

UCA Citizens Academy promotes local engagement

By Javier Hernandez

In the fall of 2019, the University of Central Arkansas Division of Outreach and Community Engagement, in partnership with the UCA Political Science Department, launched the first-ever UCA Citizens Academy. During this program, UCA students and Conway residents embark on a 13-week program aimed at emphasizing civic engagement at the local and regional level.

Many cities around Arkansas, such as Jacksonville, Bella Vista and Mountain Home, conduct their own citizen academies. However, these academies focus primarily on law enforcement. The UCA Citizens Academy is unique in the way its curriculum is designed to cover a variety of topics ranging from the local judiciary system to the Conway Sanitation Department. The focus of the course is to “bring residents together to become more informed about local and regional government, the entities and institutions of which its composed and their activities, and with the idea that with a greater understanding of local government and activities, they will be more disposed to participating and engaging with it.” The topics covered in the academy include those in the public and nonprofit sectors, such as finance, economic development, transportation, safety, ecology and sanitation, and human services.

Clay Arnold, chair of the Political Science Department at UCA, designed and led the class as a part of a campus-wide initiative to promote civic engagement and citizen participation within UCA’s student body. The university partnered with Campus Compact, a national coalition of colleges and universities that aims to promote civic participation and community development within institutions of higher education. In addition to being offered to UCA students, the program is open to Conway residents so they would be able to learn more about their local government and services. Participants in the program interacted with local officials from regional government and nonprofit agencies in a series of classes once a week for two hours. The presenters ranged from elected leaders, such as Faulkner County Judge Jim Baker, to Daniel Tyler, the founder of Deliver Hope, a local nonprofit.

After the completion of the program, participants are tasked with creating a civic engagement plan to help local agencies provide services more efficiently and create a better community. Another goal of the program is the development of a civic action plan library that could



Carol Crews, prosecuting attorney for the 20th Judicial District, describes her role in the judicial process as part of the UCA Citizens Academy.

be made available to any civic group looking to perform a project to benefit their community. Arnold believes that the community civic engagement plans may inspire other communities, whether in partnership with institutions of higher education or not, to develop their own citizen academies.

In helping plan and create this program, Conway City Council Member Shelley Mehl, who is the former associate vice president of UCA outreach, believes the academy is “an opportunity for UCA to reach out, educate and engage the community,” adding “this program is a way to bring all parties together in a constructive way that we hope would improve communication and support the development of engaged citizens.” It is courses like the academy that Mehl believes are “the start of moving our community forward.”

Participants in the class felt the program allowed them to engage with local leaders in discussions that permitted them to ask more in-depth questions to more fully assess the needs within the community.

Booker White, a junior at UCA from Mayflower, said, “The class was very informative about the ways both state and local government and nonprofits work together and independently to serve the public. The civic engagement plan inspired me to look more closely at the needs of the community and come up with possible solutions or alternatives that will allow me to help work in a hands-on way to develop a better community.”

You can learn more about the UCA Citizens Academy at www.uca.edu/outreach/citizens.



Javier Hernandez is the intern for the Center for Community and Economic Development at the University of Central Arkansas. He is currently a junior in the UCA Schedler Honors College double majoring in Environmental Science and Political Science.