

*Western Area  
Community Assessment Results:  
Participation and Civic Health*

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## INTRODUCTION

Community participation is a critical factor in determining the health and vitality of a community as well as a necessary ingredient for democracy. No community can be strong and vibrant without participation of its citizens in political, community and neighborhood associations (National Civic League 1998). Although participation is widely recognized as promoting the civic health of our communities and nation, the actual level of participation in our country has declined significantly over the last 30 years. This decline has ranged from voting in elections (both national and local), serving on boards and commissions, attending public meetings and participating in volunteer and neighborhood associations (Putnam 2000).

A community needs assessment will typically evaluate the needs (i.e., deficiencies) and the assets (i.e., opportunities) of a community. Based on assessment results, educational programs are developed to meet the gaps between needs and assets. The purpose of this assessment is to evaluate in detail the issue of participation as it affects civic health and then develop educational goals followed with specific programs to best address this issue in detail. Participation is the genuine engagement of people, with no regard to wealth or position, to discuss and make decisions regarding their community (Murphy and Cunningham 2003). Although community participation may have various meanings, for the purpose of this community needs assessment, participation concerns the involvement of citizens engaged in face-to-face deliberation within formal structures for the intent of governance or community decision making. Likewise, civic health may be perceived as an ambiguous term. For the purpose of this assessment, civic health is broadly defined as a community that is able to mobilize people, identify issues and resources, and work toward their solution for the overall benefit of the community (Norris and Lampe 1994).

The concept of “health” is not exclusively reserved for the medical profession. Many subject-matter experts discuss “health”; nutritionists discuss healthy choices for individuals to address obesity issues, other disciplines discuss the health of a forest regarding prevention and control of wildfires, or the health of our watersheds in regards to water quality and quantity. This assessment is a tool to help understand the civic health of the Western Area<sup>1</sup> and how Cooperative Extension can best provide educational programs to help foster a healthy civic community.

Indicators of civic health include participation, community leadership, government performance, volunteerism, civic education, cooperation and consensus building and community vision/pride, among others (National Civic League 1998). As the community and organizational development specialist in the Western Area, my

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<sup>1</sup> Western Area includes Washoe, Storey, and Douglas Counties, and Carson City, Nevada. The Western Area is a geographical designation served by the Western Area Cooperative Extension Department.

role is to systematically document the needs related to this topic area and then address the needs through research-based educational programming.

To best assess civic health and participation in the Western Area, I developed the *Community Participation and Local Government Survey* SB# 03-12 (Rebore 2003). Specific topic areas queried included efficacy of participation efforts; individual civic skill level, including public discourse skills; reasons for participating and demographics. For the purpose of this assessment, efficacy is defined as individual perception regarding the effectiveness of participation efforts. Civic skill is defined as an individual's communication skills and organizational abilities that enable him or her to effectively participate. Many questions on the survey were based on previously used measures in the literature (Verba et al. 1995, Robinson et al. 1999, and Thomson 2001).

The community assessment on participation and civic health addresses four questions in depth:

- 1) Who participates?**
- 2) Why do people participate (or not)?**
- 3) What are people's civic skill levels and how does this affect participation?**
- 4) How effective are participation efforts, as perceived by respondents?**

## METHODOLOGY

Participation is best measured by examining actual citizen engagement in their community. Therefore, rather than polling key community informants or agencies, I sent the questionnaire directly to citizens. To best gauge the spectrum of participation and overall civic health, I sent the survey to two groups: 1) citizen advisory board members—who we know actively participate in community and; 2) randomly selected registered voters.

Serving on a community advisory board is considered one of the most intensive forms of community participation due to the time involved and skill level required. Registering to vote is often perceived as the simplest expression of participation. Therefore, by assessing these two groups, I am able to examine the overall spectrum of participation and civic health, from those who are actively engaged in community to those who are simply registered voters and may or may not participate in community affairs.

Participants in this assessment included Washoe County Citizen Advisory Board (CAB) members from 1997 to 2003 and randomly selected Washoe County active registered voters. CAB members were selected from the CAB roster list from 1997 to 2003 ( $n=246$ ) as provided by Washoe County Department of Community Development. All 246 CAB members were surveyed. The CAB roster list is considered public records and can also be accessed on line from the Washoe County Website. Active registered voters were randomly selected from the Washoe County Active Registered voter list, which was purchased from Washoe County Registrar of Voters Office for five dollars for nonprofit/educational organizations. The active registered voter file lists over 190,000 registered voters. From this list, I randomly selected 700 registered voters from a random numbers table to participate in this assessment.

As with any survey or study, the issue of feasibility and cost is an issue. Rather than surveying residents and advisory board members in each county and jurisdiction in the Western Area, I developed a county-by-county comparison of demographics based on the U.S. Census Records (Table 1). The comparison of demographics provided me the information to determine if enough similarity existed among the Western Area to conduct a study within my constraints of time and money. Although some minor variations do occur across all four jurisdictions (Washoe, Storey, and Douglas Counties and Carson City) I felt confident that sampling Citizen Advisory Board members and randomly selected registered voters in Washoe County was in general representative of the larger Western Area population (Table 1).

Table 1. Western Area Demographics<sup>2</sup> given as percents of the total population.

	<b>Washoe County</b>	<b>Carson City</b>	<b>Storey County</b>	<b>Douglas County</b>
<b>Total Population</b>	339,486	52,457	3,399	41,259
<b>Gender</b>				
Male	50.7	51.7	51.8	50.5
Female	49.3	48.3	48.2	49.5
<b>Race/Ethnic Origin</b>				
African American	2.1	1.8	0.3	0.3
American Indian	1.8	2.4	1.4	1.7
Anglo-White	80.4	85.3	93.0	91.9
Asian-Pacific Islander	4.8	1.9	1.1	1.5
Hispanic/Latino	16.6	14.2	5.1	7.4
Mixed Races	3.3	2.1	2.4	2.2
Other	7.7	6.5	1.7	2.5
<b>Education</b>				
Some High School, no diploma	10.4	12.4	11.3	6.4
High School Degree /GED	25.2	27.9	29.7	26.6
Some College	28.0	29.4	33.3	33.8
Associates Degree	7.0	6.7	5.7	8.0
Bachelors Degree	15.8	11.9	12.2	15.8
Graduate/ Professional Degree	7.9	6.6	5.7	7.3
<b>Household Income<sup>3</sup></b>				
Less than \$25,000	24.1	27.3	19.2	19.7
\$25,000 to \$49,999	30.2	32.1	33.7	27.2
\$50,000 to \$74,999	21.5	20.8	24.0	25.1
\$75,000 to \$99,000	11.2	10.5	15.9	13.3
Over \$100,000	12.9	9.3	7.1	14.7

Both CAB members and Registered Voters were mailed the *Community Participation and Local Government Survey SP# 03-12* (Rebore 2003). Survey questions were designed to assess overall civic health and community participation through specific measures in political efficacy, civic skills/engagement, reasons for participation and demographic information. The survey was piloted in a graduate-level class at University of Nevada, Reno for readability and clarity prior to administration. University of Nevada Social Behavioral Institutional Review Board (IRB) granted approval for human subject's research ensuring confidentiality and anonymity of responses (protocol number E03/04-40). Administration of the questionnaire followed Dillman's (1978) Total Design Method.

