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## The Next Generation of Our Work

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## The Next Generation of Our Work

### **Abstract**

In this reflective piece, Sandy Heierbacher, Director of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), outlines some of the trends she has been noticing from her unique vantage point in the rapidly growing and innovating field of deliberative democracy. Heierbacher reflects on ways this field, centered around practices designed to engage citizens in the decisions and issues that effect their lives, is changing its relationship with government, becoming more receptive to online tools for engagement, shifting its attention back to local efforts, focusing attention on building infrastructure, and increasingly relying on collaboration to achieve its goals.

### **Keywords**

dialogue, deliberation, deliberative democracy, movement building, field building, public engagement, collaboration, civic infrastructure

How does one comment on the state of a field that seems to be ever growing yet constantly in flux? As the director of the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD), I have a bird's eye view of this burgeoning, vibrant field. Yet I realize I see only a fraction of the great work that is being done to engage people in the decisions and issues that effect their lives.

Here are a few of the trends I have been noticing from my vantage point.

**Collaboration with government.** Many engagement practitioners are accustomed to working outside of government out of necessity, pushing on the edges of power but rarely getting through. This has been gradually changing with innovations like the Citizens Initiative Review and Participatory Budgeting being embraced by local and state governments. Additionally, government networks like the National Council on State Legislators<sup>1</sup> and the International City/County Management Association<sup>2</sup> are beginning to recognize deliberative public engagement as vital to effective governance.

**Openness to online tools for engagement.** Many group process experts are still skeptical that quality dialogue and deliberation can happen online. Yet there has been a growing interest among NCDD members to understand how they might utilize technology to engage new audiences and to support their face-to-face efforts. The popularity of our Tech Tuesday events and the quick acclimation our members have shown to our own online programs using tools like Codigital, Maestroconference and Hackpad are a testament to this shift.

Although skepticism is still par for the course among dialogue and deliberation practitioners who understand the power of in-person engagement, we are learning how to selectively invest our time and energy in online technology so we are not left in the dust as the world rapidly becomes more connected and digitized. Some examples of successful online engagement include recent experiments like Creating Community Solutions' Text-Talk-Act project ([www.creatingcommunitysolutions.org/texttalkact](http://www.creatingcommunitysolutions.org/texttalkact)), which utilized text messaging technology to guide groups of young people through in-person dialogues, and our successful use of Codigital to get the NCDD community to crowdsource, hone and prioritize ideas for our upcoming conference. These experiences show how the deliberative democracy field is learning to appreciate the continuum Ethan Zuckerman of MIT Media Lab refers to as "thin engagement" (for texting, voting, clicking, sharing) and "thick engagement" (for the work our field is all about).

**Consistently rapid growth.** If NCDD's membership is any indication, the deliberative democracy field is growing rapidly. After launching in 2002 with 50 organizational members, we now have more than 2,050 members and 33,500 subscribers. Lately, it seems like someone new finds and joins NCDD every single day, and we constantly learn of new organizations, networks and innovators we would love to bring into the network.

**Increased energy devoted to collaborative efforts.** Many in the dialogue and

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<sup>1</sup> <http://www.ncsl.org/research/about-state-legislatures/citizen-engagement.aspx>

<sup>2</sup> [http://icma.org/en/results/management\\_strategies/leading\\_practices/civic\\_engagement](http://icma.org/en/results/management_strategies/leading_practices/civic_engagement)

deliberation community recognize that their hopes for this work cannot be realized unless we combine efforts. An important recent example of cross-organization collaboration in the deliberative democracy field is Creating Community Solutions, an alliance of six organizations—AmericaSpeaks, the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, Everyday Democracy, the National Issues Forums Institute, the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation, and the University of Arizona’s National Institute for Civil Discourse—which organized hundreds of dialogues across the country as part of Obama’s National Dialogue on Mental Health.

Also, two notable collaborative events are being planned to coincide with the National Conference on Dialogue & Deliberation in October. First, the Mediators Foundation will lead a meeting-of-the-minds of top leaders and influencers in transpartisan dialogue work. Second, the CommunityMatters Partnership will convene a summit on civic infrastructure bringing together leaders in various sectors of public work. Both events will encourage collaboration and relationship building among people doing parallel, but often disconnected, work.

Other examples of successful collaboration include last year’s effort by a group of NCDD members to organize a public-at-all-levels infrastructure for national dialogue on a shoestring budget. Additionally, the Kettering Foundation has increased its attention to the opportunities for deliberative democracy organizations to collaborate, and as a field we are recognizing and dealing with the various barriers and snags we face while attempting to work together. These efforts are just a taste of the collaboration that is happening across this field.

