
DOING DEMOCRACY

How a Network of
Grassroots Organizations Is
Strengthening Community,
Building Capacity, and
Shaping a New Kind of
Civic Education



SCOTT LONDON • 2010

A REPORT FOR THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

Kettering Foundation

The Kettering Foundation is an operating foundation rooted in the tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others.

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PREFACE

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION IS pleased to publish Scott London's stories of a group of unique centers for public life. This report should be of use to citizens who want a stronger hand in shaping their future and to academic institutions that want to strengthen citizens' capacity for democratic self-rule. The centers are natural allies for both.

The centers differ widely in structure and purpose, yet their existence and growth have common roots in a range of long-term developments both inside and outside the academy. These centers were created primarily by civic entrepreneurs, many of whom are academics. All of the centers focus on the role of citizens in our democracy. Some have their own boards and nonprofit status; some are based in institutions of higher education. And while independent from the Kettering Foundation, most have an ongoing relationship with the foundation that is based on a joint-learning exchange. Kettering exchanges its research for the experiences that the centers have with citizens, local officials, and communities.

Who founded the centers is an interesting chapter in its own right. These civic entrepreneurs, with little support and a mixture of indifference

and opposition, created the centers almost out of thin air, much like the innovators who organized Neighborhood Watch Programs, Teach for America, and Habitat for Humanity. The centers' roots stretch back to the late 1970s, when the country was rocked by the human and financial cost of the war in Vietnam and by the revelations in the Watergate scandal that forced the first resignation of an American president. Citizens were losing confidence in the country's political system and government. Yet before the end of the decade, some began talking about "taking back the system," among them a handful of faculty and staff members at about a dozen colleges and universities that wanted to try to do something (they weren't exactly sure what) to give their fellow citizens a better understanding of policies that were being formulated in their names, particularly domestic policies that affected everyday life. These civic entrepreneurs began meeting and set out to revive something like a town-meeting democracy. They called themselves the Domestic Policy Association, a Tocquevillian civic alliance.

By the early 1980s, the Kettering Foundation joined these meetings, and with the help of another organization, Public Agenda, began pro-

ducing policy briefing books (what are today the National Issues Forums or NIF issue books) to be used in the public forums that the founders organized. The first issue books were on crises like the ones facing the Social Security and health-care systems. Today, these issue books cover major issues, including economic security, education, and the role of the United States in the world.

During the 1980s and 1990s, the number of forums held around the country grew into the thousands. Preparing people to lead them became a challenge, and the forum sponsors responded by establishing centers with training programs. The Domestic Policy Association was on its way to becoming a legally chartered nonprofit, the National Issues Forums Institute. And the centers have been joined by other forum sponsors outside academe, such as the Presidential Libraries, the Southern Growth Policies Board, the American Bar Association and, recently, the American Library Association. The forums also spread into tenants' associations, religious congregations, literacy programs, schools, and even prisons.

For Kettering, a research organization, the centers have proven to be an excellent source of information on some of the questions the foundation studies. Insights from Kettering research

have also been useful to the centers in sharpening their work. Of course, the centers have ties to organizations other than Kettering, and their objectives aren't primarily to provide information to the foundation. Nonetheless, the joint learning has been mutually beneficial.

Kettering soon found out that Americans weren't just interested in learning about policies; they wanted a voice in setting directions. Fortunately, the NIF issue books are framed around the approaches or options that need to be considered and could help forum participants work toward decisions on policies that require making

painful trade-offs. But what is this "choice work" like? As the foundation looked at what was going on in the forums, it became clear that people weren't just discussing policies or debating issues. What they were doing seemed closest to what is described in the literature as public deliberation—the exercise of judgment or moral reasoning. So the first Kettering exchange with the

centers focused on the nature of deliberation and what prompted it.

While knowing how deliberation works in a public setting was important, it quickly led Kettering to the obvious next question: what organizations would see it in their self-interest to

The most important insight has been that deliberative decision making by citizens is, in fact, an essential component of democratic politics, whether the issues are national or local.

provide space for citizens to deliberate? The centers had the same question from a practical point of view; they had to find allies that would cosponsor forums. So this became the basis for another joint-learning exchange. The major finding to date has been that organizations, particularly professional ones, often see it in their interest to find out how the public goes about making decisions on the issues that concern them. The results from public deliberation help to avoid miscommunications. For instance, people often start with different understandings of an issue than the ones that professionals and politicians use. Not recognizing those differences results in talking past citizens.

Governing bodies, both legislative and executive, also have reason to be interested in how citizens define issues and how they go about deciding what should be done. That is particularly the case because, as Dan Yankelovich, cofounder of Public Agenda has shown, the public moves in stages in making up its mind on a policy issue. For officeholders to misjudge where the citizenry is in moving from first impressions to considered judgment can be a major barrier to effective communication. Some of the centers have become interested in how local officials relate to their forums, and Kettering has had the troubled public-government relationship on its research radar for some time. This intersection of interests is the basis for still another joint-learning exchange.

Centers have also taken on new roles over the years, and that has provided more opportunities

for expanding the exchanges. Some began working with nearby communities on local issues, and Kettering was also looking at communities' role in democracy. Both Kettering and the centers found that public deliberation is not a technique for facilitating small group discussions but rather a way of making sound decisions on the potentially divisive issues that challenge communities. (Deliberative forums on policy issues have had an impressive record in helping people be able to deal with controversial issues like abortion and AIDS without leading to polarized stalemates.)

Drawing on the centers' experiences in communities, Kettering has recently started a new line of research focused on indigenous or local issues. The most important insight has been that deliberative decision making by citizens is, in fact, an essential component of democratic politics, whether the issues are national or local.

Presently, there are more than 50 centers, and the number continues to grow. Part of this growth may be in response to citizens' concerns about lack of a common or public voice in the political system and in response to appeals from communities. Within academe, other changes are making it easier for the centers to find allies. Political scientists have become interested in deliberative democracy; philosophers have taken up deliberative theory, and scholars in speech communication have delved into the tradition of rhetoric to resurrect ancient accounts of moral reasoning and the cultivation of practical wisdom.

In addition, major academic divisions such as the Cooperative Extension System have begun recovering their democratic roots and reexamining their relationship to communities as the number of farmers needing technical assistance continues to decline.

Growth hasn't been easy, however, as Scott London's report makes clear. Centers have faced practical difficulties that Kettering's research doesn't address. Funding has been a constant challenge, as has been replacing the founders when they leave or retire. And establishing an independent and distinctive identity has been crucial, particularly for centers

on campuses that have other types of institutes.

The importance of the centers, however, is not in their numbers. It is in the unique role they play in our democracy. The civic engagement that they foster is the engagement of citizens with citizens rather than the engagement of institutions with citizens. And the service they provide is not technical expertise but assistance in building indigenous civic capacity, which is the ability of people with different convictions and interests to join forces in combating common problems.

Perhaps most important of all, the centers make us aware that our democracy requires

more than visible institutions—legislative bodies and executive agencies. Democracy also depends on what might be called its ecosystem, which is made up of civic alliances, social norms, and deliberative practices that have an organic rather than an institutional quality. In this ecosystem, what citizens produce by working with other citizens is crucial. Elinor Ostrom, in her Nobel prize-winning research, calls this work the “coproduction” of public goods, noting that it is a necessary complement to the work of institutions. This is why the centers' focus on citizens is key; they are combating the forces that sideline citizens.

(These include everything from the gerrymandering of voting districts to ensure the reelection of incumbents to the recasting of people's role from producers of public goods to consumers.) These forces are moving us toward what cannot be—a citizenless democracy.