<sup>2</sup> Data Source: U.S. Census Bureau, American FactFinder.

<sup>3</sup> Household Income based on 1999 earnings.

## RESULTS

A total of 945 surveys were sent out in February 2004. After adjusting for returned undeliverable surveys (wrong addresses, etc.) the total surveys delivered actually numbered 763. This included 554 registered voters and 209 CAB members. The overall response rate was 49 percent, with a 40 percent response rate for registered voters and a 73 percent response rate for CAB members (Table 2). The response rate is the percentage of respondents in the sample who return completed questionnaires. Mail surveys such as this study, typically have the lowest response rate of all survey research methods, somewhere between 20 to 40 percent (Nachmias and Nachmias 1996). However the response rate for this study is well above the expected average. Each group has a high to extremely high response rate (Table 2).

Table 2. Survey totals and response rates per group.

	Initial Total	Adjusted Total	Response Rate
<b>Registered Voters</b>	699	554	223 (40%)
<b>CAB Members</b>	246	209	152 (73%)
<b>Totals</b>	945	763	375 (49%)

Randomly selected registered voters (Table 3) reflect a representative sample of the total Western Area population as compared to the demographic attributes compiled by the U.S. Census Bureau (Table 1). Demographics are important information to initially describe a community and its citizens, as well as provide explanatory measures (Timpone 1998). As indicated in Table 1; population size of each county varies significantly, from 339,486 in Washoe County to 3,399 in Storey County. Overall, the Western Area is predominately White/Caucasian, the median household income ranges between \$41,809 in Carson City to \$51,849 in Douglas County, with over 50 percent of the population in the \$25,000 to \$74,999 range (American FactFinder 2004). Educational attainment varies across the Western Area with the largest grouping for each county having *Some College* (Washoe 28 percent, Carson City 29 percent, Storey 33 percent, and Douglas County 34 percent).

This study used a simple random sampling to select registered voters and compare those responses to community advisory boards members. Using a random sample allows me to examine significance through the use of probability levels. The probability value or  $p$  given in Table 3 indicates statistical significance. This value represents the likelihood of this analysis rendering the same result if re-conducted. For example a probability value of 0.05 ( $p= 0.05$ ) would tell us that if this study were re-conducted independently to a different sample 100 times, using the same survey, at least 95% of those analyses would render the same result.

### **Who Participates?**

Education has been cited in the literature as the single largest predictor of participation (Verba and Nie 1972, Verba et al. 1995, Nie et al. 1999). This finding is also replicated in our local assessment (Table 3).

Table 3. Comparative demographics between randomly selected registered voters (RV) and Citizen Advisory Board (CAB) members.

	<b>RV n= 223</b>	<b>CAB n = 152</b>	<b>Significance Levels (p values)</b>
<b>Gender</b>			.040
Male	49.1	59.9	
Female	50.9	40.1	
<b>Race/Ethnic Origin</b>			.508
African American	1.4	0.7	
American Indian	0.5	0.7	
Anglo-White	84.7	90.1	
Asian-Pacific Islander	2.3	0.0	
Hispanic/Latino	1.8	0.7	
Mixed Races	2.9	2.0	
Other	4.5	4.6	
<b>Education</b>			.003
Some High School, no diploma	2.7	0.7	
High School Degree/GED	13.1	1.3	
Some College/Technical School	34.0	35.5	
Associate's Degree	8.1	8.6	
Bachelor's Degree	19.0	20.4	
Some graduate work	7.2	12.5	
Graduate/Professional Degree	15.8	16.0	
<b>Household Income</b>			.045
Less than \$25,000	11.7	4.4	
\$25,000 to \$44, 999	18.5	20.0	
\$45,000 to \$64,999	18.5	16.3	
\$65,000 to \$84,999	20.5	14.8	
\$85,000 to \$104,999	13.7	17.0	
Over \$105,000	17.1	27.4	
<b>Years of Residence</b>			.046
0 to 3	7.2	0.7	
3 to 10	20.0	15.8	
10 to 20	24.1	25.6	
< 20	48.6	57.9	
<b>Political Ideology</b>			.058
Liberal	28.2	25.5	
Moderate	27.7	18.4	
Conservative	44.1	56.0	

People who actively participate in community boards are significantly more educated than those who do not participate ( $p = .003$ ). The significance of this result, as demonstrated through the probability level or  $p$  value as in  $p = .003$  tells us we have a 99.7 percent chance of this result being correct. In other words, we are 99.7 percent sure that those who participate on boards are more educated than the general population of registered voters.

Likewise, those with higher incomes are also more likely to participate in community boards ( $p = .045$ ). The  $p$  value for this finding tells us we have a 95.5 percent chance of this result being correct. Again, we are 95.5 percent sure that those who participate on boards have a higher income than the general population of registered voters.

Other significant indicators of those who participate on community boards tend to be male ( $p = .040$ ), and live in the community longer ( $p = .046$ ). Finally, people who consider themselves conservative tend to participate more than moderates or liberals ( $p = .058$ ). This last finding could be reflective of a larger conservative base sampled. In other words, perhaps there are more people in the general population sampled who consider themselves conservative rather than moderate or liberal.

The results outlined in Table 3, with regard to those who participate being better educated and of a higher income are reflective of national trends and statistics and therefore are not surprising. As an educator using these results in a community assessment to develop educational goals and ultimately programs; a more useful question concerns how do I ensure educational access and opportunity regarding participation skills for all segments of society? Since research and local data indicate those who do participate in community boards tend to be better educated and of a higher income than the average resident.



