Educating for Deliberative Democracy

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EDITOR

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Campus-based centers and institutes serve as hubs for local dialogue, deliberation, and collaborative problem solving.

Facilitating Democracy: Centers and Institutes of Public Deliberation and Collaborative Problem Solving

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Facing significant budget deficits and stagnant enrollments, a local school district realized that they would likely need to close some schools, which is always a difficult issue for communities to consider. Initial newspaper reports about potential closings caused a strong reaction from the public, resulting in the organizing of several Facebook "Save our School" groups, angry letters to the editor of the local paper, and intense public meetings often vilifying the superintendent. The school district, hoping to find a way to have a productive community conversation about this difficult issue, turned to a local, nonpartisan university-based organization to help examine the situation from an impartial, third-party perspective, and then design, facilitate, and report on a public participation process. The organization utilized students throughout the process, including as facilitators of small group discussions during each of three large public meetings. In the end, the public engaged a difficult issue much more productively, the school district gained high-quality public input, students had an opportunity to gain valuable experience and sharpen their twenty-first century skills in a "real-world" situation, faculty researchers learned useful lessons about collaborative problem solving and deliberative practice, and the university bolstered its value to the community.

Projects such as these are happening more and more across the country in recent years. The continued development and maturation of campus-based centers and institutes tied to deliberative democracy, such as those that are a part of the National Issues Forum network and the University Network for Collaborative Governance (UNCG), represents a phenomenon that holds great promise to provide our communities with the necessary

capacity to spark and sustain productive collaborative problem solving. Such centers can serve as critical "hubs" of democracy that provide the necessary impartial resources and process expertise to connect experts, institutional decision makers, and the public in ways that democracy currently sorely lacks, but clearly requires to function well (Carcasson, 2008; London 2010). This chapter provides an introduction to these centers, an overview of the two networks, and a summary of the type of work they do.

Center Basics

The particular setup of the various centers varies widely. True to the nature of deliberative democracy, they are interdisciplinary, finding homes all over their respective colleges and universities. Many centers are stand-alone interdisciplinary entities of their own; others are connected to *academic disciplines* (currently there are centers housed in departments or schools of education, communication, government, law, business, history, political science, public health, urban planning, leadership, and community development), *administrative offices* (such as Offices of Equity and Diversity or Community Development), or *cooperative extension.* One of the UNCG centers, the Ruckelshaus Center, is a unique collaboration across two rival institutions, connecting the University of Washington and Washington State University.

The centers also differ significantly in size and budgets, in what activities they primarily focus upon, and the extent to which they utilize students or engage in research. Some of the centers are run by dedicated staff or tenured faculty, but more often the work of these centers is completed by individuals in a wide variety of positions whose work at the center makes up only a portion of their job descriptions. Despite these differences, two common threads bring these centers together. The first is an overall philosophy that has them focus on serving as key resources for improving the quality of collaborative decision making, problem solving, and public conflict management in their communities or regions. In other words, they focus on supporting processes designed to improve our democracy. To serve this mission, they cultivate a reputation of nonpartisan impartiality to play the critical roles of designers, conveners, facilitators, and reporters of productive collaborative processes such as community dialogues, deliberative forums, stakeholder negotiation processes, and other public participation efforts. Such processes require safe places for citizens to come together, good and fair information to help structure the conversation, and skilled facilitators to guide the process. In a variety of ways, these centers and institutes are dedicated to providing these three key ingredients to their respective communities.

Said differently, these centers often have a dual focus of addressing both the problems *in* democracy and the problems *of* democracy (Mathews, 2009). They help their communities address concrete public problems, but