The significance of what the centers are doing for citizens seems clear enough. They could play a role similar to the one once played by civic associations and nongovernmental organizations. Yet while most centers are based at colleges and universities, the significance of what they are doing—and can do—for higher education is not so

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clear. America's postsecondary institutions often acknowledge a responsibility for democracy in their mission statements. And higher education's current emphasis on civic engagement is commendable. However, when academic institutions report on their engagement efforts, they don't necessarily include the centers. There may be many reasons. One could be that these civic engagement initiatives have other objectives, which have little to do with citizens and democracy. This is the assessment in a forthcoming book edited by John Saltmarsh and Matthew Hartley, *To Serve a Larger Purpose*. They found that "with only a few exceptions . . . institutional efforts . . . do not explicitly link the work of engagement to our democracy."

To the extent that this is the case at colleges or universities, the implications for students are troubling. Students usually want to make a difference in the world, and one way to do that is by being an engaged citizen. To be effective, citizens have to do more than serve; they have to know how to join with others in solving problems. For instance, natural disasters expose problems within democracy itself. After these tragedies, citizens sense that they need to come together in order to rebuild their communities. They are afraid that the way of life they value will be lost if outside planners and developers take over. This kind of indigenous community building, which is more than economic or organizational development, may not be the focus of an institutional effort.

Less dramatic challenges like the slow erosion of a local economy also prompt people to try to come together. They need the capacity to make the collective decisions that will lead to effective collective action. That is, these communities need more than expert advice, professional service, and student volunteers. And that's the problem. Once again, however, there don't seem to be a great many institutional efforts that speak to this challenge, although there are notable exceptions. It is encouraging that some of the centers now provide opportunities for students to learn the skills needed for collective decision making and action.

Are the centers stepping up to this challenge? Some are. While Scott London's report doesn't claim that they are the solution, some clearly have the potential to facilitate civic capacity building and to strengthen the hand of citizens who want a stronger grip on the future. This civic capacity is badly needed at a time when incivility and hyperpolarization undermine our democracy and alienate the young people we are counting on to be active citizens.

The centers described in this report bring a stronger form of democracy into the civic engagement movement in higher education and into communities. To be sure, all the centers are works in progress. Most are still evolving and haven't exhausted their potential. That is surely the most important finding in this report.

—David Mathews



DOING DEMOCRACY

HOW A NETWORK OF GRASSROOTS ORGANIZATIONS
IS STRENGTHENING COMMUNITY, BUILDING CAPACITY,
AND SHAPING A NEW KIND OF CIVIC EDUCATION

WHEN ALEXIS DE TOCQUEVILLE toured the United States in the 1830s and 1840s, he marveled at Americans' propensity for civic participation. "Americans of all ages, all conditions and all dispositions constantly form associations," he famously wrote. In France, social movements were mobilized by the government, in England by the nobility, but in America, the *people* banded together and formed an association.

What was distinctive about these civic organizations, Tocqueville observed, was not just how numerous and variegated they were, but how they embodied what he saw as a unique and distinctly American understanding of democracy. Associations were the means by which Americans acted together in pursuit of their common goals and aspirations. They were carriers of what he called



"habits of the heart"—the essential beliefs and practices that shape our character as democratic citizens.

For over two centuries, this idea has been deeply rooted in our national psyche. To many Americans, the word *democracy* still conjures up images of barn raisings and bake sales, of town meetings and gatherings on the village green.

Yet studies show that the country has been moving away from this ideal in recent decades. Civic participation has dropped precipitously, membership in associations is on the wane, and our penchant for “prosecuting great undertakings in common,” as Tocqueville put it, is not what it used to be. Once a nation of joiners, we’ve become a nation out of joint, more disconnected from each other and from our communities than ever.

The change can be attributed to a number of convergent trends. Among the most widely documented is the collapse of active involvement in civic clubs and other voluntary associations. Americans used to bowl in leagues, as Robert Putnam has shown, but today we’re mostly “bowling alone.” As community involvement has declined, large membership organizations, such as the Sierra Club and the National Rifle Association, have moved in to fill the void. But these kinds of organizations are largely function-based rather than place-based and offer little room for active citizen participation. What’s more, they tend to press for social change through lobbying efforts, media campaigns, and other professionalized activities that leave no place for ordinary people.

Democracy is more than simply a system of government, it’s a means by which people act together in pursuit of their common goals and aspirations.

Today, more and more of the activities once carried out by citizens have been taken over by professional nonprofits, such as interest groups, watchdog organizations, and social service providers—entities that act on behalf of the public, but often without any direct public involvement. While they define what they do in terms of the needs and interests of their communities, the focus tends to be on implementing programs, delivering services, and representing constituencies, not—as Tocqueville and others observed in the early days of the republic—bringing people together to discover common purpose and work toward common goals.

This shift has effectively sidelined many Americans from active participation in public life. Functions once performed by citizens have been taken over by experts who speak in their name and organizations that act in their interest. “Rarely have we felt so powerless,” the National Commission on Civic Renewal summarized in a report some years ago. “In a time that cries out for civic action, we are in danger of becoming a nation of spectators.”

Despite these worrisome developments, and partly in response to them, there is a growing

effort across the country aimed at reversing current trends and mending the social fabric. The movement—if one can call it that—draws from a wide range of promising grassroots activities, including creative community-building practices, breakthrough academic research, boundary-spanning visioning projects, unique public-private partnerships, collective resource management systems, and innovative policymaking approaches at every level of government.

This report describes a burgeoning network of organizations at the heart of the renewal effort. Their names vary—some call themselves public policy institutes, others centers for public life—yet they share a common methodology, one aimed at tackling tough public issues, revitalizing communities, and strengthening people’s capacities to participate and make common cause. They recognize that democracy is more than simply a system of government, it’s a means by which people act together in pursuit of their common goals and aspirations. To function effectively, it has to be embodied not only in public institutions but in the everyday practices of its citizens.

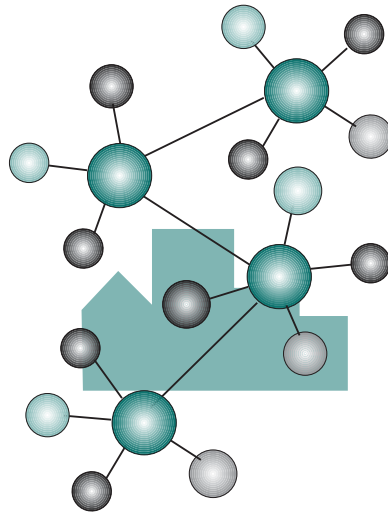
Today, there are more than 50 of these centers operating in almost every state in the union, most affiliated with institutions of higher learning. Except for a handful that are freestanding, these centers combine the best of what colleges and universities provide—civics courses, leadership development, service-learning programs, community-based research—with the kinds of hands-on,

collaborative problem solving traditionally done by nongovernmental organizations. Because they operate at the intersection of the campus and the community, their impact extends to both: they nurture and strengthen public life while at the same time enriching higher education.

On many campuses, the centers’ activities represent a promising alternative to traditional forms of citizenship education. The work is carried out in public squares, community centers, and neighborhood associations, not behind campus walls. It also goes beyond traditional outreach and engagement efforts by emphasizing the importance of collaborative public work where academic institutions work closely with communities in ways that can benefit and strengthen both.

Like most community-based organizations, the centers are working for change at the local and regional levels. But the impact of their work doesn’t stop there. Because of their emphasis on skill and capacity building, they’re cultivating norms of democratic thought and action that are likely to create more engaged citizens and strengthen America’s civic landscape in coming years.

