

Civic Leadership Education at the University of Chicago: How an Urban Research University Invested in a Program for Civic Leaders that Resulted in a Positive Impact for both the Civic Leaders and the Faculty, Staff and Students of the Institution Itself

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Abstract

The University of Chicago (UChicago), known for transformative education, created the Civic Leadership Academy (CLA) to address the need for leadership development in government and the non-profit sector. In 2014 the Office of Civic Engagement recognized that while there were a host of leadership development opportunities for individuals in the private sector, similar opportunities for nonprofit and local government employees were lacking. The program begins by investing in fellows' leadership capacity, so that in turn, their organizations are better able to carry out their missions. After three years of research and co-creation with foundations, corporations, individuals and groups, an original design, structure and curriculum emerged. The curriculum is rigorous and analytical, drawing upon the expertise of the faculty and the experiences of established civic leaders in Chicago. Action skills help individuals use their knowledge to achieve desired outcomes, and involve elements of communication, negotiation, persuasion, motivating others, and teamwork.

Keywords: civic leaders; Chicago; Civic Leadership Academy; non-profit; government; leadership development; civic engagement; equity; civic infrastructure

Introduction

The University of Chicago (UChicago), known for providing transformative educational experiences, created the Civic Leadership Academy (CLA) to address a lack of rigorous leadership development in non-profit and government employees who work in a variety of domains (education, housing, transportation, parks, arts, law, etc.) and who have at least 5-7 years of experience. This six-month, international, interdisciplinary program exceeded expectations by benefiting the civic leaders, the organizations that invested in those leaders, and the city's larger civic infrastructure. In addition, this program transformed the way the University understands civic leadership education and its own role and responsibility in fostering it in Chicago. The process the University undertook, to weave together faculty from five professional schools and to create a learning environment for faculty to interact with local civic leaders impacted the school in anticipated and unanticipated ways. The civic actors, while studying with faculty from multiple disciplines, raised new questions about what civic leadership is, how it is employed in the dynamic civic sector, and how the institution itself wrestles with questions of race, equity, inclusion, and difference. Fellows helped shape the curriculum and sparked uncomfortable, and therefore fruitful, questions for UChicago faculty and staff. As an institution dedicated to rigorous civic dialogue, the University welcomed the insights and made changes based on the feedback of civic leaders. This reciprocal relationship between academics and practitioners makes this program distinctive. The field of civic studies looks at the relationship

between the academy and the surrounding civic sector. The CLA is a concrete example of how a University can invest in civic studies. As Peter Levine (2014), Lincoln Filene Professor of Citizenship & Public Affairs at Tufts, writes,

Civic studies [is] a strategy for reorienting academic scholarship so that it does address citizens—and learns from them in turn. In fact, it treats scholars *as* citizens who are engaged with others in creating their worlds. Civic studies integrates facts, values, and strategies. Those who practice this nascent discipline are accountable to the public for what they believe to be true, to be good, and to work. They are accountable for the actual results of their thoughts and not just the ideas themselves. Civic studies is a large river fed by tributaries of scholars and practitioners who share commitments to particular forms of civic action in the world.

The creation of the Civic Leadership Academy was a way to bring scholars and practitioners into meaningful contact around a contested notion of civic leadership. While the original intent was to serve civic leaders, an additional benefit was the impact these civic leaders had on faculty, staff and students inside the University of Chicago. For example, the question raised in the CLA curriculum, “What is civic leadership?” (Howell & Wolton, 2014) led to an interdisciplinary faculty symposium hosted on campus entitled “A Symposium on Leadership” that included faculty from philosophy, political science, comparative literature, and behavioral science, seeking new questions about leadership. The lessons learned, and the results described below, might help other universities recognize the potential they have in contributing to the education of civic leaders who are addressing complex urban challenges.

Origin Story: What was the Situation and the Opportunity?

This University is here to assist teachers, students, businessmen and women, and particularly those whom circumstances have deprived of educational opportunities once eagerly sought. I maintain that University men and women owe something as an institution to the people who are without its walls. Our obligation does not cease when we give instruction to those who come to us; it is our business to go beyond just as far as our means and opportunities permit.