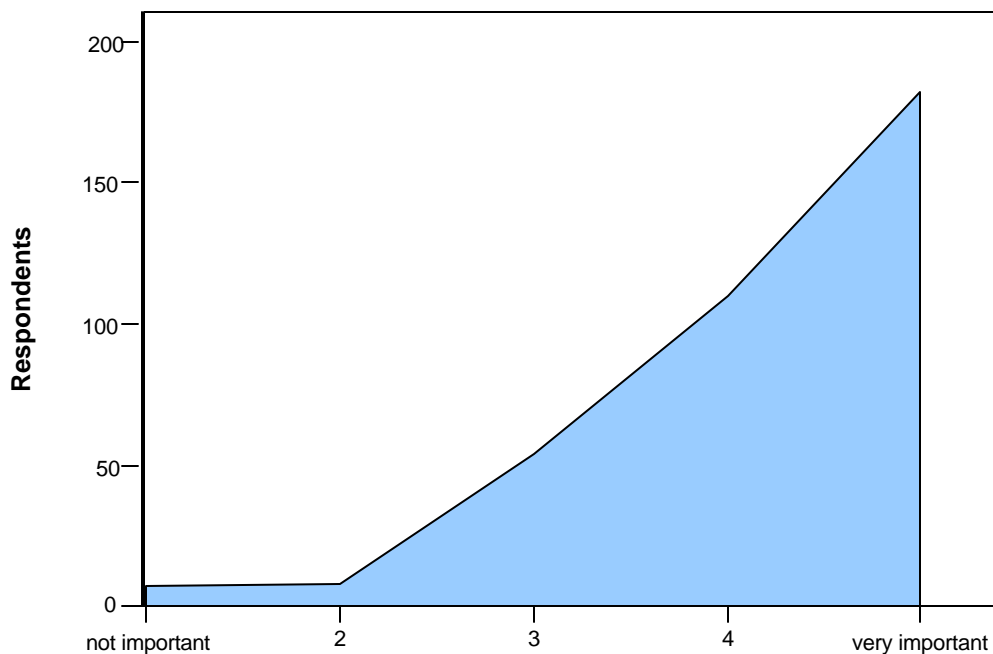
### ***Why Do People Participate?***

Numerous reasons are cited in the literature for why people participate or don't participate. Typical reasons cited for why people participate include: to solve a problem, provide a service, become more knowledgeable, make friends, fulfill a sense of responsibility, enhance personal goals and exert political influence (Thomson 2001). Reasons cited in the literature for why people **do not** participate in community include: lack of time or money, lack of skills to participate—people don't know how, and, no one asks them to participate (Verba et al. 1995).

The reason most frequently cited for why residents in the Western Area participate in community was *The chance to make the community a better place to live*, with over 80 percent (292 respondents) citing this as one of their most important reasons (Figure A). The second most important reason cited was *To solve a particular problem*, with over 70 percent (257 respondents) citing this as one of their top reasons (Figure B).

**How important is the following reason in your decision  
to take part in the community?**

**The chance to make the community a better place to live.**

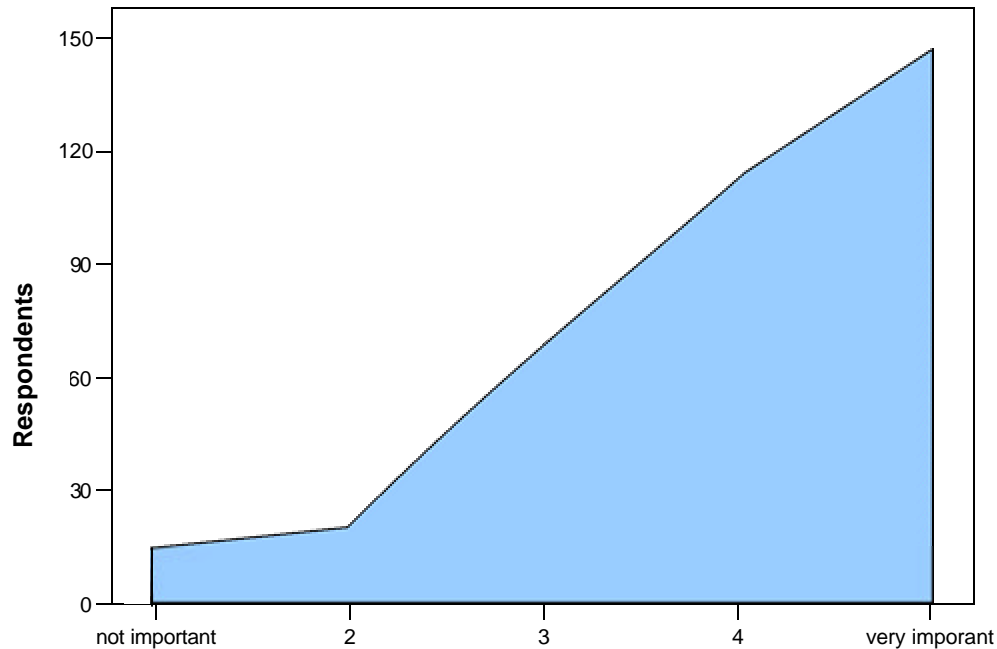


**Figure A**

Figure A: The most important reason cited for participating in community.

How important is the following reason in your decision to take part in community?

**To solve a particular problem**



**Figure B**

Figure B. The second most important reason cited for participating in community.

Other reasons that ranked important were: *To influence government policy*, with over 60 percent (252 respondents) citing this reason, followed by *To lend a hand to people who need help*, gathering 57 percent (236 respondents).

When comparing the top 10 reasons of registered voters to the top 10 reasons of advisory board members, there is a significant difference in five of the top 10 reasons listed. Advisory board members place significantly more importance on their reasons listed more often rating them a (5) very important on a five-point scale. For example, when looking at the top reason cited by both groups, *The chance to make the community a better place to live*, advisory board members place significantly more importance on this reason ( $p = .000$ ) than registered voters (Figure C).

