;
- how to identify decision makers;
- strategies for making your voice heard;
- dealing with social anxiety;
- phone calls, letters, emails, and petitions;
- lobbying and personal meetings;

- creative ways to share your message; and,
- what to do when you cannot get through.

Key takeaway lessons from this session included the usefulness of official government websites and local civic organizations (e.g., the League of Women Voters) in identifying elected officials; the fact that officials differ in their preferred communication mode; and the importance of doing your homework (about the official and the meeting topic) and being respectful when talking with public officials. Knowing an elected official's favorite breakfast spot, regularly scheduled flight to Washington, DC, favorite restaurants, or workout routine is also a way to get much-needed face time with officials who are not always receptive to meeting with constituents. Such approaches must be used very sparingly (i.e., one or two contacts per legislative season), the contact should be brief and cordial (whenever possible), and, of course, it should not evolve into a stalker-like scenario characterized by an invasion of privacy. An even better approach is to chat with officials during scheduled appointments or at public events where the officials are present in their official capacity.

Session 4

The fourth session, "[The Legislative Process: Influencing Local, State, and National Policy Debates](#)," featured a former state senator and current members of the city council and county council. I also provided information about the legislative process in the U.S. Congress. We discussed:

- how a bill becomes a law—U.S. Congress;
- how a bill becomes a law—Indiana General Assembly;
- how and when you can influence legislation;
- how to track legislation;
- how to read a bill for yourself;
- how to access public meetings, hearings, and floor debates;
- how to stay up-to-date on bills that matter to you;
- how to participate in city and county policy debates; and,
- how to write your own laws.

Some of the major takeaway lessons from this session included the fact that anybody can suggest an idea for new legislation but that a very small percentage of bills ever become laws, especially at the national level. We also discussed key differences between the state and national legislative processes, including the fact that Indiana's legislature is a part-time legislature, meeting only 30 to 61 days per year. Attendees learned the importance of the legislative calendar (requiring people to submit ideas for new state laws by Thanksgiving for consideration in January–April and limiting the introduction of bills requiring appropriations to every other year). Bills often take several years to advance through the Indiana General Assembly, while the city council can act very quickly, moving from idea to ordinance in a couple of weeks. Attendees also learned about how citizen opportunities to speak to a legislative body differ depending on the level of government. For example, while citizens cannot speak on the floor of the state legislature, they can speak, with time limits but no invitation, at South Bend City Council meetings. Finally,

participants learned how to track bills and watch the livestream (and recorded) sessions of local, state, and national legislatures online.

Session 5

The fifth session, “[Protest 101: Making Your Voice Heard](#),” was added in the wake of the Black Lives Matter movement and the Women’s March as community members expressed a frustration with elected officials and a sense that their voices were not being heard. This session featured a history professor and a women’s and gender studies professor who both taught about and participated in political protests, along with activists representing local organizations that had recently hosted highly visible protests and rallies in our community. Topics of discussion included:

- when to organize a protest;
- how to organize a protest;
- how to attract participants;
- how to craft a message;
- how to gain media coverage;
- how to protest safely and legally;
- how to stay out of jail (*if that is your objective*);
- the principles of non-violence; and,
- how to make a difference if you cannot attend.

This far-reaching discussion included several key lessons, including the importance of recognizing the strengths and limitations of protest as a strategy. First, attendees were reminded that protest should not be the first tactic considered, especially if a group has not first tried talking directly with decision makers. Protesting in front of an elected official’s office to demand action before ever sitting down with the official to make the request is a surefire way to create an enemy rather than an ally or champion for a cause. Second, speakers reminded attendees that while a well-organized protest is good at generating media coverage and public attention, there must be a plan in place to capitalize on any public attention and legislative pressure resulting from the protest. Activists must supplement protests with long-term organizing and lobbying strategies to ensure new policies and solutions.