—William Rainey Harper 1894, University of Chicago’s first President

In 2014, the Office of Civic Engagement recognized that while there were a host of leadership development opportunities for individuals in the private sector, there were not the same opportunities for nonprofit and local government employees, who were addressing some of the most complex urban challenges. In Chicago, nonprofit and government agencies are often working on the same issues but sometimes at cross-purposes. Individuals who work for the public library, the park district, and the public school system for example often did not have mechanisms to form relationships with nonprofit agencies in education, housing, and health. Robert Zimmer, President of the University of Chicago, as part of the University’s strategic vision, invested in civic engagement as a key priority, and hired Derek Douglas, former Special Assistant for Urban Affairs in the Obama White House, to become the Vice President of Civic Engagement in 2011. Given the University of Chicago’s desire to help strengthen the civic infrastructure of its home city, while staying true to its educational mission, the Office of Civic

Engagement committed to co-create, with local partners, a new program to serve “the people who are outside its walls.” The original intent was to leverage the University’s intellectual resources to build the leadership capacity of non-profit and government leaders. As evidenced by the three-year study, it accomplished its goal, and created positive benefits for the University as well.

What is the Model and How Does it Work?

The program begins by investing in fellows’ leadership capacity, so that in turn, their organizations are better able to carry out their missions. The CLA has another goal of building a collaborative network that “breaks down silos.” Bringing together fellows across sectors will ultimately contribute to Chicago’s civic infrastructure. Civic infrastructure is defined as an active, engaged network of civic leaders who gain strength from 1) *Relationship development*, or the extent to which individual fellows developed strong personal and professional relationships with other fellows in their cohort, and 2) *Networking activities*, or the extent to which fellows exchanged information and resources and/or formed mutually beneficial organizational collaborations. (Cassata, Talbot & Century, 2018).

The six-month CLA program is distinctive for three reasons. First, the curriculum is interdisciplinary, with 110 hours of classroom learning with faculty from Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, Chicago Booth School of Business, University of Chicago Law School, the School of Social Service Administration, and the Graham School of Continuing Liberal and Professional Studies. The curriculum is curated to expose the fellows to contradictory and divergent ways of thinking. For example, two political science professors modeled how to disagree with the accepted definition of the concept of “leadership.”

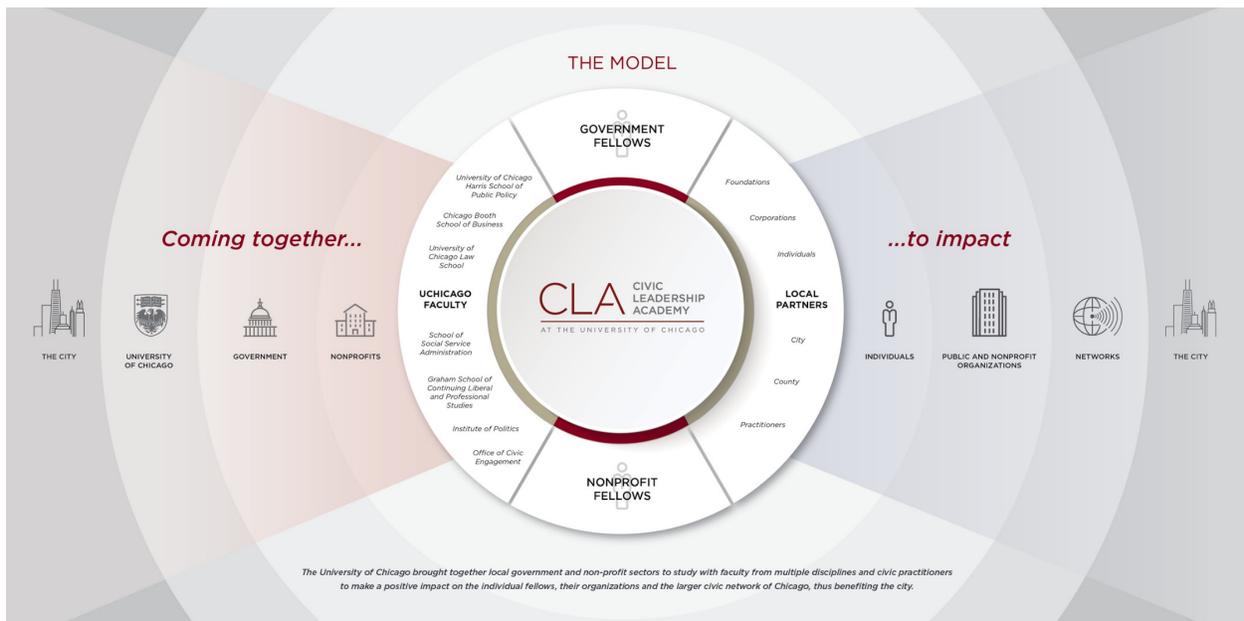


Figure 1. Theory of action diagram, University of Chicago’s Civic Leadership Academy.

