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The Critical Role of Local Centers and Institutes in Advancing Deliberative Democracy

Abstract

Utilizing the development and early history of the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation as an example, this paper makes the case for expanding the number of and the level of support for such campus-based centers as critical resources for expanding deliberative democracy. Due to their ability to not only provide deliberative capacity to the community, but also to attract students to our field and equip with them with essential skills, to strengthen the connection of colleges and universities to their local communities, and to contribute to the further development of deliberative theory and practice, these local “hubs of democracy” represent a natural “win-win-win-win” that warrants significant focus as we work to develop the deliberative culture of our communities.

Keywords

community capacity, centers and institutes, community problem-solving, student engagement

The Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) was established in the fall of 2006. It was initially developed to provide opportunities for students to apply deliberative concepts to community issues. I had been experimenting with incorporating such concepts in my argumentation and debate classes, and decided to take the opportunity to see if the students could potentially develop material and host events in the community that provided an alternative to the typically adversarial and expert dominated discussion of public issues. After receiving some National Issues Forum and International Association of Public Participation training myself, I developed a course to train a group of high quality students selected through an application process to serve as small group facilitators. When the CPD began, I truly expected our projects to be student led projects that sparked interesting community discussions, but not much more than that.

From the very beginning, however, the community seemed to have much more ambitious plans for the CPD. As I was setting up the basic structure of the organization, a grant I was applying for required an advisory board made up of individuals both on and off campus. So I essentially “cold called” several local institutions. The most important was likely to my local school district’s communications director, Ellen Laubhan. I explained I was a CSU professor starting an organization to help spark better conversations about tough issues in the community, and her initial response was to ask me to help with a meeting they needed to run in a few weeks regarding civic education as part of a grant they had received. We helped with that meeting, which went very well, and three months later the school district called us back, this time to help with a much more controversial issue. We ended out running six nights of forums, with over 500 attendees, and again the processes went very well. The value of having a third-party run the process was clear, as well as the ability to bring 20 trained facilitators with me each night. Another of the cold calls to the League of Women Voters connected us both to a major project related to a regional transportation plan and a project with the LWV regarding statewide health care reform.

Those projects led to others, and in most cases at the end of each event, someone would walk up to me, hand me a business card, and ask for help on another project. In the eight years the CPD has operated, other than a couple minor projects our first year, each of our projects has come to us from the community, asking for process and facilitation help on difficult issues. The original purpose of the CPD—to provide students an opportunity to apply deliberative concepts to community issues—has certainly been fulfilled, but in reality the CPD has fulfilled a much broader, much more important purpose. It has become a critical impartial resource for the northern Colorado community, providing capacity for deliberative discussions and collaborative problem solving. Each year we run a number of projects for the city government, citizen boards and commissions, nearby school districts, and a wide variety of community organizations such as the United Way, community foundations, and the public library.

I tell this story about the origin and unexpected rapid growth of the CPD to highlight what I believe is my most relevant reflection about the 10 years I have been involved in the field of deliberative democracy: I truly believe our local communities are starved for genuine conversation and authentic engagement. The CPD was clearly filling an important void in the community. Despite the dominance of adversarial methods of communication and the corresponding apathy, polarization, and cynicism that seems to define our political culture, my experience with the CPD shows that when given an alternative, people relish it. Whereas I do believe the simplistic “us v. them” and “good v. evil” polarization is much more natural and psychologically pleasing to most, I also believe that, with help, individuals and communities can build much stronger habits for the high quality communication and engagement that democracy requires.

As I have argued in other writings (Carcasson, 2008, 2010), I believe local centers or institutions focused on deliberative practice can serve as “hubs of democracy” that help develop these individual habits and overall community culture. Indeed, I have argued that a rare “win-win-win-win” can be realized when colleges or universities build and support strong deliberative engagement programs focused on their local communities. The students win by building an incredible skill set very much in demand by employers. The institution wins by strengthening its community ties in ways that make real, direct impacts without relying on the “top-down” expert model or taking sides on controversial issues. The community is constantly amazed at the quality of work of the students, and the fact that they are not only attending a public meeting, but helping run one. The community gets to see the students in a much different light than normal, which helps highlight the benefits of the local institution. As a tenured faculty member with teaching, research, and service responsibilities, I win because I get to bring all three of those aspects of my job requirement in concert with each other, each sharpening and improving the other. Like most fields, our field suffers from a disconnect between theory and practice, and the work of local centers and institutes focused on deliberative practice offer a strong response to those gaps. And the final “win” is perhaps the most important: the community receives significant improved capacity for deliberative engagement.

This final win cannot be underestimated. I speak often of the pros and cons of three different models of public problem-solving: the adversarial, the expert, and the deliberative. Each has a unique mix of benefits and costs, but it is clear the most significant barriers to the deliberative are the time and skilled capacity required to support quality deliberative projects. Most communities simply do not have the funds to hire outside firms to fulfill all the tasks necessary to support deliberative projects (i.e. analyzing multiple perspectives in order to frame the issue productively, convening broad and inclusive audiences, training facilitators, designing processes, running the processes themselves, processing the data from the events, and finally supporting the long term move to action that often involves multiple stakeholders). I have written before about the critical need for “passionate impartiality” to support deliberative work (Sprain and Carcasson,

2013), but the reality is passionate impartiality rarely occurs naturally. That being said, students and faculty working in public institutions of higher learning are the best bet we have for cultivating enough passionate impartiality in our communities to support the ongoing development of deliberative capacity, precisely because those faculty and students can pursue their own ends while also providing critical capacity to their community.

The good news is that more and more institutions are taking advantage of the win-win-win. In 2011, the Kettering Foundation developed their Centers for Public Life program, which provides in-kind training and networking for communities developing public deliberation programs similar to the CPD (Diebel and Nielsen, 2013). Around forty programs have participated over the last four years, significantly expanding the network of local centers supporting deliberative practice involved with the NIF network (www.nifi.org/network). The University Network for Collaborative Governance (<http://www.policyconsensus.org/uncg/>) has also developed over the past decade to provide additional support and networking opportunities for similar institutions, built off of the emerging role of universities as neutral forums for collaborative policymaking (Policy Consensus Institute, 2005).

In closing, I believe the further expansion of new local centers—both in terms of their total number as well as the level of support each receives from their institutions and community—is perhaps the most important factor for the development of our field. The number of centers is certainly growing, but many are scarcely supported and rely too much on individual champions going above and beyond their own responsibilities. Too many are also primarily focused on service, and are disconnected from their institution’s core functions of teaching and research (Carcasson, 2008). Despite these important limitations that must be addressed, the potential impacts from the win-win-win-win are substantial. Due to their ability to provide critical deliberative capacity to the community, while attracting top students to our field and equipping with them with essential skills, strengthening the connection of colleges and universities to their local communities, and contributing to the further development of deliberative theory and practice, these local “hubs of democracy” represent an essential strength of our field as we move forward.

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