### To help make the community a better place to live.

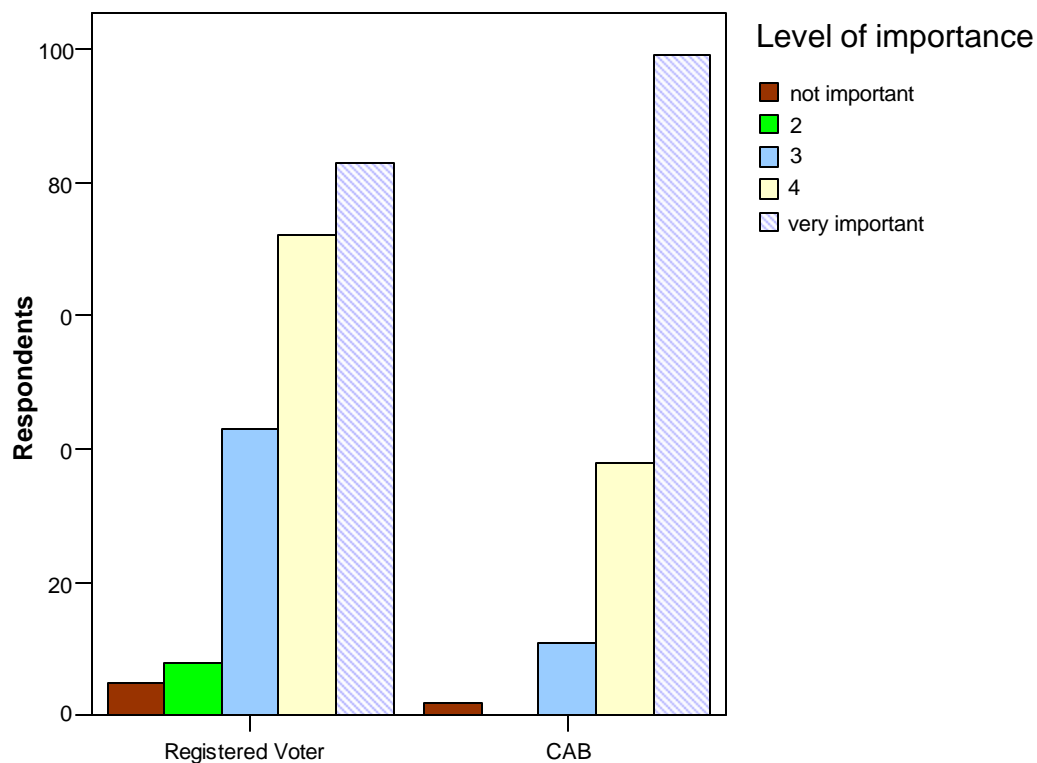


Figure C. Level of importance given for advisory board members and registered voters.

The top 10 reasons why someone would take part in their community are outlined in Table 4. For each reason listed, the total number of responses for that reason and the significance level between registered voter and advisory board member responses are also provided in Table 4. Reasons listed in bold on Table 4: #1) **The chance to make the community a better place to live;** #3) **To influence government policy;** #5) **It is my duty as a citizen;** #6) **To do my share;** and #8) **To be with people I enjoy,** were all ranked significantly more important to advisory board members than to registered voters. Perhaps this may help explain why someone joins an advisory board and chooses to participate in community.

Table 4. Top ten reasons why someone would take part in their community and the significance between registered voters and advisory board members.

Rank	Reason Listed	Total Responses	p value*— Level of Significance
1.	<b>The chance to make the community a better place to live.</b>	292	<b>.000</b>
2.	To solve a particular problem.	257	.151
3.	<b>To influence government policy.</b>	252	<b>.000</b>
4.	To lend a hand to people who need help.	236	.795
5.	<b>It is my duty as a citizen.</b>	194	<b>.008</b>
6.	<b>To do my share.</b>	189	<b>.000</b>
7.	To work with people who share my ideals.	185	.880
8.	<b>To be with people I enjoy.</b>	120	<b>.007</b>
9.	To learn about politics and government.	115	.082
10.	I find it exciting.	102	.346

\*p value indicates the level of significance. For example; *The chance to make the community a better place to live* was ranked as more important to advisory board members than registered voters. The p value of .000 tells us statistically our result is 100 percent accurate. In other words, if listing those reasons again, we would predict with 100 percent accuracy, that advisory board members will rank these reasons as more important than registered voters.

### ***How Does Civic Skill Level Affect Participation?***

Civic skill level is simply defined as an individual's ability to communicate and organize effectively (Verba et al. 1995). Examples of civic skill include; giving a speech or presentation, preparing or organizing documents, contacting local officials to express concerns, writing a letter or signing a petition. Participation activities that require extensive efforts and skills, such as face-to-face discussions, community problem solving, contacting local officials and forming new neighborhood groups, all require fundamental resources of time, commitment or money. Resources such as time and money tend to be more available to those with a higher socioeconomic status (SES). Therefore those with higher SES more often engage in intensive participation efforts (Berry et al 1993, Verba et al. 1995, Thomson 2001).

Civic skills are often acquired through one's work experiences or through participation on volunteer or community associations. Additionally, civic skills are learned by youth (i.e., teenagers) through their participation in youth organizations, or from their parents (Verba et al. 1995, Beck and Jennings 1982, Almond and Verba 1963). Therefore, youth who are not involved in any volunteer associations or whose parents are not engaged in community likely will not be provided the opportunity to learn and practice civic skills that are necessary for community participation and democracy. Recent studies have strongly indicated disengagement among American youth in both political and

community associations and the unwillingness of youth to exercise citizenship responsibilities (Kirlin 2003). As less people participate in community, our civic culture experiences a generation gap where younger people lose the opportunity to learn and practice the skills necessary to promote and sustain a healthy community and democracy.

I assessed 10 civic skill items among both registered voters and advisory board members. Traditionally only four civic skill questions are used in the literature from the Citizen Participation Study (Verba et al. 1995, p.56). These standard skills include:

Have you...

*Written a letter?*

*Gone to a meeting where you took part in making decisions?*

*Planned or chaired a meeting?*

*Given a speech or presentation?*

To assess civic health that reflects community engagement and discussion, beyond mere political participation—as is typically used when measuring civic skill level, I felt it necessary to augment the traditional measures of civic skill to include the 10 questions asked on the survey (Table 5).