As Figure 1 illustrates, UChicago brought together local government and nonprofit sector leaders to study with faculty from multiple disciplines and civic practitioners to develop individual fellows, public and nonprofit organizations, and civic networks, all in order to benefit the city.

Second, all 30 fellows engage in a week-long global practicum to South Africa or India that exposes them to their counterparts in a radically different context. Third, fifty percent of the cohort is admitted from the non-profit sector and fifty percent from the government sector so that fellows build an intentional community across non-profit and government sectors aimed at building a stronger Chicago.

Partnering Across the Civic Sector

After two years of research and co-creation with foundations, corporations, individuals and groups such as LISC Chicago (a community-development support organization) and the Civic Consulting Alliance (an engine of public-private sector collaboration), an initial design, structure and curriculum emerged. LISC Chicago hosted a set of focus groups for the target population of nonprofit candidates for the Civic Leadership Academy. The Civic Consulting Alliance helped identify promising public sector leaders who would benefit from this kind of program. Seed funding for the program came from local foundations such as the Searle Funds of the Chicago Community Trust, McCormick Foundation, and the Field Foundation, in addition to corporate donors such as JPMorgan Chase and Microsoft Corporation, as well as significant investments of time and resources from the University of Chicago. One important factor in the program's success was its partnership model. From the outset, planners gathered input from an Advisory Council comprised of individuals from foundations, corporations, community-development corporations, public/private entities and all five of the University of Chicago's professional schools. The process was a form of civic engagement itself, which built a sense of collective ownership. The full cost of the program, including six months of study and a one-week global practicum, is \$25,000 per fellow or \$750,000 for 30 fellows in each cohort. To make this program affordable to the non-profit and government section, the University committed to raise \$17,000 per student from philanthropy and asked the host organization to pay \$8,000 for this certificate program. Additional financial aid was raised for organizations who could not afford the \$8,000 fee, no organization was turned away based on financial constraints.

The Curriculum is Grounded in Theory

The CLA curriculum is rigorous and analytical, drawing upon the expertise of the faculty and the experiences of established civic leaders in Chicago. The Civic Leadership Academy is grounded in an approach emphasizing the need (Davis & Hogarth, 1992) to acquire both "conceptual" and "domain" knowledge, and develop both "action" and "insight" skills.

Conceptual knowledge means learning about fundamental leadership and management principles, theories, and ways to think rigorously about problems and challenges. It is acquired through formal instruction and learning experience. To that end, CLA employs an interdisciplinary team of UChicago faculty from all five professional schools and the Institute of Politics, as well as industry professionals, who help fellows think broadly, critically, and creatively.

Domain knowledge, on the other hand, is area-specific and acquired by hands-on experience or through a company or industry training program. To that end, CLA not only draws on some of the University's top professors, but also from the expertise of its nonprofit and government partners, and from the fellows themselves, who come on average with 5-7 years of field experience. The program's comprehensive nature fills a need for skill-based, conceptual and practical leadership development. By bringing together nonprofit and government leaders, CLA creates an environment where fellows can learn from their counterparts in public service.

Action skills help individuals use their knowledge to achieve desired outcomes, and involve elements of communication, persuasion, motivating others, and teamwork. As part of the application process, fellows select a leadership skill to advance during the CLA and provide two examples of opportunities to exercise that skill.

Throughout the six months of the program, each fellow identifies, collects, and analyzes data on his or her own leadership action skills. These "insight skills" help fellows learn the right lessons from their experiences and profitably interpret feedback about the outcomes of their actions. Working with faculty, each fellow reflects individually and in a group, to ensure that she or he is gaining the appropriate insight. In this way, the CLA experience is also a reciprocal one, where faculty and practitioners engage participants in new questions that inform and shape their teaching and work. This reciprocal knowledge sharing benefits both the participants and the instructors.