Building relationships with local media, using social media for direct advertising, working through existing networks to organize and spread the word, and crafting a message that is clear, concise, consistent, compelling, and connected to people’s real-world concerns were important tips shared during this session. Speakers also stressed the tradition of nonviolent civil disobedience going back to Mahatma Gandhi and Martin Luther King, Jr., and the importance of acting peacefully, knowing your legal rights, and accepting the consequences of your actions. Other lessons included: how to train protestors, how to control the message of a protest, how to securing proper permits and obey local laws, how to create a “human megaphone” to communicate with a large group, and how to create a human shield around the most vulnerable members of the group. Panelists also listed reasons a person may be unable to participate despite their belief in a cause and provided a list of ways such people can help make the protest a

success, including: advertising the event, conducting research on the issue, giving rides to the protest, making signs for others to carry, and more.

Session 6

The sixth and final session provided a model for community problem solving based on Bob Graham's book. This model can be used to address problems both big and small. The session, entitled "[Solving Community Problems: A Step-by-Step Guide to Civic Leadership](#)," featured four local community organizers representing different types of organizations and approaches to civic leadership. Topics included:

- defining the problem;
- identifying the decision maker;
- gauging public support;
- persuading the decision maker;
- building coalitions;
- using the calendar;
- engaging the media;
- funding your initiative; and,
- preserving victory and learning from defeat.

In this session, the moderator drew upon lessons from the previous five sessions while also allowing panelists to provide additional examples of successful approaches to community problem solving. Coalition building was a significant focus of this session, as was the central message that victory can slip away easily if a group fails to track a new policy through the implementation and enforcement phases. Another key takeaway was that it is critical to thank volunteers for their work. Whether or not a citizen initiative is successful, a simple "thank you" can make the difference between creating a citizen organizer who continues to be politically engaged and alienating a person who feels that their work was fruitless or unappreciated.

This series attracted a [large community audience](#), local [media promotions](#), and many favorable [media stories](#). It also expanded our network and led to new partnerships and additional series and events the following semester. We ended the series with a [networking reception](#). People who attended at least four events also received a Civic Leadership Academy Certificate. We were amazed by how many people attended every session because they wanted to earn that (non-credit, ADP-issued) certificate of participation. We snapped wonderful [pictures](#) of people [smiling from ear to ear](#) as they proudly held their certificates.

For us, this academy was a great success. The students who attended enjoyed it. They also enjoyed staffing the events and even moderating the session on protests. The community members who attended stayed connected with us via our email list and Facebook, and many attended the Civic Leadership Academy on "Asset-Based Community Development" as well as our candidate debate series the following fall. The IU South Bend campus recommends highly that other campuses consider hosting similar academies at locations across the United States (and beyond).

Before hosting your own Civic Leadership Academy, you should consider the following questions:

- Why do you want to host a Civic Leadership Academy?
- Who is your audience?
- How will you find out what they want to learn?
- What are some topics you think you might cover?
- What speakers would do a good job covering those topics?
- What media outlets might cover your events?
- Who might be good co-sponsors for your academy?
- Will you provide a certificate? Why or why not?
- Will you provide credit of some kind? Required, enrichment, career and technical education (CTE) credits?

In the case of IU South Bend, we hosted our first academy in response to citizen questions and requests for information, and to our own desire to act as a steward of place by providing useful civic education programming during a non-election year. Our audience was the campus and the community at large. The topics were based on attendee suggestions from past event surveys, emails and phone calls we received, our own observations about critical skills needed for a functioning representative democracy, and our director's background teaching a civic leadership course. [Our director](#) had long-term relationships with numerous public officials after more than 15 years of moderating local, state, and national political debates and six years of hosting a weekly public affairs [television program](#). For these same reasons, she had also developed close relationships with local reporters and news directors. We did not have a co-sponsor for our first academy but did identify a co-sponsor for our second academy (through discussions at the post-academy networking reception). We provided a [certificate of participation](#) but did not provide academic or CTE credit of any kind.

Before agreeing to host a Civic Leadership Academy, it is also important to consider who will:

- plan the series;
- plan each session;
- handle logistics (e.g., room, A/V, programs, food, furniture, etc.);
- invite the speakers;
- write the press releases;
- talk to the media;
- answer questions from the speakers and from the public;
- promote the series on campus;
- promote the series on social media and community calendars; and,
- moderate each event.

In our case, the director of the American Democracy Project, a faculty member with a one-course release, worked overtime on this project with the help of the campus event planner and a student intern. Students from the non-partisan Political Science Club helped host the sessions.