When examining the 10 civic skills among respondents, advisory board members are significantly stronger in their use of civic skills than registered voters (Table 5). This is not surprising since the task of an advisory board member is to engage in meetings that involve face-to-face discussions and arrive at solutions or recommendations regarding community issues. It appears that advisory board members possess the skills required for civic health and represent what a community in strong civic health would want to attain. Over 90 percent of advisory board members engage in most of the activities listed in Table 5. However, there does seem to be room for improvement and educational opportunities to work with board members to improve their existing skill set, especially regarding conflict management, group organization and organizing documents (Table 5). One of the potential limitations of this assessment was my inability to determine if advisory board members possess these civic skills prior to joining a board or if they attain and enhance their skills while serving on the board.

When examining the responses of registered voters, it is evident that roughly 50 percent of them possess the civic skills listed (Table 5). Based on these findings, it appears opportunities are very strong for designing a program for adults that provide them with the additional skills and confidence needed to join boards and various community groups, hence strengthening the overall civic health of the Western Area. The challenge to such a program lies in finding and recruiting participants. Since many of these people don't belong to groups, how do you strategically and efficiently engage them in such a program?

Table 5. Respondents who have practiced or engaged in civic skills in the past 10 years either as part of their jobs or as members of organizations. Responses are given as percent for each group assessed.

<b>Civic Skill***</b>	<b>Registered voter</b>	<b>Advisory board member</b>
Given a speech or presentation.	59%	86%
Attended a community meeting.	68%	99%
Planned or chaired a meeting or provided leadership to a meeting.	46%	82%
Actively participated in meetings (i.e., express opinions, voice ideas, etc).	67%	99%
Resolved conflicts among attendees in a meeting.	42%	72%
Organized a group to accomplish a task.	47%	70%
Facilitated or helped to facilitate a meeting.	55%	87%
Prepared or organized documents or reports.	56%	78%
Written a letter, sent an electronic letter or signed a petition (electronically or by hand) to an elected official or government agency.	69%	90%
Contacted a local official through phone calls, mail or email?	43%	85%

\*\*\* All skills listed are significant at the .000 level between registered voters and advisory board members. Advisory board members have significantly practiced or engaged in the following civic skills more than registered voters.

### ***How Effective Are Participation Efforts?***

Effectiveness of one's participation is a significant reason why someone will or will not participate in community. It seems logical to assume that the more effective participants feel, the more likely they are to participate. Likewise, the more that people participate in community affairs, the more they perceive themselves to be effective. It becomes a vicious cycle but is an important explanation for why people participate. Additionally, perception of effectiveness also affects community civic health and democracy (Barber 1984). If citizens perceive themselves to have an influence in government and local decisions, civic health is stronger and hence the practice of democracy is exercised. Efficacy has been subdivided into various categories in the research literature (Craig et al. 1990). For the purpose of this assessment and to best gauge how effective citizens perceive themselves, a few simple and reliable questions were used in the questionnaire (Robison et al. 1999).

Participants were asked a series of questions concerning how effective they perceive their actions are or what their impact is on the political decision making process. These questions related to individual influence or effectiveness in both local and national government activity, issues in their community, and local

government decisions. Additionally, respondents were asked if they had participated in a local issue, and how effective they felt their participation was on that issue.

Sixty-four percent of total respondents said they had participated in some way on a local issue (52 percent of registered voters and 99 percent of advisory board members). Assessing how effective they felt their participation efforts were on the issue, respondents were mixed, with only 30 percent ranking their efforts as effective to very effective (Figure D).

**How effective do you feel that your participation was on that local issue?**

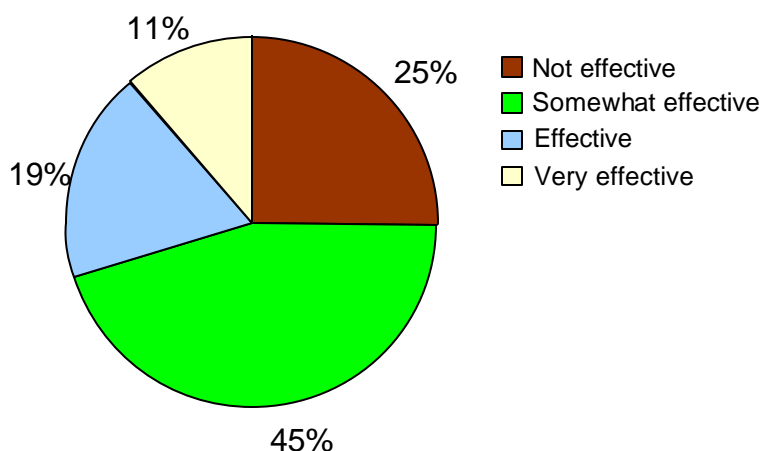


Figure D. Perception of participation effectiveness for both registered voters and advisory board members.

When advisory board members were asked about the effectiveness of their advisory board, 58 percent ranked their efforts as effective to very effective (Figure E).

**How effective do you think your CAB was in addressing the issues that came before your board?**

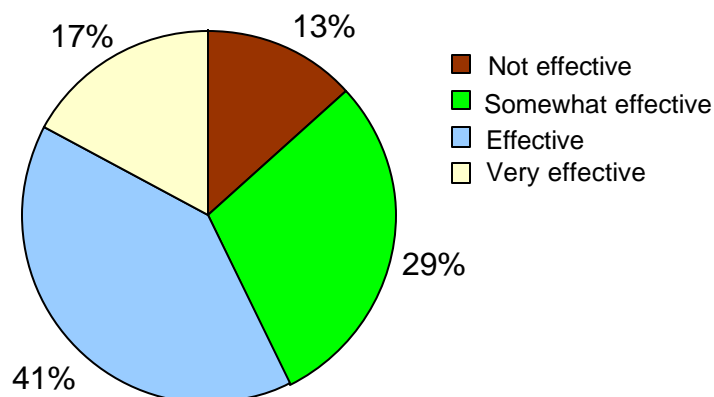


Figure E. Perception of CAB effectiveness for advisory board members.

One would expect (and hope) advisory board members would perceive their participation efforts as effective. The role of a Washoe County Citizen Advisory Board (CAB) is to communicate the interests of citizens to Commissioners on a variety of issues that affect their neighborhoods and jurisdictions. Additionally, CABs serve as one of the formal structures for gathering citizen input on issues and local governance. Although slightly more than half of advisory board members perceive themselves as effective, there is significant room for improvement in this area.

Other questions revealed that regarding a local government activity, advisory board members' perceptions of their individual effectiveness are higher than registered voters' perceptions of their individual effectiveness (Figure F).