The Six-Month Curriculum is Divided into Three Sections

The CLA curriculum is dynamic and changes in response to feedback from faculty and fellows every year. In the first four years of the program, the curriculum was divided into three sections. The first section focused on foundational ways of thinking about leadership, including sessions on discovering one's capacity for leadership, defining civic leadership, and collecting and analyzing data to inform civic action. For example, a history professor taught a session on foundational ideas of leading through Plato's *Crito* and Martin Luther King's "Letter from a Birmingham Jail." A political science professor challenged notions of power and ethics by teaching Machiavelli's text *The Prince*.

The second section was the global practicum that in years 1-4 brought fellows to Johannesburg, South Africa or Delhi, India, where they meet with nonprofit and government leaders in a different context who faced similar leadership obstacles and employed leadership strategies. The goal of the week-long immersion was not to understand "what" leaders in South Africa or India are doing, but to investigate "how" those leaders were advancing goals, persuading audiences and negotiating in contested civic spaces. The week-long global practicum sparked fellows to think differently about the broader context in which they operate and how they as a network of leaders across Chicago might learn with and from the leaders in South Africa and India who faced similar challenges in a larger and more complicated context.

The final section focuses on the application of concepts to practical challenges of leading in the civic space. For example, a business school professor teaches techniques in negotiation in the civic sector. A behavioral science professor teaches conceptual knowledge on securing commitment, a necessary skill for leaders who need to secure commitment from civic actors. A community organizer engages fellows on disrupting power through an analysis of Saul Alinsky's *Rules for Radicals*. The classwork and global practicum provide a powerful transformative learning experience for nonprofit and government leaders. In addition, in the program's fourth year, the curriculum added an interactive civic case-study, based on Chicago's history with the "CHA Plan for Transformation." This new case study focused on goal-setting, persuasion and negotiation in a local historical set of events. In the fifth year, the program's management transitioned from the Office of Civic Engagement to the Harris School of Public Policy, which had served as the academic home of the program from the program's inception. Under the leadership of the Harris School the curriculum continues to be refined based on input from faculty, staff and fellows.

How to Measure the Success of the Civic Leadership Academy?

The Office of Civic Engagement worked with UChicago's Outlier Research and Evaluation Network to conduct a three-year comprehensive evaluation of the Civic Leadership Academy addressing the following questions:

- To what extent have CLA fellows experienced and demonstrated changes in leadership behavior and self-efficacy over time?;
- To what extent have organizations benefited from having a fellow participate in the CLA?; and
- To what extent has the Civic Leadership Academy experience facilitated the development of a network and in turn contributed to a civic infrastructure in Chicago?

The methodology used to address these questions included: pre and post fellow leadership surveys, pre and post fellow network surveys, pre and post supervisor surveys, fellow focus groups and fellow case study interviews.

Results of the three-year study:

The Outlier evaluation was able to illustrate with qualitative and statistically significant quantitative data that from the beginning to the end of the program, fellows became more confident in their ability to:

- Use data and information to guide decision-making;
- Understand others' perspectives;
- Reflect on the effects of their behavior;
- Develop effective action plans;
- Adjust their behavior in response to feedback;
- Use assessment tools to understand others' needs;
- Make a greater effort to understand others in the organization; and
- Consider both experience and research when goal-setting.

The results reveal that the Civic Leadership Academy had a positive impact on individuals, organizations and civic infrastructure. Over the course of the program, fellows became more confident in using data to guide decision-making (59% pre to 91% post), understanding others’ perspectives (59% pre to 82% post) and developing effective action plans (77% pre to 91% post). Furthermore, the organizations benefited from having a fellow in the program, both because of the professional connections and because of the change in behavior. 78% of supervisors of fellows agreed or strongly agreed that CLA improved their fellows’ ability to be better leaders in the organization. Moreover, qualitative and quantitative data revealed that a larger civic network emerged from the program, resulting in concrete new collaborations. For example, when the Deputy Commissioner from the public library connected with a nonprofit that focused on job placement, training and coaching people affected by poverty, they were able to create a new initiative to connect homeless individuals who arrived in the public libraries with services to help them find employment. Illustrations of these collaborations can be found in all twelve case studies (Cassata, Talbot & Century, 2018).

The pre- and post-surveys, focus groups and interviews revealed that fellows built strong personal and professional relationships, their behaviors changed over time, and the organizations benefited because of the leaders’ increased self-efficacy. These findings, collected during the program’s first three years, indicate that an urban research university, when it partners with local government and nonprofits, can use its resources to convene and educate civic leaders in the service of strengthening the individual, organizational and civic infrastructure of a city.

