



Leaders at the Core of Better Communities

**2015 Local Government Excellence Awards Program
Program Excellence Awards Nomination Form**
(All programs nominated must have been fully operational for a minimum of 12 months, prior to January 31, 2015)

Deadline for Nominations Extended to March 30, 2015

Complete this form (sections 1 and 2) and submit with your descriptive narrative.

SECTION 1: Information About the Nominated Program

Program Excellence Award Category (*select only one*):

- Community Health and Safety
- Community Partnership
- Community Sustainability
- Strategic Leadership and Governance

Name of program being nominated: Citizens Academy

Jurisdiction(s) where program originated: City of Midland, Michigan

Jurisdiction population(s): 41,863

Please indicate the month and year in which the program you are nominating was fully implemented. (Note: All Program Excellence Award nominations must have been fully implemented for at least 12 months prior to January 31, 2015, to be eligible. The start date [on or before January 31, 2014] should not include the initial planning phase.)

Month: January Year: 2007

Name(s) and title(s) of individual(s) who should receive recognition for this award at the ICMA Annual Conference in Seattle, Washington, September 2015. (Each individual listed MUST be an ICMA member to be recognized.):

Name: Jon Lynch

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: City of Midland, Michigan

Name: _____

Title: _____ Jurisdiction: _____

Name: _____

Title: _____ Jurisdiction: _____

SECTION 2: Information About the Nominator/Primary Contact

Name of contact: Jon Lynch

Title: City Manager Jurisdiction: City of Midland,
Michigan

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2015 Local Government Excellence Awards Program

The Citizens Academy - City of Midland, Michigan

Program Description

One of the City of Midland's most successful citizen engagement programs is the Citizens Academy – an opportunity for citizens to get an up close and personal look at their city government.



Over its nine-year history, the annual program has graduated more than 200 “students” who’ve learned about all things city government, from aviation to zoning. Classroom presentations and tours give a detailed look at municipal operations; how outstanding City services are delivered cost-effectively and efficiently; how local government and various groups collaborate; and how citizens can get involved in the community by volunteering on City boards, commissions, and other programs.

Problem Assessment / Challenge / Need for Program

Midland, Michigan is a mid-sized, suburban community of nearly 42,000 residents that enjoys a highly participatory citizenry. This is primarily due to the fact that our community's two largest companies – The Dow Chemical Company and Dow Corning Corporation – employ highly educated, scientifically-oriented citizens who value information and their community.

With such a pool of citizens to draw from, the City has long reached out to residents for feedback on such topics as City service priorities and shrinking budgets. Over the years, we've utilized surveys and community roundtables to gather input that has helped shape policy and generate ideas on how we can continue to achieve efficiencies while providing services that meet citizens' wants and needs.



Citizen input has helped the municipality make decisions in both good times and bad. This has been especially important in recent years, given how national, state, and local financial woes have affected the City: since the academy's 2007 start, the City has lost 12% of its General Fund workforce through layoffs and attrition, with remaining staff taking on more duties with fewer dollars.

While public input programs have historically allowed us to provide some government education on specific topics, City leaders wanted to offer a program that looked less at challenges faced by city government and more at our organization's many strengths and offerings. The goal was to provide citizens with a greater understanding of municipal operations; help them realize the importance of local government in a successful, thriving city; and encourage volunteerism within the City and the larger community.

With these goals in mind, our version of Government 101 – the Citizens Academy – was born.

Program Implementation and Costs

How the Program Works: Over a six-week period each fall, citizens are invited to apply for the academy. We get the word out through press releases and print materials; social media and website posts; emails to past participants and groups whose constituents may be interested in the program; and videos on our government TV channel.

After applications are reviewed, up to 25 “students” are selected to take part in 10 educational sessions on 10 consecutive Wednesday evenings between mid-January and mid-March. Sessions are held at various City facilities to provide a behind-the-scenes look at how departments operate. These evening classes last two hours, followed by an optional tour at most locations.

Each week, students receive an agenda, handouts, and an evaluation form to complete after the session. Staff thoroughly review evaluations and glean key information that aids in making decisions on possible cost-saving measures and/or innovative ideas that could help enhance services.

