County Government Works:
An Initiative to Raise Awareness and Understanding of Counties

Key Elements for Establishing a Citizen/Leadership University

Pinellas Citizen University - Pinellas County, FL
Government Leadership University -- Hillsborough County, FL

Lori Hudson
Communications Director
Hillsborough County, FL
HudsonLE@HillsboroughCounty.ORG

- **What is the project that you developed?** In late 2001, we created an eight-week course for citizens to go behind the scenes and see how county government works, meet employees and ask questions (Pinellas Citizen University). Our focus was to provide new experiences with an interactive, hands-on curriculum – not a boring lecture series. Once each Thursday night, a group of 25 “students” would visit a different operational area and learn the challenges and rewards of each area.

- **Who is the target audience of the project (such as general public, students – elementary, middle school or high school, or other levels of government)?** For both Pinellas Citizen University (PCU) and Hillsborough’s Government Leadership University (GLU), the target audience is civic and community leaders, heads of homeowners associations, and neighborhood activists. Our goal is to inform leaders (even critics) and transform them into county advocates. We limited the class size to 25 so that the group was small enough to get individual questions answered and provide meaningful discussion.

- **What key steps were taken to accomplish the project?** First, we approached our county leadership (commissioners and administrator) to ensure we had full support to make PCU work at its best. This would require getting department heads to provide staffing after hours, develop meaningful presentations/experiences and opening up “the nuts and bolts” of their operations to public scrutiny. Departments were encouraged to be creative with their class time so that the citizens had a valuable experience. Locations were determined by the departments and course coordinators (myself and one other) based on central locale, ease of traveling to the site, and ease of parking. Risk Management had to be consulted to review our course plans to make sure we were limiting our liability with the types of activities that were developed. For example, a “forklift derby” was nixed. A special fund was created with the help of the Clerk’s Office in order to accept the $30 application fee and then expend the
monies for each student to receive a class polo shirt with embroidered logo, a PCU notebook, handouts, snacks, and finally a graduation ceremony and reception. Once our eight week course was set, we began to publicize the program with press releases, group emails out to civic leaders and associations. *The St. Petersburg Times* ran a large article on Sunday, December 30, 2001. Although the reporter’s tone was clearly sarcastic, it didn’t matter. By Wednesday, January 2, 2002, our fax machine had run over with people who had visited our county website, printed the PCU application and faxed it in. Our inaugural class was full, and we had a waiting list.

- PCU’s First Syllabus:
  - Week One: So, you wanna graduate from Citizen U?
    - Government 101
    - Hands-on Budget Exercise
  - Week Two: The Utility Package
    - Water Treatment Plant Tour
    - Water Conservation
    - Recycling/Waste-to-Energy
  - Week Three: Head out on the Highway
    - Road Construction/Engineering
    - Surveying
    - Street Lights
    - Sign Shop
    - Traffic Control Exercise
    - Mosquito Control
    - Big Truck Rodeo
  - Week Four: Come fly with me!
    - St. Petersburg/Clearwater Airport
    - Economic Development
    - Airco Golf Course
    - Tourism
  - Week Five: Cultivating Culture
    - Florida Botanical Garden
    - Parks Department
    - Heritage Village & Museum
  - Week Six: Justice Served
• Behind the Scenes in the Grand Jury Room
• Small group chat with Sheriff, State Attorney, Public Defender and Family Court Judge
• Extra Credit: Jail Tour

  o Week Seven: When Danger Threatens
    ▪ Emergency Operations Center/Hurricane Exercise
    ▪ 9-1-1/Dispatcher Test and Tour
    ▪ EMS tour of Ambulance

  o Week Eight: You're at the top of the Class!
    ▪ Televised Graduation at Pinellas 18 Studio
    ▪ Tour of Pinellas 18
    ▪ Graduation Ceremony

• Of these key steps, which were most important to its success? Most important was encouraging departments to avoid staid, boring speeches and to really allow interaction with citizens. Some areas really excelled at this, such as Public Works/Highway Dept. These proud employees were so open and genuine, and the activities were very hands-on, that they quickly became a favorite. Meanwhile, others were slower to tailor their courses.

• If you are aware of similar projects, what characteristics make this project stand out? Over the years, I have seen similar programs from many different jurisdictions. To my knowledge, two things make this project stand out. First, it was held on Thursday nights, 6 p.m. to 9 p.m., which made it easier for working people to attend. (county staffers flexed their schedules so as not to incur overtime.) Secondly, our program brought together a diverse group of individuals who created an “alumni” association and serve as ambassadors for the county. One particular individual in the first class was a regular at commission meetings for public comment and was known to criticize the county often. After attending and graduating PCU, he became an advocate and promoted the value of county services. Comments on the weekly survey sheets often were, “Now I know where my tax dollars go! Thanks for showing us all the county does for its citizens” and “I had no idea the county provided all of these services. Great work and great value.”

• What did the project cost to accomplish (including staff time)? Are there ongoing expenses? PCU was a revenue neutral project, in that the application fee covered the course materials, PCU polo shirt, Graduation reception items, etc. Since the course was at a different location each week, impacting that one operational area for one night, those 3-4 hours provided by staff were flexed out in their schedule. On the other hand, the communications team of two that led the course each week as
facilitators, gave up to 8 hours each week (1 was a salaried manager; 1 a classified employee). We promoted the program using the website, press releases, word of mouth, email groups and more – all without cost.

- **If others attempt to accomplish a similar project, what missteps would you advise them to avoid?** Make it interesting! After the first year, we changed economic development to animal services and volunteerism. After 9/11, most of the airport was off-limits for tours and the rest of the evening was mostly speeches. By going to Animal Services, we provided a tour, explained the county's dangerous dogs ordinance, and showed the humane way animals are treated by staff and volunteers. The volunteerism program provided an outlet for these leaders to get involved and plugged in to the county in a myriad of ways.

- **To determine the eventual success of a project, can you please recommend performance measures that would help assess the quality of the project's outcome?** Weekly survey sheets were critical to the program. After the first several years, we went back to alumni as a sort of “focus group” to make recommendations for keeping the program fresh and viable. Other performance measures we used: number of volunteer applications received; number of alumni participating in county events and meetings; and number of EMS and Sheriff's Office ride-alongs conducted.

- **Are you willing to help other counties take on similar projects by providing personal advice by telephone or email?** If so, how may you be contacted? Absolutely! I may be reached at (813) 307-8388 or cell (813) 335-7213 or by email at hudsonle@hillsboroughcounty.org

###