Once you have decided to move forward with the academy and determine who will do the work required, it is important to discuss how you will:

- assess the effectiveness of the academy;
- keep in touch with people after the event;
- learn from the experience; and,
- capitalize on the new connections and knowledge gained.

At IU South Bend, we use event surveys and academy completion rates to assess the effectiveness of the academy. We compiled an email list (using sign-in sheets and event surveys) to supplement our social media presence and provide a direct communication link to academy participants. We also used this participant list to track participation and to determine who would receive completion certificates. As noted earlier, we capitalized on new connections when working with academy participants to plan a follow-up academy on asset-based community development strategies.

Pandemic Adaptation

In the era of COVID-19, it is important to consider how a Civic Leadership Academy can be moved online while maintaining core curriculum and audience engagement. While IU South Bend's academy sessions were hosted on campus and at a local library to allow for live-audience Q&A, such academies could also be converted to webinars, giving moderators control of who can ask questions, who sees the questions, and which questions are posed to candidates. For example, the Q&A tab in Zoom allows participants to send questions to the host, co-host, and panelists (either with the attendee's name or anonymously, based on the settings approved by the host). The host can also determine whether attendees are able to view all questions or answered questions only. The "answered questions only" feature approximates our standard practice of collecting notecards at our live events in order to allow moderators to screen out personal attacks and questions that do not pertain to the event topic. Zoom conferencing also facilitates additional forms of attendee engagement. The host can allow attendees to "upvote" questions and/or comment on the questions, helping the moderator prioritize questions of greatest interest to attendees. The "raise hand" feature offers another way to involve attendees in Q&A. Enabling the "raise hand" features allows the host to "call on" specific people by announcing their name, unmuting their microphone, and asking them to unmute their own microphone, before allowing them to ask a question in their own voice. The host can decide whether or not to allow follow-up questions or to mute the questioner as soon as the question is asked. This feature has been popular during governors' daily media briefings featuring questions from reporters sheltering at home across their state. Zoom webinars can be recorded, shared, and posted online as part of an event archive, allowing people to participate even if they were unable to attend the original webinar.

Conclusion

This checklist of factors to consider, and the list of suggested topics for discussion, should prove useful when designing your own Civic Leadership Academy. We hope your series is as fruitful

as ours was. Such academies can help higher education fulfill its public purpose. As people working in higher education, one of our most important roles, if we choose to accept it, is educating for democracy. Hosting a Civic Leadership Academy is a wonderful way to teach beyond the campus. It allows us to meet a critical need in fostering the knowledge, skills, and motivation people need to make a meaningful difference in their communities—and the world.

Author



Elizabeth Bennion is a professor of political science and director of the American Democracy Project at Indiana University South Bend. She teaches American politics, with an emphasis on political behavior. Professor Bennion is the founding director of IUSB's American Democracy Project, president of the Indiana Debate Commission, and host of WNIT's live weekly television program *Politically Speaking*. In these capacities she moderates political discussions, public issue forums, and candidate debates for local, state, and national candidates. Professor Bennion has won numerous awards for her teaching and service, including local, state and national civic education awards. She has published widely in academic books, journals and newsletters, including the *Annals of the American Academy of Political & Social Science*, *eJournal of Public Affairs*, *Indiana Journal of Political Science*, *Journal of Public Affairs Research and Practice*, *Journal of Political Science Education*, *Political Behavior*, *Political Research Quarterly*, and *PS: Political Science & Politics*. Her teaching, research, and service promote civic education and engagement. Dr. Bennion is co-founder (with J. Cherie Strachan) of the Intercampus Consortium for SoTL Research and co-founder (with Richard Davis) of the Civic Engagement Section of the American Political Science Association. Her specialty is large, multi-campus surveys and field experiments designed to test the effectiveness of various interventions designed to increase students' civic and political engagement. Professor Bennion is currently working on a co-edited book on teaching civic engagement globally (a follow-up to her first two books: [*Teaching Civic Engagement: From Student to Active Citizen*](#) and [*Teaching Civic Engagement Across the Disciplines*](#)).