This report surveys the state of the network today, how it’s evolved over the years, and what it’s achieved. It also looks at how the centers carry out their activities, the varying orientations and essential practices that define their work, and some of the challenges they face in coming years as they continue to deepen and expand their efforts.



A BURGEONING NETWORK

RINDGE, NEW HAMPSHIRE, is a picturesque town of about 6,000 people. With its clapboard houses, white-steeped colonial churches and expansive town greens, it's a prototypical New England community. But for all its history and small-town charm, Rindge faces an uncertain future. A swelling population that has increased sevenfold over the last two generations coupled with deepening divisions about whether to protect the town's historic heritage or promote commercial expansion have stirred up a heated debate about how to go forward.

Some years ago, Douglas Challenger and Joni Doherty at the New England Center for Civic Life brought together community leaders to tackle the issue head-on. What Rindge needed, they believed, was a way for people to come together, explore the perils and possibilities ahead, and work toward some common goals. But it would take more than an old-fashioned town meeting and more than just another community plan.

As a first step, they assembled a 20-member steering committee jointly led by local residents, town officials, and faculty from Franklin Pierce University (the local liberal arts school that houses the center and at which Challenger and Doherty both teach). Then they carried out an extensive survey to assess where the community stood on a range of priorities for the future.

But unlike so many community-visioning projects, the process didn't end there. The survey was a crucial component, but it could only take the project so far. It could map people's individual preferences, but it couldn't help them arrive at a common understanding of the values and aspirations of the town as a whole. To discover that, they would need to come together to deliberate about the pros and cons of various scenarios for Rindge's future.

The deliberative forums were time consuming but also deeply rewarding for many in the community. The conversations brought people togeth-

er, strengthened ties between local organizations, and forged some new programs and initiatives. It also led to some key decisions, including the hiring of a new town planner, the launching of a local periodical, and the purchase of an aquifer for the benefit of the community.

The project was groundbreaking. It was the first time the community had come together to not only voice opinions but actually to hammer out a set of concrete plans for the town's future. For Challenger and Doherty, the process was also rewarding from an academic standpoint. It got their students involved in what they describe as "problem-based service learning." It illuminated what scientifically generated facts and expertise can and can't do in the realm of public decision making. And it allowed the college to extend its reach in the community and contribute resources and expertise in a uniquely collaborative and participatory way.

Six hundred miles away, the people of West Virginia were wrestling with a more wide-ranging, if less talked about, issue: the alarming rate of domestic violence. While the problem is a persistent one across the country, it ranks among West Virginia's most urgent concerns. Close to one-third of all homicides in the state are linked to spousal abuse and rates of violence against women and children consistently rank among the worst in the nation. The problem has been especially troubling for those who work in West

Virginia's crisis centers and abuse prevention programs. Despite years of hard work raising awareness and offering support, the rates of sexual and domestic violence have continued to soar.

A few years ago, Betty Knighton at the West Virginia Center for Civic Life decided to try a new approach to addressing the problem, one organized around a statewide series of deliberative conversations. Teaming up with a coalition of domestic abuse programs, she began by conducting a survey to assess where West Virginians stood on the issue. Using the findings, she and her colleagues developed a discussion framework and a set of briefing materials for the community dialogues.

The forums were held across the state and brought together adults from all walks of life—including a fair number who had experienced domestic violence first hand, either as victim or perpetrator. Care was taken to limit the conversations to no more than 20 participants. The idea was to talk about an emotionally charged issue in a respectful way, to share stories and experiences, and to deliberate about practical strategies for addressing the problem across the state.

While the initial goal of the forums was a relatively modest one—to raise public awareness and to help people begin to talk more openly about a sensitive and taboo subject—many participants were galvanized by the conversations. "Until they began to hear some of the stories of their fellow citizens in these forums—which included the

stories of people who had been on both ends of the actual domestic violence issue—they had no way to act,” Knighton says. “People needed to see a place for themselves. They needed to see their role in the process.”

For a number of participants, the forums were a spur to action. In McDowell County, for example, people set up a monthly meeting to continue discussing the problem and lend support to those personally affected by it. In Mineral County, residents mounted an effort to start up a new intervention program. Many participants also launched support groups and started to volunteer in local shelters.

For those working in domestic abuse programs, social service agencies, local governments, and even the news media, it was a startlingly effective approach to raising public awareness—one that went beyond information and outreach to actually engaging people in a search for solutions.

It was eye-opening to discover that the public contextualized the issue very differently from professionals, according to Sue Julian of the West Virginia Coalition Against Domestic Violence. In the forums, people spoke of poor law enforcement response, the failure of the courts system, the humiliation of visiting health-care clinics, and the fears that keep people entrapped in violent relationships. As they saw it, domestic abuse was not so much a private issue as a wide-ranging and complex public problem. The forums

allowed people to explore the full dimensions of it, Julian says, and “provided a space to figure out together what needed to be done.”

In addition to domestic violence, Betty Knighton and her colleagues at the West Virginia center have tackled many other pressing issues, from childhood obesity and substance abuse to water quality and the rising costs of health care. They have also developed briefing materials that have been used by other centers and forum organizers across the country. “I think the greatest potential of the work we’re doing,” Knighton says, “is the capacity of people to build relationships with one another and to understand that if they can disagree with someone and still work together there really is an avenue of hope and a possibility for change.”

The New England and West Virginia centers are part of a growing network of organizations carrying out community-building activities like these across the country. Though they vary widely, the centers share a common approach: they convene individuals and organizations, identify and map public issues, organize deliberative conversations, and strengthen people’s capacity to act together for the common good.

Collectively, they’re sometimes referred to as “public policy institutes.” The name is misleading—their focus is neither policymaking nor research, at least in the strict sense. The designation harkens back to the early 1980s and the launch

of the National Issues Forums, an initiative aimed at stimulating dialogue and deliberation on major public issues at a time when our public discourse was growing more rancorous, polarized, and expert driven. The goal of the forums was not to advocate specific solutions or points of view but to encourage public dialogue about the critical issues shaping our future.

National Issues Forums were embraced by schools, libraries, churches, neighborhood associations, and other civic groups across the country. But as their popularity grew, so did the need for people trained in the basic methodology of convening and moderating discussions. To meet the demand, the Kettering Foundation—

one of the initial sponsors of the National Issues Forums—organized a Summer Public Policy Institute in August 1987 on the campus of Miami University in Oxford, Ohio. It was the first of a series of well-attended workshops offering an introduction to the theory and practice of deliberative dialogue.

But it soon became apparent that an annual workshop held at a single location was both impractical and insufficient to meet the need. So by 1989, a handful of regional public policy insti-

tutes had cropped up around the country, typically housed on college and university campuses. They drew participants from neighborhood and community organizations, leadership and literacy programs, news organizations and grantmaking foundations, school boards and local governments—in short, from across the spectrum of civic organizations working to strengthen communities and improve public life.

In the early days, the work of the centers was limited to introducing people to the National Issues Forums methodology. People were taught how to “name” an issue, “frame” it for discussion, weigh the strengths and weaknesses of potential solutions, work

through difficult trade-offs, and arrive at some sense of common ground, if not always consensus, about how to move forward. The centers also trained participants in the mechanics of organizing and moderating forums, preparing issue books and other briefing materials to promote effective dialogue, and working with legislators to narrow the gap between citizens and government.

Over the past two decades, the centers have proliferated and the work has evolved. There are now over 50 of these organizations operating

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across the country. And while they all continue to train people in the theory and practice of public deliberation, many of them have come to see that work as part of a broader and more fundamental mission—that of fostering strong democratic practices, cultivating civic capacity, and building robust communities from the ground up.