**If you had a complaint regarding a local government activity and you took that complaint to your local government council, how much attention do you think that they would give you:**

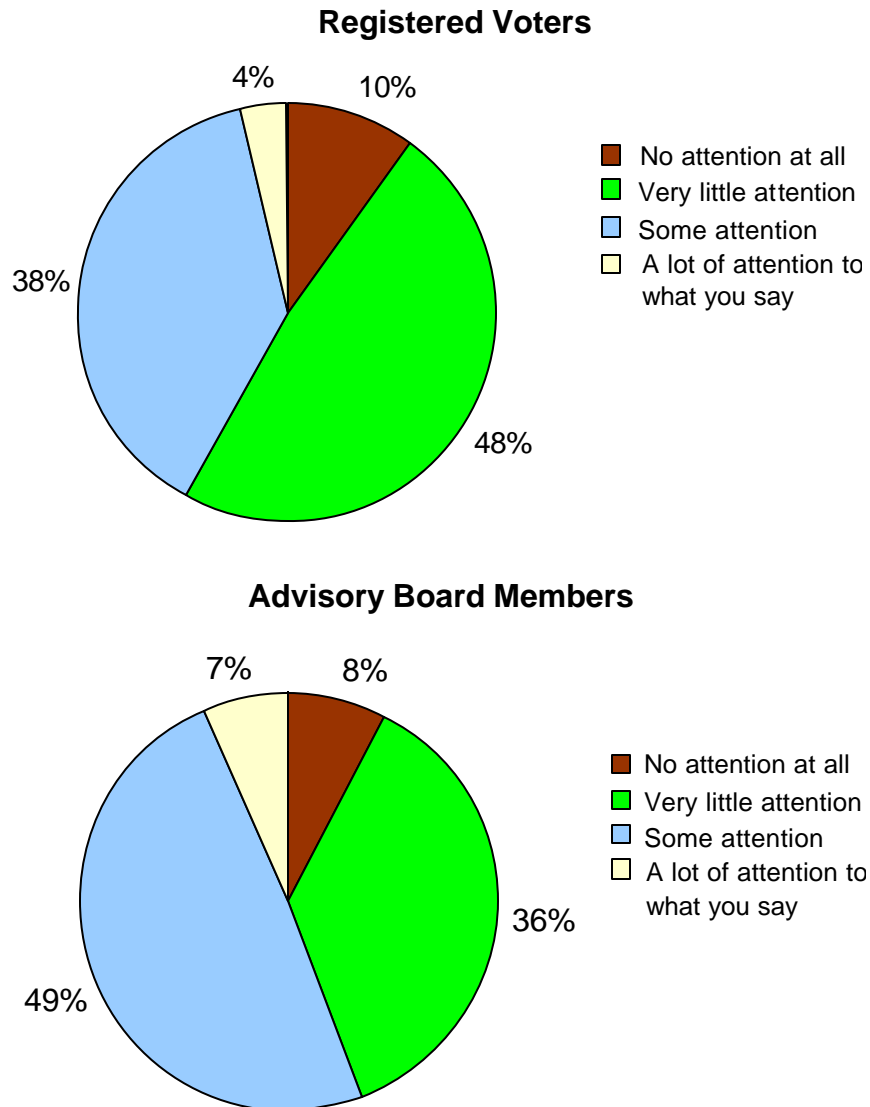


Figure F. Perception of individual effectiveness/influence regarding local government activities.



The difference between advisory board members' perception of effectiveness (56 percent) compared against registered voters' perception of effectiveness (42 percent) (Figure F) has a tendency toward significance ( $p=.054$ ).

When participants were asked how attentive they felt local government would be to a concern of theirs, advisory board members perceived local government would pay attention to their issues significantly more than the registered voters perceived local government would pay attention to their issues ( $p=.009$ ) (Figure G).

**Regarding an issue in your community, if you took a complaint to your local government council, how much attention do you think they would give you:**

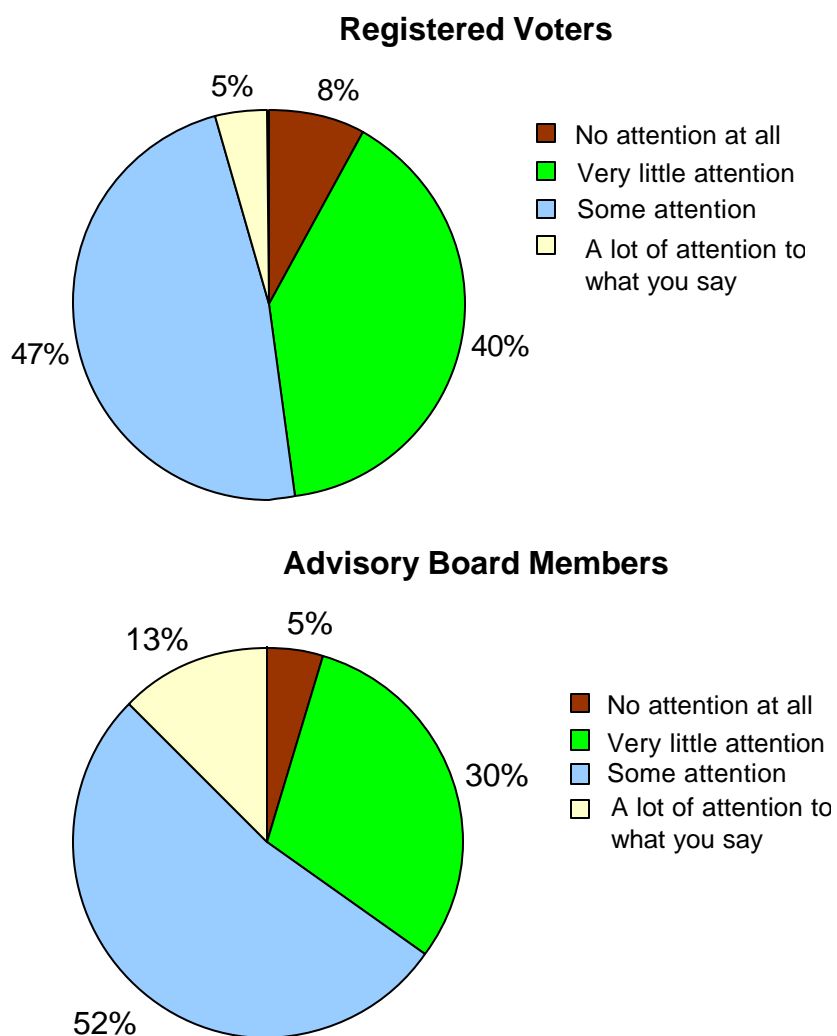


Figure G. Perception of individual effectiveness/influence regarding community issues.