Each session features one or more departments and is hosted by City leaders. PowerPoint presentations and tours explain services in great detail. At least 15 minutes of Q&A time is carved out of each session to allow citizens to clarify and ask questions about information presented.

While eight of our 10 sessions are set up classroom-style, two follow a different format:

- “Coffee with Council” is a relaxed Q&A session with our five elected City Council members.
- The final night of the academy features a fun,

interactive game show entitled “Who Wants to be a MIDLANDaire?” (patterned after TV’s “Who Wants to be a Millionaire?” show). Designed in-house at no cost, the game tests students’ knowledge of subjects covered during the academy. Students form teams for a bit of friendly competition, with the winning team earning \$100,000 Grand (candy bars, that is!).



Graduates receive a “diploma” from the Mayor and a logoed, fleece vest to wear proudly around town.

Cake, punch, and a class photo follow, after which students and staff mingle and share laughs.

More on the Program Set-up: In addition to traditional pen-on-paper schooling, students enjoy interactive learning. They’ve had the chance to thumb through materials that protect the bottom of the city landfill; learn what goes on behind the camera at our public access station; wear a 12-pound police officer’s belt; and climb aboard a big red fire truck (just to name a few).

New Offering: Because the City of Midland works with Midland County on several programs, a new session was created in 2013 that looks at services



specific to the County, such as the Sheriff's Office, court system, and health department. This highly-rated session also shows how the City and County share knowledge and resources to better serve citizens.

Costs: The program's annual \$1,900 budget pays for note-taking binders, commemorative fleece vests, light refreshments, diplomas, and miscellaneous supplies. City staff create marketing materials in-house, and departments hand out trinkets that pertain to their services.

Results and Outcomes

Community Recognition / Appreciation: As the number of graduates has increased, so has the academy's popularity. While we utilize various free, in-house resources to get the word out, we have found that our best marketing "tool" is past students, who give the program overwhelming praise – here's what two students wrote on their evaluations: *"Would I recommend this to others in the community? Heck yes!"* and *"I've already told an employee at 7-11!"*

Turning Critics into Fans: Once they've gone through the academy, critics often change their views about city government and express appreciation for how we work to provide excellent services as efficiently as possible. For example, before becoming a participant, one very vocal naysayer told the City Council that the City was made up of "fat cats," despite the fact that we were maintaining our usual high-quality services with fewer staff and less funding. After completing the program, the student said more than once how much he enjoyed and would promote the program.

Happy Customers: Participants consistently give above average to excellent ratings for classes, and high praise for staff and how the City operates. A few comments: *"I love this program. It was not only informative, but it was interesting. I have a whole new perspective on the City."* and *"I have lived in Midland all my life and was truly surprised how*



City staff love their community and work together to bring us this wonderful city. My thanks to all.” (one participant’s unsolicited Letter to the Editor in our local newspaper)

Academy’s Impact: A total of 16 participants have joined a City board, commission, or committee following the academy. In addition, one student was elected to Michigan’s House of Representatives, and two were elected to Midland City Council, with one serving as mayor. The mayor, who was in our first class, has said that her academy experience helped seal the deal on her decision to run for office.

The academy has also inspired many participants to get more involved in the community. A 2013 survey was completed by 20% of our former students. After the academy was completed, nearly all participants become volunteers for various groups such as city and county government, the United Way, Big Brothers Big Sisters, Habitat for Humanity, beautification committees, local charities, leadership organizations, school mentoring, and more. Moreover, 71% of respondents said the academy increased their interest in taking on more of a leadership role in the community. From one student: *“The academy gave me more confidence about getting involved in the community. I now feel ‘in the know.’”*

Another sign of success is the program’s popularity with various groups. Here at the City, we developed an in-house program that mirrors the academy but is geared for City employees. In addition, we’ve had two municipalities approach us for information to help develop their own programs. Midland’s academy has also been awarded for excellence by 3CMA, a national municipal communicators association.

Due to the nature of the program, it is difficult to quantify its successes. We have, however, seen citizens grow in their knowledge of city government, and have motivated many of them to get more involved in our community. Our alumni have become the City’s biggest cheerleaders – something that money can’t buy.

All in all, the program has been a great success, and, we hope, a catalyst for working together to keep Midland a great place to live, work, and play.