Figure 6.1. Spheres of Democratic Communication.
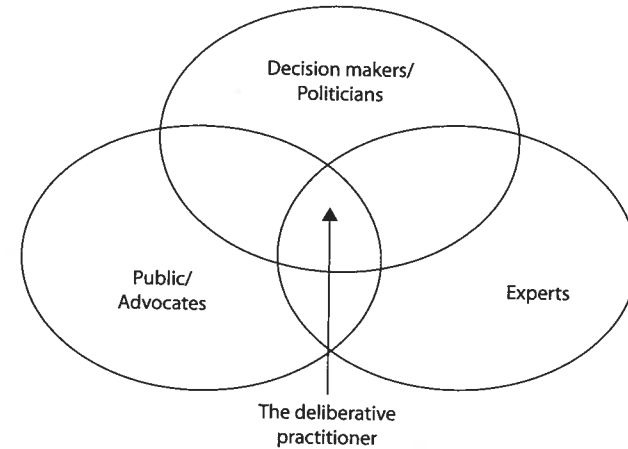
Adapted from Throgmorton, "The Rhetorics of Policy Analysis," 1991.

they hope to tackle them in particular ways that are more inclusive, lead to more sustainable solutions, and are supported more broadly by the community. In many ways, they also are concerned about building capacity and developing particular democratic habits in the community so that with each project the community becomes more self-sufficient (Carcasson, 2009).

A second common theme is that these centers generally support emerging notions of "democratic" or "collaborative" governance (Boyte, 2005; National League of Cities, 2006). Such perspectives call for a reconsideration of the respective roles of the public, experts, and government in public problem solving. They support the assumption that communities solve problems, not governments, though governments certainly remain a key tool for communities to utilize. Citizens are thus transformed from mere spectators, taxpayers, or voters, to engaged problem solvers. Such a view requires productive coordination between public, private, and nonprofit sectors; therefore, it necessitates processes that can support such interactions. As Figure 6.1 shows, deliberative practitioners such as those involved with these centers and institutes see themselves at the nexus of these worlds; they hope to facilitate bringing them together in much more productive ways to enable the coordination and refinement of interests and perspectives that democracy requires.

A Tale of Two Networks

Currently, two networks of such centers are operating and share many similarities, but also have some interesting differences. The National Issues

Forum (NIF) network has been developing for the last thirty years. Currently, fifty-two centers or institutes are listed on the NIF Web site, covering thirty-nine states (www.nifi.org/network). The network initially developed with a focus on training individuals to run public forums that would utilize NIF discussion guides. These centers hosted training workshops that primarily served to train community members how to host and moderate NIF-style public forums. The NIF forums typically involve two-hour sessions focused on a particular issue that brings the public together to consider a common problem and three or four potential approaches to addressing the problem. Such forums are often educational, but, at times, the data captured during the discussions may be used to spark community action, inform institutional decision makers, or contribute to broader research concerning the public voice on particular issues. These forums and workshops remain a key function of many of the NIF centers. Some of the centers focus on such NIF work, but most have a much wider range of activities. In particular, many of the most-involved centers have begun to focus more and more on engaging local issues, and thus develop original material for projects and experiment with a number of deliberative methods.

The University Network for Collaborative Governance (UNCG) is a newer network, but includes a number of centers with significant histories. In 2004, the Policy Consensus Initiative (PCI) conducted a national survey of around fifty university-based programs that were "providing consultation, convening, facilitation, training, research, and process-design services for collaborative policymaking efforts," and published the results in an insightful report entitled, "Finding Better Ways to Solve Public Problems: The Emerging Role of Universities as Neutral Forums for Collaborative Problem-Solving" (PCI, 2005). The report detailed the development and growth of many centers, lessons learned, and overviews of the activities with which they were involved. Following the report, PCI was instrumental in the development of UNCG, launched in 2008, and continues to play a key role in supporting the network. Quoting from the UNCG brochure, the network is "made up of forward-thinking centers and programs that engage in service and scholarship to enable citizens and their leaders to engage in dialogue, discussion, problem solving, and conflict resolution around public issues." Currently, twenty-six programs are officially part of the network.

Whereas the NIF network originated primarily to provide places for training, many UNCG centers began as centers focused on mediation, alternative dispute resolution, and collaborative policymaking, at times directly serving government agencies. Another distinction between the two networks is that a majority of the UNCG centers are focused on particular substantive issues such as natural resource management or intergovernmental relations, whereas the NIF centers tend to address a broader range of issues. It could perhaps also be said that the NIF centers typically focus more on working primarily with the general public and community organizations,

whereas many of the UNCG programs are more involved with official stakeholder processes that are more likely to directly engage institutional decision makers and key organizational representatives rather than the general public. Stakeholder processes are also typically much more formal, involving multiple meetings, and at times seeking official consensus agreements. There are a few centers that are part of both networks, including the center that I direct at Colorado State University, the Center for Public Deliberation (CPD).