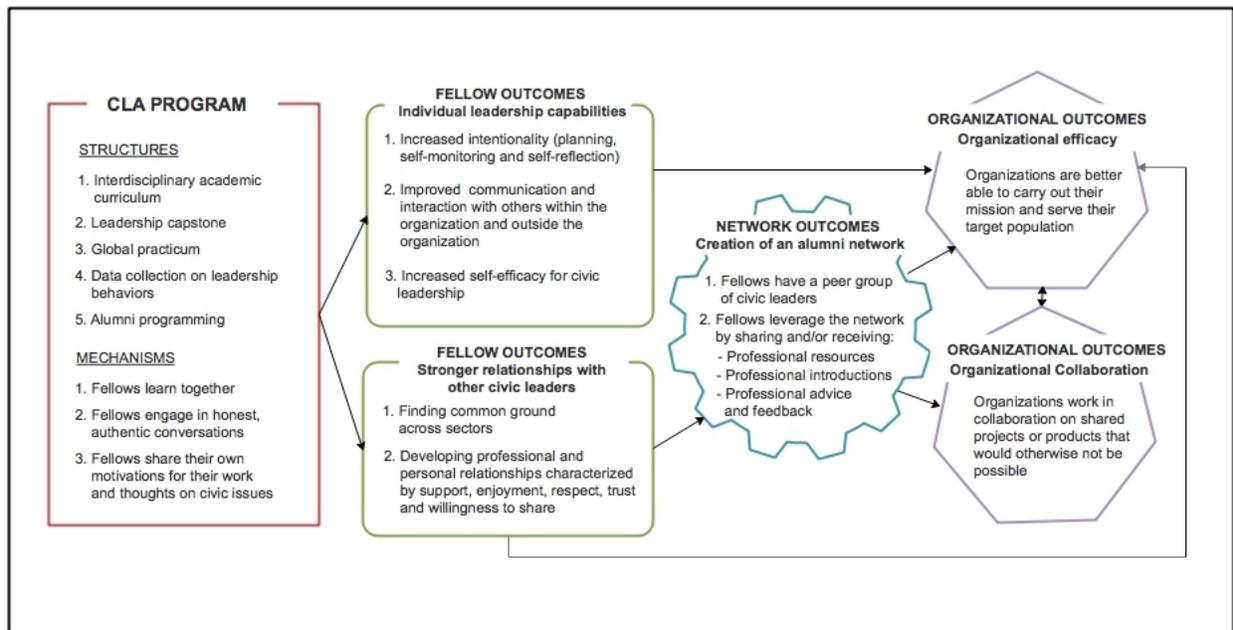


Figure 2. Civic Leadership Academy – Working Theory of Action Based on Evaluation Data (2015-2017)

Figure 2 illustrates relationships between the CLA program and the key outcomes described in the summative evaluation findings. Program structures experienced by fellows are listed in the left-hand box, and described in detail below. Program mechanisms, derived from evaluation data, describe the processes through which program structures may yield the identified fellow,

network, and organizational outcomes. The arrows depict relationships between outcomes, illustrating multiple paths through which particular outcomes may be reached.

Lessons Learned

The three-year Outlier evaluation served both a formative and summative role that informed program design and refinement of the Civic Leadership Academy. Data collected in the evaluation led to two significant adjustments to the program. First, after the first year, it was clear that while the fellows enjoyed exposure to the variety of professors and ways of thinking, they needed help integrating one class with another and connecting them to their own work. Therefore, in the second year, the program added a “faculty advisor” who attended all classes, met with each faculty member to help design the sessions, and traveled with the cohort on the global practicum, in order to be the “red thread” tying these elements together. Second, there were major changes made to the capstone project in order to have it align with the mission of the program. The intended goal of the capstone project was to help fellows put their leadership development into action. In the first year of the program, fellows were asked to submit two proposals (with sign-off from their supervisor) for active projects that could advance their own leadership and benefit the organization. At the end of the first cohort, the evaluations revealed that while capstone projects advanced the work of the host organization, they did not improve the leadership skills of the fellows as much as anticipated. One possible reason is that the types of people nominated for and accepted into the program were high-performing, task-oriented individuals. The work of leadership development requires one to become more self-aware, more vulnerable and to take risks. Because of the high stakes of doing a project at one’s home institution, as soon as the project was scoped, the individual focused on immediate results and lost sight of the more nuanced task of observing one’s own behavior in particular contexts. Because of this real-time feedback, the program adjusted its requirement from a capstone project to a capstone reflection paper, which asked fellows to synthesize and draw connections from classwork to their experiences. The reflection paper employed in the fourth and fifth year encouraged fellows to consider *how* one leads, rather than focus on the completion of a particular task.

