

Public Deliberation: The Kettering Foundation's Experience and Opportunities for the Engaged University

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Abstract

The National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI), launched by the Kettering Foundation in 1980, provides an opportunity for the engaged university to foster public deliberation with its students and alumni, as well as leaders in the communities where it operates. NIFI publishes three issue books per year on topics of national importance. These materials are nonpartisan and non-prescriptive, designed to provide citizens with information they need to make an intelligent choice. Through various partners, NIFI then conducts forums around the nation to allow citizens to discuss these issues and discover ways they can contribute toward a solution. Participation in such public deliberation fosters civic engagement.

Introduction

The NASULGC¹ Council of Presidents recently had an interesting discussion on the topic of “the public university as a neutral forum for political discussion,” exploring an important role that their institutions could play during this period in our nation’s history. This is in response to the increasing polarization of politics in our society and the need for a place and environment in which nonpartisan exchange by citizens can take place on topics of both local and national concern.

This is, in my opinion, a legitimate role for the university. After all, the academy over its history has fostered an objective and exhaustive examination of important issues in every discipline as a central focus of the educational process. And this is a role that the Kettering Foundation, through the National Issues Forums Institute, has been encouraging and assisting universities to engage over many years.

The Kettering Foundation, based in Dayton, Ohio, was established in 1927 and has concentrated its research on the question “What does it take to make democracy work as it should?” This issue is addressed by a network of university and independent scholars and public policy institutes, resulting in books and journals.

One of the conclusions reached over time is that for democracy to be effective, individual citizens must be involved in the process. It is difficult to craft a government “of the people, by the people, and for the people” if all decisions are made by a small group of wealthy contributors who are often motivated by self-interest. This has become a matter of increasing concern given the evidence that large numbers of citizens have assumed the role of spectators, rather than participants, in the political process. When citizens are engaged in the problems that confront their communities, they are more likely to take ownership of those issues and work with others to find a solution that is in the “public good.”

Kettering research reveals that citizens become engaged when they (1) are informed about the issue, (2) feel that they have a voice in the matter, and (3) see a way to work with others toward a solu-

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tion. To respond to these needs, Kettering formed the National Issues Forums Institute in 1980. NIFI each year selects several issues of national importance and, using Kettering researchers, publishes issue books that describe the problems and alternative solutions to them. The material is nonpartisan

and nonprescriptive; it is designed to provide the citizen with the information needed to make an intelligent choice.

NIFI then, through various partners, conducts forums around the nation to allow citizens to become knowledgeable about the topic, to find their voice, and to discover ways they can contribute toward a solution. Over the years, these forums have been sponsored by high schools, universities, public libraries, and a variety of community organizations like the League of Women Voters. In the forums a process called “public deliberation” is employed, designed to stimulate citizen engagement.

Public deliberation involves several steps. First, participants in the forum are expected to read the issue book materials prior to the discussion. Then, each individual is given an opportunity to express an opinion and to hear the opinions of others. Finally, a moderator trained for this task assists the group in arriving at some “common ground”—a conclusion on which they can agree. Kettering research, particularly a major project at Wake Forest University, indicates that when individuals participate in such public deliberation their disposition toward engagement accelerates (Harringer and McMillan 2007).

Many university faculty use NIFI issue books to give students an opportunity to deliberate about current issues that are relevant to the courses they are teaching. Schools also use the materials to sponsor community forums within their state and region. This year, twelve presidential libraries held forums leading up to the presidential election. Additionally, we currently have a major project under way at Michigan State University to see if Cooperative Extension can be used as a vehicle to host forums in communities around the state.

Over the years NIFI has published over seventy-five issue books on a variety of topics. Each describes a problem and then discusses three or more alternative solutions. This information forms the basis for the deliberation that is to follow.

This is just a brief overview of an effort that is helping to preserve and strengthen our democratic system. Your institution, through their outreach programs as well as their classroom activities, can play a vital role in that important endeavor.

Endnote

1. NASULGC, the National Association of State Universities and Land-Grant Colleges, is now the APLU, Association of Public Land-Grant Universities, effective March 30, 2009.

Reference

Harringer, Katy J., and Jill J. McMillan. 2007. *Speaking of politics: Preparing college students for democratic citizenship through deliberative dialogue*. Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press.

About the Author

- William V. Muse is president of the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) in Dayton, Ohio. NIFI is a nonpartisan nationwide network of locally sponsored public forums on public policy issues. Muse holds a PhD in management from the University of Arkansas and worked in higher education for forty years, including stints as CEO of three universities: the University of Akron, Auburn University, and East Carolina University.