Although Figure G may not appear to show a significant difference between the two groups, again advisory board members perceive themselves as being more effective regarding community issues than registered voters perceive themselves.

Responses of registered voters and advisory board members also differed significantly ( $p = .002$ ) on another commonly used measure for effectiveness regarding influence over local government decisions. Twenty-three percent of registered voters rated they had some to a lot of influence over local government decisions while 43 percent of advisory board members rated themselves as having some to a lot of influence over local government decisions (Figure H).

### How much influence do you think someone like you has over local government decisions?

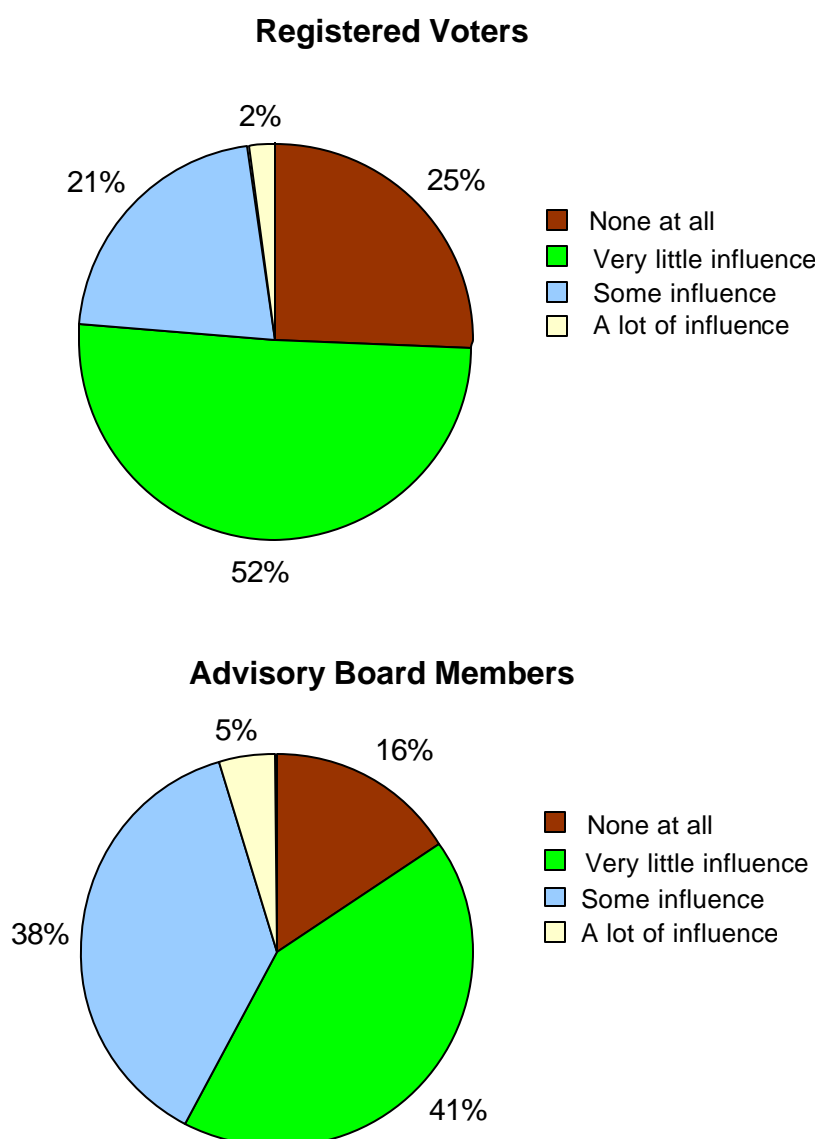


Figure H. Perception of individual effectiveness/influence regarding local government issues.

The results from Figures E, F, G and H all demonstrate advisory board members perceive themselves as being effective with regard to local government more so than registered voters perceive themselves as effective. This result supports what we know already in the literature, those who feel effective participate and the more one participates the more effective they perceive their efforts. Results from Figures E, F, G and H seem to support this conclusion. However we still do not know if Citizen Advisory Board members participate because they perceive themselves as effective prior to participating on a community board, or as a result of their experience on the advisory board CAB members perceive themselves as effective.

To assess if perceived effectiveness was related to local activities and issues or the broader governmental process, I also asked both participant groups to rate their sense of effectiveness regarding national government activities. I asked, *If you had a complaint about a national government activity and took that complaint to your congressman or congresswoman, do you think they would pay: no attention; very little attention; some attention; or a lot of attention to what you say.* The majority of respondents (60 percent of registered voters and 56 percent of advisory board members) answered *no attention* or *very little attention*. There was no significant difference between the two groups ( $p = .350$ ).

As discussed in the research literature and evidenced on this assessment, citizens feel more likely to be heard on local issues impacting local government, than on national issues. Many citizens feel issues that are national in scope are best left to professional lobby groups and advocacy groups. To impact national issues, citizens now simply join an advocacy group who will speak and fight for them in the nation's capital (Putnam 2000). However, if one is concerned about local issues and wants to impact those decisions, they need to participate in the local process. Local community involvement is still the best way to experience democracy and promote overall civic health. Although certain civic skills are required for participation, one must also feel their efforts will have some sort of influence or impact.

### **Assessing Overall Civic Health: Putting it all together**

Trust, which is a measure of confidence and faith people have in their government (Citrin and Muste 1999), can be measured by a variety of attitudinal scales composing numerous factors. However, this assessment applied a simple approach that focused on a reliable and consistently used question (Citrin and Muste 1999). On a very basic level, trust in local government is a systematic measure for gauging how effective citizens feel local policies and authorities are in their duties and obligations as officials. Therefore, high levels of trust are also linked to community support for government policies and decisions. Trust in local government was low both among advisory board members and among registered voters, 63 percent and 55 percent respectively, expressing distrust of local

government. When asked if they agree with the statement, *I trust local government to do what is right*, the majority of respondents disagreed to strongly disagreed (Figure I).