Anticipated and Unanticipated Benefits to the University

In launching the CLA, the University hoped that the program would result in positive benefits to the University. For example, CLA fellows can help undergraduate and graduate students gain access to opportunities working with or in the public sector. CLA fellows met with undergraduates from the Institute of Politics to share their career stories. A student group reached out to CLA fellows to host a civic hack-a-thon; students were able to use “real data” from Cook County to scope meaningful data-science projects. These types of initiatives led to a year-long program where public-policy data scientists partnered with Cook County staff to deploy teams of data scientists to inform policy makers how to make evidence-based decision making easier for government employees (International Innovation Corps, 2019). Enriching the lives of the civic leaders, welcoming them into the University community and providing new opportunities and connections for current students were anticipated positive outcomes of this investment.

One unanticipated benefit was that the lived experiences fellows and practitioners brought to the university informed the curriculum itself and helped instigate conversations within the

University on race, equity and inclusion. Fellows raised questions of how race, equity and power dynamics shape the policies and protocols in Chicago and how that inherently influences the work of civic leadership in Chicago. As part of a session taught by a political scientist on “undefining civic leadership,” students met with a local activist who was a key founder of the Movement for Black Lives. These activists and fellows pushed back on the definition of leadership as inherently hierarchical.

The input the fellows and practitioners brought to the CLA curriculum challenged UChicago faculty and staff to think and teach differently. As a result, there was a new CLA session introduced into the fifth cohort on “Confronting Difference,” where Fellows grappled with the ascriptive characteristics that shape how—and in some instances, whether—one is able to lead. Texts for this section include Palacios (2016), Delaney (2018), and Richie (1996; 2012).

Heat Map: Chicago Community Areas Served

Map represents survey responses of CLA nonprofit fellows across three cohorts (2015-2017), N=44.