As the centers' missions have expanded, so have their activities. Workshops continue to be a primary focus, but many centers' programs now encompass teaching, research, and projects of various kinds as well. Some examples:

- The National Forum on Higher Education for the Public Good, a center based at the University of Michigan, uses deliberative dialogue to strengthen the link between citizens at the community level and regional and state policymakers.
- The Center for Civic Participation at Maricopa Community Colleges works with leaders from Hispanic, black, Native American, and other traditionally underserved communities to ensure they have a greater voice in regional and state policy discussions.
- Texas Forums, a center based at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, organizes face-to-face public dialogues as well as online forums. The institute is breaking new ground by incorporating Internet technologies like podcasts, blogs, and social networks to engage Texans in a discussion of pressing issues.
- The Center for Public Deliberation and Engagement at Albany State University in Georgia uses deliberative dialogue to explore and advance civil rights issues.
- The Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy at Kansas State University partners with other organizations across the state to make sure policy discussions on issues like immigration, land-use reform, health care, and energy policy reflect the public voice.
- The Naperville Center at the College of DuPage has worked with its local school district on a long-range community plan based on public input as well as extensive districtwide deliberation about the community's future.
- The Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University sponsors events aimed at boosting civic involvement in community problem solving, decreasing cynicism and frustration with politics, and creating a culture of collaboration in Northern Colorado.
- Two California centers — the Institute for Social Innovation at Fielding Graduate University and Cooperative Extension at the University of California, Davis — are experimenting with Second Life and other software platforms to deliberate in “virtual” communities.



DIVERSE PATHS TOWARD A COMMON END

THE CENTERS CAN BE SAID to share a common mission, but they come at their work from different vantage points. Some see their primary function as building healthy communities, others as empowering citizens to advocate for social change. Some define their role as fostering civic engagement, others as spanning boundaries, resolving tensions, and promoting common ground on issues.

In her research, the Kettering Foundation's Alice Diebel has found that the centers' different orientations can be grouped into four broad categories:

- Civic education
- Collaboration and networking
- Connecting to policymakers
- Community development

For those centers with deeper roots and longer histories, these varied approaches are often mutually reinforcing rather than exclusive. The Institute for Civic Discourse at Kansas State University, for example, describes its work as a

combination of facilitation, education, outreach, and scholarship—goals which cut across all four categories.

But for fledgling centers, the work tends to be more narrowly defined and oriented toward specific outcomes. Following Diebel's categories, they focus on 1) teaching the theory and practice of public deliberation; 2) spanning divisions, managing conflicts, and cultivating common ground; 3) putting the public back into public policy; and 4) building robust communities.

Teaching public deliberation

Most of the centers see their primary function as training people in the skills and habits of mind needed for democratic action. Their work focuses on identifying collective problems, developing a sense of common purpose, and working together to solve them. For example, the Institute on the Common Good at Regis University offers introductory and advanced classes in public deliberation aimed at undergraduates, professionals, and members of the surrounding com-

munity. The workshops train people to identify common concerns, define the scope and dynamics of a problem and frame possible approaches, convene deliberative discussions, work through disagreement and conflicting viewpoints, communicate with policymakers, and learn together as a community.

The institute has also teamed up with the Center for Public Deliberation at nearby Colorado State University to organize student-led moderator trainings and public forums. In addition, it offers internships and cofacilitation opportunities with organizations throughout Colorado to give people hands-on experience in deliberative dialogue, community problem solving and public engagement.

According to institute director Paul Alexander, these programs allow people to see themselves “as political actors in their own communities seeking to build consensus around divisive issues that are locally and immediately relevant.”

David Patton and David Stein run the Council for Public Deliberation, a similar center at Ohio State University. They stress that the work is not about teaching people specific techniques so much as cultivating new habits and “ways of acting” in public life. In their workshops and other

programs, participants “become involved in the underlying processes guiding citizen politics,” they point out. For many, the experience of trying out new roles and new ways of engaging with others is a transformative one. “Merely learning the technical skills of organizing and moderating a forum will not result in the deep learning that must take place to sustain the citizen leader role,” they say. “Sustaining citizen involvement requires a shift in the way one thinks about local political action and the role of citizens in that action.”

Spanning divisions, managing conflicts, and cultivating common ground

Some centers see themselves as boundary-spanning organizations whose primary purpose is to bridge differences, negotiate conflicts, and lay the groundwork for collaboration. These centers typically partner with groups and organizations to explore tough public issues, but the underlying goal is not to raise awareness or shape policy so much as create a sense of common ground and collective purpose.

The Indigenous Issues Forums in Rapid City, South Dakota, is a case in point. It

works with local churches, tribal colleges, libraries, and foundations to organize deliberative conversations and what they call “talking circles.”

“Sustaining citizen involvement requires a shift in the way one thinks about local political action and the role of citizens in that action.”

“Much of our efforts are focused on getting youth and elders to share in dialogue,” explains director Ruth Yellowhawk. “At times we also work with outside groups to foster discussion among groups and individuals with competing agendas.” In one case, they brought together Native American tribal members, ranchers, environmental activists, and representatives from the departments of Fish and Wildlife and Public Lands to explore the killing of America’s last wild buffalo, a herd said to be carrying diseases that threaten livestock in large parts of the West. According to Yellowhawk, the first step in addressing the issue was to “help each side understand the other’s point of view.”

At Hofstra University’s Center for Civic Engagement, Michael D’Innocenzo and his colleagues have adopted a similar approach by organizing forums that bridge generational divides. The dialogues give elders a chance to model constructive civic awareness and engagement, D’Innocenzo says, just as they provide young people with an opportunity to energize and encourage older people. To date, the center has held over 50 of these forums at Hofstra and in the Long Island community. The results have been encouraging. Young people find the dialogues empowering and some say they regard the elders’ commitment to service and civic engagement as an example worth emulating.

In some cases, the effort to span boundaries is oriented toward the creation of networks and coalitions. The Iowa Partners in Learning exem-

plifies this approach. By forming an alliance of organizations all committed to public dialogue and deliberation—one made up of, among others, a teachers’ association, an organization of school boards, the state university extension system, even the Iowa Department of Education—the Partners have created one of the strongest networks in the country. When they started in 2001, the Partners organized deliberative conversations across Iowa about the future of the state and presented their findings to the state government. Since then, they have taken the strategy a step further by working not only with the state but with communities seeking greater public involvement in local decision making.

Another way that centers cultivate networks is by maintaining close ties with their alumni. By observing how students put their new skills to use within organizations and communities, some of them have discovered innovative applications for their work and developed some unexpected partnerships. A growing number of libraries now use deliberative forums to promote literacy, for example, and some prisons use issue books to help inmates prepare for and pass their GED exams.

Putting the public back into public policy

About a dozen centers are chiefly oriented toward improving governance. They see their work as crucial to making policies that reflect the public’s real interests. In today’s poll-driven

and media-saturated political culture, where rhetoric and sound bites often take the place of serious ideas, and where elites often presume to speak for the people, it's rare for policymakers and newspeople to take counsel of the public. And when they do, it tends to be in the most superficial of ways—through snapshot opinion polls, perhaps, or “on the street” interviews. The centers provide mechanisms by which citizens can play a more authentic role in shaping the debate and setting directions for policy.