Center Activities

The centers and institutes in both networks participate in a wide range of activities. The two most basic activities are projects and training. In this sense, their work fits primarily, and for some centers exclusively, into service or engagement efforts in the collegiate triumvirate of teaching, research, and service. Projects may be a function of their university service, tied to class projects or student engagement, serve as a collaboration between the center and other campus or community organizations or government institutions, or be completed as part of a grant or fee-for-service contracts. Some of the more established UNCG centers are connected to state governments and work on major collaborative projects involving significant contracts. The centers may also provide specific services, particularly as process consultants and trained facilitators, for projects run by other organizations.

Most of the centers are also involved in training for a wide variety of skills connected to deliberative work, such as facilitation, issue framing, policy analysis, conflict management, and project design. Similar to the project work, the training at times is provided as a public service, and at times is a key revenue generator. Trainings may target the general public, community leaders, or local and state government officials. One of the current projects the UNCG is taking on is to perform an inventory of both the collaborative competencies related to the work and the various trainings offered among the centers in order to create better coordination between them.

Beyond these two major activities that are common to many of the centers, other activities depend on the particular program. The degree to which centers are connected to teaching and research varies significantly. A growing number of the NIF centers in particular utilize students in many aspects of their programs. Projects run by the CPD at Colorado State University, for example, involve students throughout. A student associate program was developed that brings in about ten to fifteen students each semester through an application process to participate in a year-long program. During the first semester, students take a dedicated three-hour course focused on training them as facilitators, and then in subsequent semesters take practicum credits while working on projects. Students assist in all aspects of CPD projects, including project selection, design, convening, facilitating, and reporting. Such substantial student involvement is not typical of many of the programs,

however. Other programs may have internships for students, or have specific programs to attract students to training workshops, but do not rely heavily on the students during projects.

Lastly, some of the centers are also involved in research, particularly on public policy issues. Many of the NIF centers work closely with the Kettering Foundation, a research foundation that focuses on the question, "What does it take to make democracy work as it should?" Research, however, is typically a secondary concern. Research may be focused on deliberative theory and practice, or on the specific issues their projects address. Many develop detailed case studies of their projects, though the degree to which such work is considered "research" likely depends on the institution.

Conclusion: Future Growth and Development

Centers can serve as clearinghouses and symbolic institutional homes for the variety of critical activities that require significant capacity and time to do well. Activities such as being the local voice for civility and collaboration, linking and improving theory and practice, serving as a central organizing point for grant proposals and fee-for-service work, providing training opportunities and faculty development, and connecting the work to students and faculty in multiple disciplines. The future development of these centers, however, will be contingent on a number of factors. Much of the work of these centers is completed by individual deliberative catalysts or entrepreneurs that often go significantly "above and beyond" in time and effort to support the work of their organizations. Such a model is not sustainable long term. Many of the centers are also in precarious financial positions at their institutions, as are any university entities that are not directly connected to core functions. The ability of these centers to acquire more resources, particularly in the form of dedicated staff, is critical to the impact they have on our communities. Some of the centers are self-sufficient through fee-for-service, but if forced to rely on charging for their services, their impact on their communities may be limited to projects that have financial support, which can lead to inequalities. Perhaps most important to their future development and sustainability is having them more strongly connect to the teaching and research functions of their institutions, without distracting from the important service work they currently provide. In the end, perhaps the ultimate vision is for every college or university across the country to provide all their students with the skills our diverse democracy requires, take responsibility in their research efforts to better understand *and* improve the quality of our democratic processes, and serve their communities as catalysts, conveners, and facilitators for deliberative practice. As stories similar to the one that opened this essay are replicated more and more across the country, it seems clear that centers and institutes specifically focused on deliberative democracy and collaborative problem solving offer a particularly promising way to fulfill those responsibilities.

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