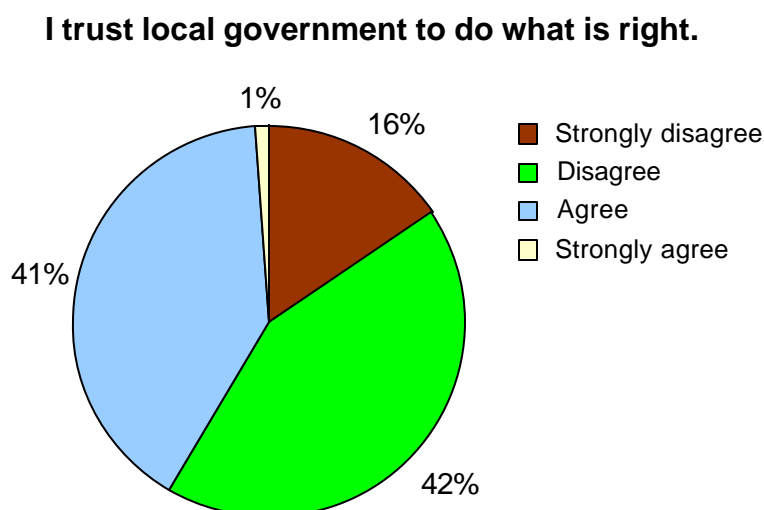


Figure I. Response levels for both registered voters and advisory board members regarding trust for local government.

There is no significant difference between the two groups in their level of trust. Both groups equally distrust local government ( $p=.416$ ). Low levels of trust regarding social and political institutions are associated with low levels of social capital. Social capital is the network of social relationships that help facilitate collaboration and action in community (Coleman 1988). Additionally, governments with low levels of trust tend to have low levels of civic engagement (Putnam 1993, 2000; Fukuyama 1995).

One might expect the opposite: If people distrust government, you would assume they would be more prone to participate, if only to oversee or monitor decisions made by government. Historically this is how democratic societies were built and how progressive reform arose in the U.S. (Skocpol 1999). Other scholars argue that when citizens distrust government they feel powerless, become frustrated, and disengage from participation activities. Regardless of the consequence for distrust of government, it is clear when citizens distrust their government, civic health and civic engagement are dramatically affected. The findings in this assessment and throughout the research literature indicate citizens distrust not only local officials, but also the institutions designed to gather their input and make decisions for the betterment of community. There is a national trend in which citizens have expressed a growing distrust of government and the sanctioned governmental processes designed to encourage participation (Craig 1993).

## CONCLUSIONS WITH IDENTIFIED EDUCATIONAL GOALS

Results from this assessment help explain who participates in local government processes: people who are more educated, have a higher household income and tend to be long-term residents. This assessment also reveals that people take part in community: 1) *To make the community a better place to live*; 2) *To solve a particular problem*; 3) *To influence government policy*; and 4) *To lend a hand to people who need help*. Civic skill level also helps illustrate how effective one will be in their participation efforts, and although citizens in the Western Area have practiced civic skills at some level, there is room for substantial improvement. Likewise, local government officials must become more trusted by both groups assessed, registered voters and citizen advisory board members.

Finally, citizen responses indicate that although advisory board members perceive themselves as more effective than registered voters, to improve the overall civic health, efforts must be directed at transitioning more of the non-participants (i.e., registered voters) into actively engaged members of the community. Participation levels among citizens in general have declined dramatically in this country over the last 30 years. This overall trend has impacted all aspects of public and social life. People today have "...stopped doing committee work, stopped serving as officers and stopped going to meetings" (Putnam 2000, p. 63-64).

Clear, significant differences exist between the two groups assessed. Most notably, this assessment has found that reasons for participation, civic skill level, and perception of participation effectiveness all vary significantly between registered voters—a random sample of citizens in the Western Area and Citizen Advisory Board members—active participants in the community. Identifying an overall Community and Organizational Development educational goal that is aimed at improving the civic health of the Western Area will involve more than just increasing participation among citizens. To truly work toward creating a civic community will require strengthening our local networks and institutions that include schools, governments and universities (Skocpol 1999).

Based on results in this assessment and the research literature, I plan to design educational programs aimed at improving individual civic skills that encourage participation of all groups of citizens, with an emphasis placed on those who are less educated and with lower incomes. Venues for potential programs will be targeted at schools, universities, community/neighborhood associations and government municipalities to augment existing curriculum or fill a void where no educational opportunities exist. Therefore to meet this broad program goal, educational programs will be targeted to three audiences:

- 1) Young adults (ages 16-25) who are not members of a traditional volunteer or community association or who are members but lack training in civic education.

- 2) Currently non-participating adults (ages 26+) who may be members of an association but lack training in civic skills or want to become active participators in their community. Emphasis also will be place on those individuals who are from a lower socioeconomic background.
- 3) Participating adults, including current members of advisory boards and/or elected local officials. While advisory board members possess the qualities necessary for participation, their efforts can be more effective with additional training. Likewise, given the low level of trust for our local officials and the fact that they may or may not have participated in skill-building training, an educational opportunity exists to augment their current civic skill level to improve their effectiveness, which enhances the overall civic health of our community.

#### Youth (ages 16-25)

Targeting educational programs for youth in this age group will be best met through existing institutions, high schools, college, the work force, etc. Obviously strong partnerships will need to be formed with these institutions to make such a program successful. A large component of this programming vein will also involve civic education, the importance of participation in our communities, citizenship, and service learning. Civic and leadership skills will also be taught.

#### Current non-participating adults (ages 26+)

No educational program will directly change people's reasons for participating but indirectly their reasons may change through education. On the other hand, civic skill level and perception of effectiveness can be improved upon through educational programs and thus will be the focus of this programming vein. The challenge to this programming vein lies in the targeting and recruitment of potential participants. Again partnerships will need to be brokered with current institutions and networks.

#### Participating Adults (advisory board members and local officials)

The current Engaged Leadership Program meets a very strong need in the Western Area by targeting current advisory board members in Washoe County and Carson City who are already involved in their community. Current partnerships and collaborations with the jurisdictions will be maintained and strengthened to include local officials. This program is currently designed to equip existing members with the tools and skills needed to be more effective participators.

Lastly, this assessment lays out an educational program strategy for Community and Organizational Development in the Western Area. Although the three audiences and resulting educational programs targeted are ambitious, the assessment reflects a strategic direction for programming over the next five to six years. While all three audiences may not be addressed over the next five years, it provides a vision of programming to work toward.

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