In some cases, it takes the form of what might be called “advisory deliberation” where people systematically explore and work through a pressing issue and then share the outcomes with legislators. Panama City, Florida, experimented with this approach in the wake of the 2000 census. The Citizen Leadership Institute, a center based at Gulf Coast Community College, organized a communitywide dialogue on redistricting in the months leading up to a vital state senate hearing on the issue. The purpose of the forum was to allow the people of Bay County to explore various redistricting scenarios and develop their own recommendations rather than leave the decision to state lawmakers. After the forum, the director of the Citizen Leadership Institute went to Tallahas-

see and presented the findings. The effort helped the community come together around a common vision. As a Bay County resident quoted in the local newspaper put it, “This is the first time I have seen our diverse county more unified in a goal.”

But it also helped lawmakers remap the Bay County district in a way that reflected the real needs and wishes of the people who lived there. According to an institute report, Florida representative Beverly Kilmer was evidently impressed by the process. “She felt that citizens were educated about redistricting and had reached a common direction that would be best for the community as a whole.”

Improving public policy is not always a matter of making

Improving public policy is not always a matter of making it more responsive to the public will.

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it more responsive to the public will. In some cases it means addressing deep-seated social and political inequalities. For a number of centers, the effort to improve public policy and the struggle to effect social change are one and the same. It comes down to broadening the franchise and reaching out to those whose voices are traditionally left out of public discourse. “I came to this work simply because I was angry that nobody asked me about the decisions being made in my community,” says David Stein at the Council for Public Deliberation. “I’d go to town meetings and nobody would listen to me.” For these centers,

civic engagement means nothing if not the opportunity to shape the public agenda and bring it into alignment with the voice of the people.

Building robust communities

Ultimately the goal of all the centers is to build and strengthen communities from the ground up. But they go about that mission in different ways. As we've seen, some strive to empower individuals by giving them the tools and frameworks to engage and make a difference, others go the policy route, and still others work to build trust and reinforce social bonds. About a third of the centers pursue yet another route: they help communities take matters into their own hands and engage in public work. These organizations focus on building capacity, strengthening people's ability to identify common concerns, and engaging in real-world problem solving.

Some years ago, a center based at Virginia Tech began working with the small town of Wytheville, Virginia, on a project that illustrates this approach. Sometimes referred to as the "Crossroads of the Blue Ridge," Wytheville was debating whether to divide and relocate two major highways. Over the course of three years, the center helped the community not only to resolve the highway dispute but to develop an overarching vision for the town's future. With the help of graduate students, the center first conducted interviews and research in Wytheville. It then spent six weeks working with local leaders to create a framework for communitywide deliberation. This was followed by a year-long series of

public dialogues where the people of Wytheville systematically examined several potential scenarios for the town's future. On the basis of these deliberations, the center then helped the community develop a long-term vision statement and move toward concerted action. According to institute director Larkin Dudley, it was "incredible to see the evolution and broadening of the community's focus from a narrow immediate question of road relocation to a larger question of the future of the community." It was also a powerful example of what happens when people in a community change from asking what their leaders can do for them to asking what they can do for themselves, Dudley says. The shift in the discussion allowed the group to develop new lines of thinking and to imagine a new set of possibilities.

In communities across the country, centers are taking on problems like these. Their work involves bringing people and organizations together to collectively define the issues, searching for workable solutions, and then putting them into play. This approach distinguishes their work from conventional "engagement initiatives" and "community partnerships" where the different parties come to the work with their own preestablished goals or agendas. These initiatives are aimed at discovering group purpose, not aggregating the interests of everyone involved. They rest on a systemic view of communities, one that recognizes that you can't deal with specific problems without also dealing with the connections among and between them.



THE ESSENTIAL PRACTICES

THE WORK OF THE CENTERS is focused on developing norms, processes, and habits of mind essential to collective problem solving and democratic decision making. These practices are hardly unique. Deliberative dialogue and collective decision making can be traced back to our earliest roots as a nation. They were integral to the early New England town meetings, the 19th-century Chautauqua movement, even in some cases to Native American tribal councils. But they have a newfound relevance in today's increasingly diverse and polarized political culture. And while a growing number of organizations have embraced them in recent years—*AmericaSpeaks*, Demos, and Everyday Democracy, to name a few—the centers have developed a comprehensive training program in the basic methodology. They call it deliberative democracy or public deliberation.

Unlike other forms of public discourse—such as debate, negotiation, brainstorming, and consensus building—the objective of public deliberation is not so much to talk together as to think together, and not so much to reach a conclusion as to discover where a conclusion might lie. Thinking together involves listening

deeply to other points of view, exploring new ideas and perspectives, searching for points of agreement, and bringing unexamined assumptions into the open.

While people often come to the process in the hope of solving a specific problem, public deliberation usually revolves around a pressing question that needs to be addressed rather than a problem that can be efficiently worked out. A problem needs to be solved; a question can't be solved, but it can be experienced and, out of that experience, a common understanding can emerge that opens an acceptable path to action.

Public deliberation is not a linear process, but it has certain basic requirements. These include unbiased background information, an issue framework, and a skilled moderator who can guide a conversation and help people negotiate the complexities of an issue. The centers have gone a long way toward demystifying the process and making it readily accessible to people.

Defining the issue

An essential prerequisite to meaningful dialogue is a clear understanding of the issue and what is at stake. Because people see the world

differently and tend to define issues according to their own unique frames of reference, any hope of addressing a problem must begin with a look at how the public perceives it. When people do this they often discover that the problem in question is just one facet of a larger and more complex issue. What may begin as a conversation about combating graffiti can evolve into a deeper discussion about addressing poverty, for example. Or, a decision about whether to approve a new shopping center can hinge on a broader consideration of how residents envision the future of their community.

In some cases, the conventional definition of a problem might be too controversial or polarizing to lend itself to a fix—or even a civil discussion about potential solutions. The public debate in Michigan some years ago on the issue of unpasteurized milk is a case in point. In a sting operation, state authorities had confiscated a delivery of raw milk being sold directly to the public. The rationale for the seizure was that unpasteurized milk carries the risk of *E. coli*, *Salmonella*, *Listeria*, and other serious food-borne illnesses and therefore represents a public health risk. But the sting created a consumer backlash and across the state people began demanding access to unprocessed milk.

Michigan Food and Farming Systems, a membership-based nonprofit organization, contacted Wynne Wright and her colleagues at Michigan State University for help in shifting the discussion from a polarized debate to a deliberative dialogue

about solutions. Early on, they realized that divisive phrases like *real milk* and *raw milk* needed to be jettisoned in favor of more constructive terms. They redefined the issue as one of access, adopted the term *fresh, unprocessed, whole milk*, and structured the conversations around the search for long-term solutions. Finding the right “name” for the issue was critical, Wright says, because it was the starting point for a meaningful and constructive dialogue.

Establishing a framework for dialogue

Defining an issue in meaningful terms is critical, but for authentic dialogue and deliberation to happen, people also need a framework for exploring potential actions or policy options. This is especially important given that many of the solutions being presented today are handed down by politicians, experts, and special interest groups. An issue framework has to reflect a diverse set of solutions and must speak to the values that people hold dear. In practical terms, the framework must reflect what is at stake, what actions people favor, and what benefits and potential trade-offs have to be considered.

Taylor Willingham, director of Texas Forums, a center based at the Lyndon B. Johnson Presidential Library, emphasizes that the options have to be locally relevant and include actions that are feasible, or already underway, in the community. “Otherwise deliberation can be derailed and actions proposed by the participants may be irrelevant or impractical,” she says. “By including some actions already taking place, forum

participants learn more about their own community, and may be inspired to explore new possibilities based on stories about actions in similar communities.”

Creating public space

Another crucial function performed by the centers is that of creating public space for community work. The term refers to venues for dialogue and collaborative activities, but it also describes a metaphorical space—a context—in which people and organizations can sort each other out across the barriers of social difference. The centers create “safe spaces” where people can begin to develop trust and mutual understanding.