**A re-focus on the power of local.** Though President Obama’s attention to open government caused a temporary spike in our field’s hopefulness that public engagement would be supported from the national stage, I’ve seen a strong swing back to a focus on the local level. Many new ultra-local efforts have formed and thrived in the past few years. These efforts tend to be self-supported, innovative, timely, and practical. One of my favorite examples comes from an NCDD member in Denver, local playwright and actor Evan Weissman, who founded an effort called “Warm Cookies of the Revolution.” Warm Cookies has created a “Civic Health Club” in Denver that runs creative civic events on everything from water treatment to pro sports—and serves milk and cookies at every event for the hungry activists and curious citizens who attend.

Even *national* efforts like Transition Towns and Resilience Circles, which help prepare people for environmental and economic fall-out, prioritize the establishment of local level groups. And we were reminded of the power of local relationships while running Creating Community Solutions for Obama’s national dialogue on mental health, when support, publicity and creativity came through in abundance at the local level while we struggled for attention and funds at the national level.

**Funders are coming around.** Though the lack of funding is a much discussed challenge facing practitioners of work focused on “process,” more and more funders seem to be focusing on convening, facilitation, and stakeholder collaboration. The Kellogg

Foundation and Rockefeller Foundation both produced gorgeous guidebooks on convening last year. Community foundations across the U.S. and foundations that work intensively in select communities, like the Orton Family Foundation, are embracing their role as catalysts for community-wide dialogue and collaboration. And many foundations are devoting significant resources to “Collective Impact” efforts, which bring together issue-focused groups that typically compete with each other for funding and public attention, and facilitate and support them in setting, measuring and achieving joint goals.

**Attention to infrastructure.** Leaders in the deliberative democracy field are increasingly focused on infrastructure. NCDD dedicated its last national conference to examining the concept of “civic infrastructure” – the underlying structure and supports people need so they can come together to address their challenges effectively. There are also many other examples of dialogue and deliberation organizations raising questions about infrastructure. For example, the Community Matters Partnership ([www.communitymatters.org/who-we-are](http://www.communitymatters.org/who-we-are)), an alliance of seven national organizations involved in community building, place making and grant making, have turned their attention to understanding and proliferating the concept. New Hampshire Listens is working to build a statewide infrastructure to support public deliberation on complex issues affecting New Hampshire residents, and UIC’s Institute for Policy & Civic Engagement studied Chicago’s participation and activist infrastructure in order to build a robust dialogue and deliberation network in the city.

The Creating Community Solutions’ partnership has been looking at what kind of infrastructure is needed to support future multi-method nationwide deliberation efforts. Finally, NCDD is working with the Kettering Foundation to gain a better understanding of the capacity and infrastructure that already exists throughout our field, in order to uncover how this capacity can best be utilized.

**What’s next for the field?** Much of NCDD’s time is devoted to keeping our network strong and active, and providing valuable content and programming for our members. This is a time of extraordinary momentum and productivity in our field, and we could easily fill our staff time simply by highlighting our members’ programs on our blog and social media, sharing their resources in our online resource center, and providing them with more and more ways to connect with each other about their successes and challenges.

Yet the trends I outlined above point to a strong yearning in our field to break out of our current constraints, to find ways to collaborate more effectively with each other, to combine forces with those outside our field, and to scale up our efforts. At the 2014 NCDD conference, we will be exploring all these trends as we rally around the theme “Democracy for the Next Generation.” What do we want the next generation of our work to look like, and how can we work together to get there? Now more than ever, we have both the opportunity and, increasingly, the imperative to bring this work to a much larger stage in order to build a stronger democracy that is able to address society’s most pressing challenges.

### **Author Information**

Sandy Heierbacher is the director of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD). She co-founded NCDD in 2002 with her husband, Andy Fluke, and with the support and involvement of 60 volunteers and 50 organizations. NCDD now represents more than 2,000 organizational and individual members and nearly 34,000 subscribers. Under Sandy's leadership, NCDD has grown into a respected hub, resource clearinghouse, convenor, and facilitative leader for a growing community of practice centered around the practices of dialogue and deliberation. Sandy has an M.A. in Intercultural and International Management from SIT Graduate Institute, and now serves as a Research Deputy with the Kettering Foundation in addition to running NCDD.