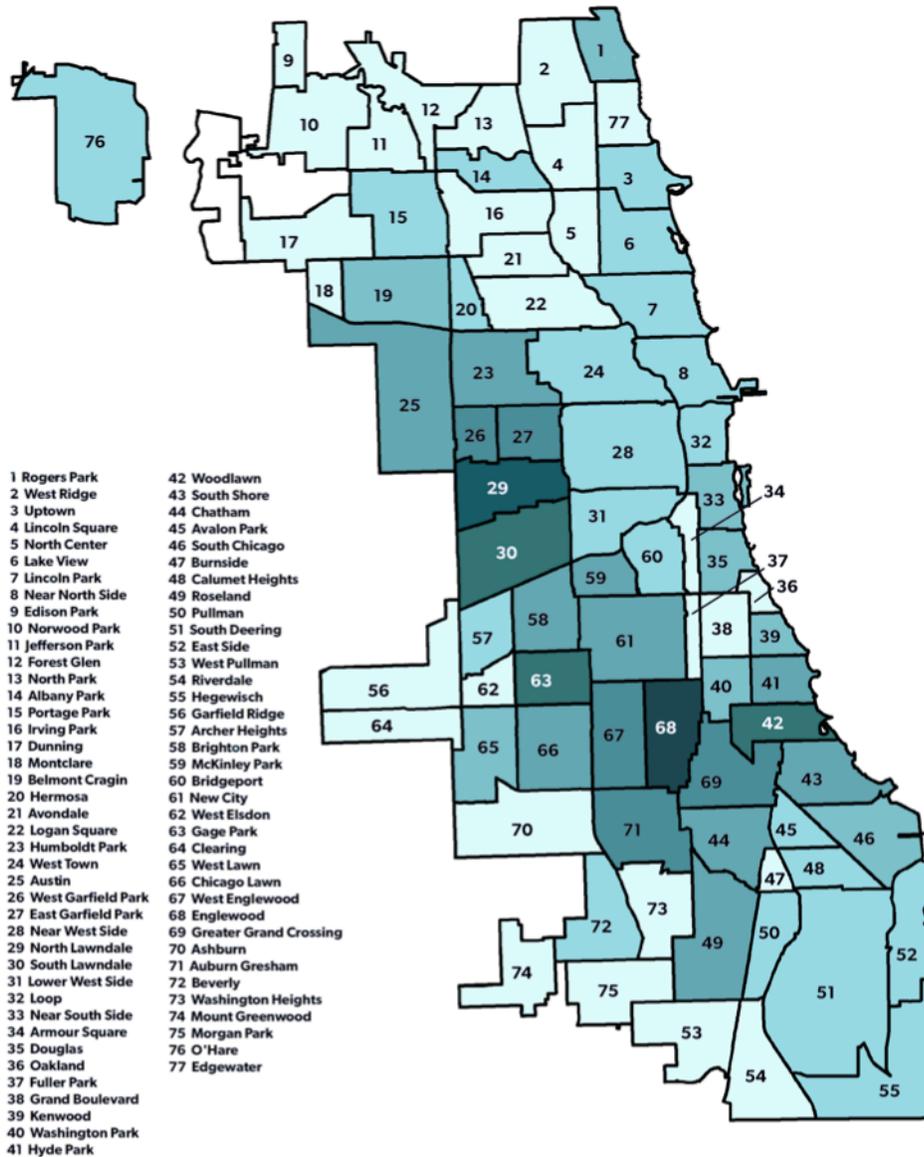


Figure 2. Heat Map: Chicago Community Areas Served



Figure 3. Heat Map: Chicago Community Areas Served

Conclusion and Implications

The University of Chicago created a model program that demonstrated how an urban research university could partner with local government and nonprofits to benefit individuals, organizations and civic infrastructure. In the program's first five years, the University discovered many positive benefits. By welcoming full-time nonprofit and government leaders as a new kind of "student" at the University of Chicago, both the participants and the University itself benefited in anticipated and unanticipated ways. Faculty from five professional schools mobilized to teach this group of eager students, and found that the life experiences they brought to the classroom were much different from those of undergraduate and graduate students.

The success of the Civic Leadership Academy has deepened the University's commitment to civic leadership scholarship, teaching and practice. The University's Office of Civic Engagement created a new position of the Executive Director for Civic Leadership to coordinate, invest in and discover new ways that an urban research university can leverage its resources, so that all students, faculty, staff, alumni and civic actors can sharpen and enhance their civic leadership.

In the next five years, it is looking for ways to leverage the initiatives that invest in civic leaders at the University, e.g. Civic Scholars, a scholarship for an MBA for nonprofit and government leaders, as well as Chicago Commons, a program of the Divinity School for faith-based leaders. UChicago leaders seek to create new platforms for civic leadership education and help support a "civic leadership exchange" for citywide leadership development programs. For example, based on the CLA curriculum, the University is piloting a new program called the "Civic Actor Studio." The initiative recognizes the performative aspect of leadership, and partners with theater directors from the University's Court Theatre, to help leaders strengthen their leadership performance skills. The Civic Leadership Academy at the University of Chicago is one example of how a major urban research institution can leverage its intellectual strength in order build the capacity of the city it calls home. In investing in inquiry and recognizing civic leaders as reciprocal partners, the University has become more permeable and has been influenced by the new perspectives civic leaders bring. By engaging a new kind of student and opening up inquiry on the very concept of "civic leadership" an urban research university can not only impact its intended audience, but can also change the research institution itself so that the institution at large can play an even more significant role in shaping its home city.

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As Executive Director of Civic Leadership for the Office of Civic Engagement, Joanie is responsible for advancing the knowledge, teaching, and practice of civic leadership locally, nationally, and globally to increase civic trust and strengthen cities. Working across the University, she raises the visibility of programs and partnerships that strengthen the civic sector via civic leadership. In 2015, Joanie launched the Civic Leadership Academy, an interdisciplinary leadership development program for nonprofit and government leaders who study with practitioners and faculty from Chicago Harris School of Public Policy, Chicago Booth School of Business, University of Chicago Law School, the School of Social Service Administration, and the Graham School of Continuing Liberal and Professional Studies. Prior to working with the Office of Civic Engagement, Joanie led the Southside Arts & Humanities Network of the Civic Knowledge Project, which connected the cultural resources of the surrounding community with the resources of the University. Joanie holds a B.A. in History from Brown University and an M.A. in Social and Cultural Foundations in Education from DePaul University.