The institute at Gulf Coast Community College sees this role as an integral part of its organizational mission. It has made staff, facilities, and other resources available to the community to ensure it has a way to address important public concerns. Beyond that, it has focused a good deal of energy toward creating opportunities for people to discover common interests and concerns. The institute has organized town meetings with elected officials, forums on race relations, debates about proposed highway bills, and study circles about affirmative action. Robert McSpadden, a former

president of the college, describes the campus as the “community’s space.”

Creating public space also involves establishing a context for meaningful dialogue. The centers approach this in different ways. In the case of Kansas State University’s Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy, it means establishing a set of essential ground rules for discussion.

People are asked to work toward understanding and common ground, to expect and explore conflicting viewpoints, to give everyone an opportunity to speak, to stay focused on issues, and to respect time limits. The centers recognize that the idea of public space encompasses not only a physical setting and a context in which people can dialogue and deliberate, but a set of norms and expectations

for how to do that most effectively.

Deliberating

To deliberate means to wrestle with choices and negotiate trade-offs. The process can be a rigorous one because people have to not only reason together about difficult practical questions but also develop solutions that are in alignment with their core values as a group. When conflicts and disagreements come up, deliberation allows groups to work through them and arrive at a collective assessment that is more than the sum of

When conflicts and disagreements come up, deliberation allows groups to work through them and arrive at a collective assessment that is more than the sum of individual opinions and preferences.

individual opinions and preferences. At its best, deliberation gives rise to common understanding of an issue, if not always a consensus about how to address it.

Working through different perspectives on a public issue tends to bring unexamined assumptions into the open. Assumptions are like comfortable frames of reference that save us the trouble of repeatedly figuring things out anew. These mental shortcuts are convenient, but they become obstacles to effective decision making. Because they are often unconscious, they lock people into set ways of understanding a problem that can stand in the way of finding viable solutions.

David Procter, director of the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy, refers to this process as “identifying values underlying argument positions.” It’s one of the most striking differences between conventional discussion and deliberative dialogue, he says. In discussion, groups often avoid talking about people’s hidden assumptions because to speak about them goes against unwritten codes of civility. But for effective deliberation to occur, people have to be outspoken about their own and other participants’ unquestioned assumptions, bring them into the open, and respond to them without judgment or criticism.

When people hold their own ideas and assumptions in check and open up to what others are saying, there is often a noticeable shift in the dialogue. Instead of simply talking

together or exchanging opinions, people are now thinking together—collectively exploring a question, weighing the strengths and weaknesses of alternative points of view, and searching for a common understanding. This is the essence of deliberation.

Resolving tensions and finding areas of common ground

When people deliberate, they tend to begin by emphasizing the things that make them separate and unique—the things that set them apart from one another—rather than the qualities they share. But by searching for points of agreement, particularly values held in common, a group can begin to transcend those differences and speak in a more unified voice.

The process of deliberating doesn’t necessarily lead to consensus or action on an issue. But it’s a remarkably efficient way to resolve tensions and discover areas of common ground. When people deliberate and sort through their differences of opinion, they come to see that frictions exist not so much between individuals as among and even within them. This helps groups work through strong emotions that can stand in the way of sound decision making.

In public deliberation, people have to work through comparable difficulties inherent in complex policy decisions. This work requires talking through, not just talking about issues. As we’ve seen, some centers see deliberation not just as a means of discovering where the public stands or setting directions on issues, but as a way to

ease tensions between individuals and groups and help them discover where they meet and what they can do together.

Identifying common assets and outside resources

The act of deliberating doesn't stop when a group has identified a potential course of action or a range of viable alternatives. It also has to survey its resources—from financial assets and human capital to civic institutions and social networks—and determine what outside support may be necessary to implementing a plan.

Sandra Hodge, an institute director at the University of Missouri, recalls a forum on domestic abuse in which special care was taken to bring in a wide range of people either personally or professionally touched by family violence. At first, the goal was simply “to bring people together to talk about the issue of troubled families,” Hodge says. But the forum “went way beyond its intended purpose.” The group realized that more needed to be done to address the problem in southwest Missouri. So they mapped out a range of strategies for raising public awareness, surveyed the public resources available in that part of the state, and analyzed where further services were needed. Once the data had been gathered and assessed, they formed a task force and set to work. Today, as a direct result of the group's activities, there is a shelter, a toll-free hotline, a thrift store, and plans for a community kitchen.

Efforts like these are sometimes referred to as “asset mapping”—taking an inventory of the individuals, groups, and organizations that can help make change happen in a community. But the greatest assets are often ad hoc relationships and networks that only come into play around specific issues, and those are often difficult to map. They require processes by which people and groups can find each other, establish common purpose, and develop practical ways of working together. When done well, the process tends to energize people and motivate them to pitch in and get involved.

Communicating the results of public deliberation

Sharing the outcomes of deliberative activities with elected officials, news outlets, community groups, and the public at large is an important piece of any deliberative process. Community leaders need to understand public thinking on critical issues, and citizens themselves need to know that their views are being adequately heard. This is all the more important given that traditional mechanisms for conveying the public's view on issues—opinion polls, focus groups, public hearings, and the like—leave little or no opportunity for deliberation.

The centers have met this challenge in a variety of ways. Some have invited officials to attend forums, either as active participants or as silent observers. “Elected officials have commented on

the value of hearing citizens' thoughtful comments and concerns on an issue," says Bill Molnar, codirector of the Laboratory for Deliberative Dialogue at Clemson University.

Others have partnered with local news organizations to identify and frame issues, raise public awareness, and report the results back to the community. Some centers also make a point of presenting outcomes at local events and in front of community leaders.

A growing number of centers are using the Internet to disseminate their findings. For example, the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy at Kansas State University and the Center for Voter Deliberation of Northern Virginia both post video clips about their activities on YouTube.

"Bloggers, citizen journalists and students represent an untapped resource for reporting on forums," says Taylor Willingham, director of Texas Forums. She and her colleagues are exploring new ways to share the outcomes of their work and build momentum for change. That includes not only direct communication between the forum participants and policymakers, she says, but "fishbowl forums, podcasting, photojournals, graphic recording, blogging, and webcasting."

Learning together as a community

Deliberative dialogue is an effective means of addressing issues and solving problems. But it's more than just a process for getting things done. At bottom, its purpose is to cultivate what phi-

losopher John Dewey has called "social intelligence"—the capacity for citizens of a democratic community to collectively advance their common interests. To deliberate means to think and to learn together.

"Learning is at the center of this public work," says Wynne Wright, assistant professor and codirector of a center based at Michigan State University. "When we speak of learning, we're referring to the multiple ways in which participants are able to critically reflect upon their own values and ideals, as well as those of others, and then break down walls that typically divide and constrain alternative ways of knowing."

Some institute directors stress that the really significant and enduring innovations they have observed are the result of people with diverging interests and backgrounds learning together. In education, for instance, it has been a few committed teachers with some bright ideas, in concert with a principal who has a particular view of his or her job, in concert with a superintendent who is in line with that principal, and in concert with people in the community who are very much part of the process of making change happen.

"I think we've got the right title for our organization," says David Wilkinson, chairman of Iowa Partners in Learning, "because the essence of any change is learning. Recognizing the power of learning in our lives and making that more intentional is a very important piece."



EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

SOME 85 PERCENT OF THE CENTERS are housed in a college or university, but they are not academic institutes in the usual sense. Most of them are hybrids—part academic program and part nongovernmental organization. Operating at the intersection of the campus and the community, they have managed to avoid some of the trappings of traditional academic institutes, on the one hand, and conventional community organizations on the other. For example, they have largely side-stepped the problems of professionalization and accountability that have dogged many nonprofit organizations in recent years. A good number have also maintained a certain autonomy from the academic functions of their host institutions. This independence has allowed them to explore new approaches to civic education that some see as highly innovative—perhaps even groundbreaking—in American higher education.

The centers are pushing the boundaries in a variety of ways: 1) they emphasize the importance of public work and community problem solving as the cornerstone of an education for democracy, as distinct from mere civics instruction or service learning; 2) they are deepening

and enriching scholarship by addressing its vital public dimension; 3) they are bringing dialogue and deliberation into the classroom; and 4) they are fostering a more democratic culture on college and university campuses.

Broadening the definition of civic education

Over the last decade, *civic engagement* has become a catch phrase on college and university campuses across the country. Much is made of “preparing students for responsible citizenship,” “developing future leaders,” and “inculcating civic values.” But for all the talk about higher education as a public good, the academy’s commitment has been mostly limited to civics instruction and service learning. It’s not that students don’t benefit from learning about government or from serving others, rather it’s that these pedagogies too often take the place of hands-on experience tackling issues and solving problems in the community.

The work of the centers differs from conventional civics curricula or service-learning programs, which are oriented primarily at undergraduates. It also differs from traditional campus-community partnerships and collaboratives, in which institutions confer knowledge and

resources on behalf of others. The centers' activities are aimed at fostering essential democratic practices and grounding them in public work carried out *with* and *as part of* the community. They bring people together, identify issues, convene deliberative conversations, promote collective action, and effect lasting social change. This is a model of citizenship education that revolves around democratic problem solving, not simply inculcating civic values or "doing good" in the community.

Deepening and enriching scholarship

Traditional academic research presents a difficult challenge for those working to build communities and strengthen democratic practices. What works in higher education does not necessarily work in public life. In the academy, knowledge is valued to the extent that it makes an original contribution to its given field or discipline. In the public sphere, by contrast, knowledge is valued to the extent that it advances specific public ends. The two forms of knowledge are not mutually exclusive—academic expertise can be applied toward any number of public purposes, such as developing a new vaccine or determining the effects of ozone depletion. But many of the problems of public life are not technical in nature and therefore can't be

solved by expert knowledge. They are not based on conflicting information so much as conflicting values and convictions.

Through the work of the centers, scholars at many institutions are exploring new ways to deepen and enrich their disciplines by drawing on public knowledge—knowledge based on group inquiry and public deliberation. When done well, they say, it not only advances their scholarship but also serves the broader needs of the community. The centers offer an ideal laboratory for public scholarship of this sort, one that allows faculty to explore the broader civic dimensions of their research.

Bringing deliberation into the classroom

Deliberative dialogue is a powerful way to explore issues and solve problems not only in the community but also in the classroom. At a growing number of institutions around the country, professors are using public deliberation to infuse their teaching with social responsibility and public purpose. Some have gone so far as to incorporate it into their first-year seminars, their humanities classes, and even their online coursework.

"If you look at a lot of classroom activities," says Richard Dubanoski, dean of the College

Through the work of the centers, scholars at many institutions are exploring new ways to deepen and enrich their disciplines by drawing on public knowledge—knowledge based on group inquiry and public deliberation.

of Social Sciences at the University of Hawaii, “we have an expert lecturing the students. We don’t engage them in the conversation, in active learning, or in any kind of critical thinking.” Participating in one-time deliberative discussions on specific issues may not transform a student’s learning experience, he says, but the practice of deliberation is very powerful when it becomes part of an ongoing process of inquiry. “If students are having continual experiences from the time they come to the university until the time they leave, there is a chance they will take on the habit of deliberating.”

Some centers have also partnered with academic departments to create “schools for democracy”—opportunities for students to live and work together as citizens. Larkin Dudley at Virginia Tech sees this as part of a growing movement, particularly at large research universities, aimed at developing “learning communities” where students can share ideas and work together to achieve common learning objectives. “It’s an attempt to find alternative ways of creating community,” she says.

Creating a more democratic culture on campus

The true test of a college or university’s civic mission is how it deals with contentious issues on campus. Many institutions are content to educate for democracy, not practice it. But some are working in partnership with centers to explore new ways to address campuswide issues. Colleges and universities are perfect venues for delibera-

tive problem solving since they are communities in their own right and mirror the problems of society at large. Because they are institutions of learning, vexing social and political issues can also serve to deepen the pursuit of knowledge and the growth of understanding.

Douglas Challenger, cofounder of the New England Center for Civic Life at Franklin Pierce University, recalls the turmoil on campus after a series of racially motivated attacks some years ago. To help address the crisis, he restructured his sociology class to include a series of forums on ethnic and racial tensions. The class spent the better part of one semester framing the issue, preparing issue guides, and learning how to moderate deliberative discussions. It then sponsored a series of campuswide forums, organized and moderated by the students themselves, on how to address racial tensions at the college.

While the process was a wonderful learning experience for the students—who wrote glowing evaluations of the class at semester’s end—the forums also helped alleviate the crisis on campus, Challenger says. The college president and academic dean were impressed by the forums and subsequently decided to make public deliberation and sustained dialogue an integral part of the first-year seminar. To date, the college has taken up a broad range of issues, from gender and sexual orientation to alcohol abuse, using this approach. The example shows how some schools see the practice of deliberation as a vital part of their broader civic mission.



WHAT HAVE THE CENTERS ACHIEVED?

THERE IS NO EASY WAY to measure the outcomes of the centers' work over the past two decades. Even if it were possible to sum up the quantitative data—the growing ranks of institute alumni, for example, or the rate of growth of the network as a whole—the real value of the work would not be reflected in the numbers.

In interviews, institute leaders routinely caution against searching for hard evidence of impact. The most powerful outcomes are the most difficult to quantify because they involve democratic norms and capacities that are intangible, says Charles Lacy, retired director of a center at the University of California, Davis. “If you can tell strong stories,” he adds, “that is probably the closest you can come.”

Even so, the evidence—especially when examined as a whole—constitutes more than just good stories. It suggests that the centers' efforts have contributed to a range of public goods. Thanks to careful documentation and, in a few cases, independent evaluations, the centers can be shown to have directly or indirectly increased voter turnout, heightened civic participation, strengthened civic capacity, deepened trust and

mutual understanding, spanned social, political and economic boundaries, reached out to traditionally underrepresented populations, brought an end to stalemates on intractable issues, influenced public attitudes, and shaped public policy.

There is also some evidence—less convincingly documented but supported by interviews and second-hand reports—suggesting that some centers' programs have improved relationships between citizens and officials, enhanced decision making, expanded the responsiveness of local institutions like government, business, and the media, and even created new institutional arrangements.

Measuring impact remains one of the most vexing aspects of the work for many of the centers. “We need better ways of evaluating outcomes, both long- and short-term,” says Taylor Willingham, director of Texas Forums. Barbara Brown, codirector of an institute at Clemson University, agrees. “Much more work needs to be done to measure the impact of deliberation,” she says—“impact on communities, on a public, on a targeted group, such as youth, and on individual citizens.” Finding a middle ground

between strictly quantifiable assessment criteria and qualitative, process-oriented performance measures is essential, they say. Broadly speaking, such measures would have to address five key dimensions where the work has produced significant outcomes: 1) levels of civic engagement, 2) public awareness and understanding of issues, 3) community networks, 4) boundary-spanning initiatives and organizations, and 5) connections between citizens and officeholders.

Creating new avenues for civic participation

One of the central tenets of the centers' work is that a community cannot long flourish without robust and widespread citizen participation. Participation can mean different things, from casting a vote on election day or speaking up at a town meeting to mobilizing a group of neighbors to fix a broken streetlight or raise a child with a clear sense of social responsibility. But for the centers, participation comes down to engaging people in addressing tough public issues. At the most basic level, it involves identifying concerns, framing them for public discussion, creating discussion guides and other materials, convening forums, moderating the discussions, and sharing potential outcomes with the rest of the community, the news media, officeholders, and others with a stake in the issue.

Given the sheer number of deliberative forums organized each year—typically held under the banner of National Issues Forums and either directly or indirectly sponsored by the centers

the discussions provide opportunities for people across the country to voice their concerns and get involved. In any given year, forums are organized by hundreds, even thousands, of high schools, civic organizations, churches, libraries, and neighborhood organizations. These activities are valuable because, as Texas Forums' Taylor Willingham puts it, "we want to engage people and reconnect them with the democratic process. We use the forums as a tool to help people find their voice. I don't think most organizations appreciate the importance of building civic skills in the public. This is as important as being able to make a direct link to policy."

Deepening public awareness and understanding of issues

Beyond increasing civic participation and political involvement, the centers are also bent on enhancing people's awareness and understanding of public issues. They recognize that learning about issues is a vital component of effective self-governance. If people are "not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion," in Thomas Jefferson's famous words, "the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education." Public knowledge is not only essential to making informed decisions, it counterbalances the influence of experts, keeps the public debate from becoming overly shrill and rancorous, and lends coherence to the profusion of context-free information on important public issues.

Another crucial dimension of learning about issues is that it deepens people's perceptions of problems so they can play a more meaningful role in setting directions and shaping agendas. According to Martín Carcasson, director of the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University, the centers' focus on issue-learning 1) increases awareness of the range of perspectives on public issues, 2) helps people work through tough choices and trade-offs on issues, while at the same time helping them identify common ground across diverse perspectives, and 3) generates new information and inspires innovative responses to public problems. At their best, Carcasson says, the centers serve as "critical sources of high-quality, well-framed impartial information about a range of approaches to complex problems—through the development and utilization of nonpartisan discussion guides, well-designed forums, and carefully prepared reports of forums—filling a role that is vital to the health of a democratic society but paradoxically uncommon in our 'information age.'"

Strengthening community networks

The health of a community can be measured by its stocks of social capital—its informal networks and norms of reciprocity, trust, and

mutual assistance. The work of the centers goes a long way toward creating this capital by convening individuals and groups, helping them discover common interests and concerns, and paving the way for collective problem solving. Many directors say their ability to unite and focus the community around pressing issues—and thereby strengthen its capacity to discover and implement solutions—is one of the most powerful outcomes of their work.

The health of a community can be measured by its stocks of social capital—its informal networks and norms of reciprocity, trust, and mutual assistance.

Yvonne Sims and Wanda Minor, two community organizers who have taught the theory and practice of public deliberation since the 1980s, say they have seen the big impact of this work on issues like racial tension, violent crime,

and affirmative action. In her own city of Grand Rapids, Michigan, Sims says that a core group of people committed to dialogue and deliberation have helped the community not only come to grips with tough issues but also create the political will needed to bring about real change.

But both women stress that forging relationships and building networks is tough. "You really have to work it," Minor says. "You have to bring in the usual types of groups, like the League of Women Voters, the neighborhood groups, some churches. They have to be invited to participate

and then encouraged to bring at least 5 or 10 people from their own groups,” she says.

When done well, however, the effort to bring people together around common concerns can create virtuous circles. The more people do it, the more they value and insist on it. Over time, the effects become self-reinforcing and cumulative.

Spanning social, political, and economic boundaries

Just as the centers seek to strengthen social bonds, they also work to build bridges and heal divisions within communities. This function is crucial, especially at a time of widespread social and political fragmentation. Coming together to talk, to share, or even to argue, helps people establish a common frame of reference and begin to map a path for change.

In practical terms, spanning boundaries can mean bringing individuals together that might not otherwise interact, or helping groups discover common ground on a pressing issue. It could also mean reaching out to those in the community who are traditionally excluded from public conversations.

The Center for Civic Participation, an institute based at Maricopa Community Colleges in Arizona, has made a point of reaching out to the black, Latino, and Native American communities to ensure that they have a voice in policy discussions on local and state issues. In a state where a full 40 percent of the electorate is non-white, this is critical to sound policymaking. But

Alberto Olivas, the institute’s director, stresses that it’s not simply about ensuring equal representation. While everybody deserves to be heard and to have a place at the table, he says, “bringing all the right parties together is about much more than that,” he says. “It’s about creating a setting and engaging in a process that’s effective, where learning happens on both sides.” As he sees it, it’s not enough to convene public hearings or solicit citizen “input” and “feedback,” no matter how inclusive the process may be. People need opportunities to help frame the issues, look at a range of choices for moving forward, and have a hand in bringing about change.

Narrowing the gap between citizens and officials

Any work aimed at engaging people, deliberating about issues, shaping policy agendas, and articulating the public voice is ultimately aimed at healing the rift between citizens and government and making policymaking more responsive to the public’s will. The centers all recognize this as a core aspect of their missions. But some have taken a direct route to bridging this gap by creating working relationships with policymakers.

In some cases, the centers report directly to policymakers on the outcomes of their deliberative activities. People in government need good information about how the public is grappling with an issue, says Betty Knighton, director of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life. These types of reports give them a different appreciation

of citizens “not only as consumers or as advocates of a particular position, but as sources of judgment and wisdom that helps them do their work better,” she says.

In other cases, they invite policymakers to attend deliberative meetings to observe first hand how their constituents are working through difficult choices. In Panama City, “pre-legislative forums” bring together as many as five officials at a time to listen without comment to deliberative conversations about key policy issues. The rationale is to offer the officials a chance to hear their constituents deliberate about the very issues they themselves will take up at a later legislative session in the state capital. The format has been a successful one in Florida. Allan Bense, former Speaker of the Florida House of Representatives, describes the forum as a “very beneficial” process, one that allows elected officials and citizens alike “to talk about community problems and find common ground for action in a dynamic, instructive way.”

There are also cases where centers have worked directly with state legislatures to bring deliberation into the policymaking arena. For example, the institute at the University of Hawaii has convened a series of forums where citizens and legislators deliberate together about term limits, campaign finance reform, and other issues. According to Hawaii state senator Les Ihara Jr., sessions like these “can provide legislators with a positive experience of deliberative policymak-

ing.” They foster a deeper and more nuanced understanding of issues while also promoting a heightened sense of trust, he says. “Instead of quarrelsome debates, deliberative conversations provide a constructive way for legislators to talk about issues—and narrow the gap between the ideals and the current practice of democracy in state legislatures.”

These are some of the tangible ways the centers are shaping a new kind of citizen-centered politics today, one that puts a premium on civic engagement, deliberative dialogue, joint decision making, and collective learning. The big question facing the centers is whether the value of their work is adequately recognized and whether they will continue to get the support they need in coming years. Many of them are tied to colleges and universities that are cutting back and shifting their priorities to other pressing demands, such as expanding enrollment, accommodating diversity, or simply making financial ends meet. But if the centers can continue to document their successes and make a compelling case for their work, both individually and as a network, they are likely to have a significant and deepening influence in the years ahead—one that can enrich our public discourse, strengthen our social fabric, and shore up our capacity to govern ourselves as democratic citizens.



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