

## **Public Deliberation and Civic Engagement on Issues of Diversity in Higher Education**

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### **Abstract**

The United States is becoming an increasingly polarized society, bogged down by a two-party political system and a disengaged civic society. “Politics” has become a dirty word, and many citizens are choosing to turn away from actively participating in our democratic society. As institutions of higher learning, universities and colleges must step forward to help restore civic engagement in our nation. They can begin by instituting public deliberation into their purpose and into their curriculum. This article highlights one researcher’s efforts to provide a space for public deliberation at a four-year comprehensive urban university in southern California as part of a campuswide accreditation self-study on diversity. The article describes public deliberation as a means of promoting civic engagement, as well as the processes utilized for this project. The article concludes with findings from the public deliberations as well as implications for future implementation at the higher education level.

### **Politics and Public Deliberation**

**A**s a former public scholar with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, I was trained, and undertook research, in three areas—issues framing, public deliberation, and citizen research—between the years 2005 and 2007. Combined, these three components form a fundamental basis for what is known at the Kettering Foundation as “deliberative democracy.” Deliberative democracy is defined as a practice that “builds on the capacities of citizens to think, talk and work together in their common interests. ‘Politics’ in this tradition is what citizens do when they come together to solve their own problems—in contrast to the electoral, legislative and decision-making processes of government” (*Willingham n.d., 7; bold in the original*). This definition is in contrast to the common form of politics we are witnessing today in which a skeptical public has come to equate politics with corruption, special interests, and powerlessness.

In the Kettering context, politics is not something bad, corrupt, acrimonious, or something that people watch others do on TV. Rather it is something people actively participate in. It is something people are a part of and have a vested interest in. In other

words, this definition of politics is one that requires all members of the community to be actors not only in the process of rebuilding democracy but also in the act of sustaining it. Politics is the active engagement of citizens and residents in resolving the issues that most affect them and their communities while at the same developing skills and dispositions that will allow them to confront new challenges with resolve and efficiency. Consequently, politics in this context is people not only being involved in “setting directions for government” but also in “joining together in public action” to improve their lives and their communities (*Willingham n.d.*, 7).

Mathews and McAfee (2003) argue that “for democratic politics to operate as it should, the public has to act. It is not enough to vote, not enough to understand or support our elected officials, not enough to merely have opinions or keep up with current affairs” (1). Private individuals need to do more to ensure that our country retains its democratic principles as well as its accountability to the public good. For this to take place, however, private individuals need to begin to see themselves as a “common public,” that is, as a

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civic community composed of distinct individuals but with a common future.

Thus, the questions now become: how do we get private citizens to act as an engaged public so that decisions can be made in the best interest of the community as a whole rather than just for certain individuals or groups? And, what exactly needs to be done to restore active participation in matters that most affect

local communities and our government? What needs to be done to return government to the people and the notion of politics as working for the public good? Obviously, there are no easy answers to these questions, nor are there how-to techniques that can be easily transplanted from one community to another with the same results. What there are, however, are descriptions of practices that can at the very least assist communities in regaining their democratic foothold and in involving their citizens more in community and national affairs (*Grisham 1999; Kretzmann and McKnight 1993; Mathews 2002; Mathews and McAfee 2003; London 2004*).

A fundamental step toward developing an engaged public is creating spaces that will allow public deliberation between private individuals to occur. This public deliberation can take the form

of a community forum or town hall meeting in which participants come together as a group to “operationalize” democracy. As opposed to other forums in which one side either “wins” or “loses,” and where acrimony is the course of the day, public deliberation is an opportunity for community members to reason and talk about potential options for action to common local problems. It is also understood that there are multiple approaches to solving the problems at hand and whatever option is chosen will come with costs and consequences. Consequently, no option is seen as the “right” one. Rather options are chosen based on the prioritized values of that particular community.

Public deliberation functions “to make a difference in the civic life of our communities [by] developing a combination of knowledge, skills, values, and motivation to make a difference” (*Ehrlich 1999, vi*). Consequently, public deliberation is viewed “to be intrinsically valuable to citizens” in that it allows community members to talk about the issues that they care most about—issues that most directly impact the communities they live in—and it provides them lifelong skills and knowledge that can be applied at a future date and in varying contexts. In other words, through the deliberative processes of public deliberation, issues framing, and citizen research, individuals not only learn more critically and deeply about civic and socially relevant topics, but also about ways to enact this new learning in true democratic processes (*Knutson and Dedrick 2005; Paul 2001; Prenshaw 1998*). As individuals utilize these processes in addressing the issues that most impact their local communities and private lives, a culturally democratic practice begins to take root at the local level, creating the conditions that build public citizens.

### **Universities as Spaces for Public Deliberation**

Public deliberation can occur in virtually any place where there are people willing to talk about issues that concern them and their communities. Deliberation can occur under the auspices of an established institution or civic organization; or it can occur informally, as in a group of neighbors coming together at a resident’s house or a community park to resolve a pressing neighborhood concern. The setting in which public deliberation occurs doesn’t necessarily matter, provided that the elements and goals are in place that will promote a common goal and purpose for the community as opposed to false public support for an already defined solution or direction—which is often the case with “public hearings” in which elected officials are the only ones allowed to speak or ask questions and where public input is limited and timed.

Of the many institutions in the United States, universities and colleges occupy an important place in our nation and in their potential to be spaces for public deliberation and operational democracy (Carnegie Foundation and CIRCLE 2006; Ehrlich 1999; Giroux 2006). Though often accused of being heavy on theory with little practical use in the “real world” and often referred to sarcastically as the ivory tower, these institutions are nonetheless “deeply involved in the public life of their communities, the broader society and the world” (Boyte 2002, 1). They are, in a sense, “civic learning organizations” in that by their purpose and nature, they should naturally be able to create spaces for divergent thinking to come together to

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create new ideas and alternative views. Universities and colleges are “an essential part of a community’s civic infrastructure” and, as such, are indispensable institutions for providing “public making space” for students and communities (Mathews 2002). Yet, are institutions of higher education fulfilling this role? That is, are U.S. universities and colleges truly providing the spaces for students, faculty, staff, and community members to come together to create a general public that is informed about the issues that affect their community and their nation? And are these spaces structured in such a manner that public deliberation is allowed to take root and become institutionalized?

The works of Mathews (1995, 2002), Barber (1998), and others (Ketcham 1989; Smith 1990) argue that as institutions of higher education, universities and colleges have developed too narrow a focus by developing students’ minds rather than their whole being. That is, many of the educational and extracurricular programs currently offered in U.S. universities and colleges often lack an understanding, or maybe have forgotten, what it means to prepare students to be active participants in a democratic society. The result has been, according to some observers, a declining voter turnout and a “lagging civic participation” (Miller 2007, 36) among America’s youth. This has led some to conclude that “cynicism about politics and skepticism about education have become mutually reinforcing tendencies that to be understood must be analyzed in tandem” (Giroux 2006, 65).

To their credit, in an effort to promote civic engagement and instill a democratic culture in students, many universities and colleges across the country do require their students to work, volunteer, or do projects in ethnically and socially diverse communities through varied forms of community-based projects or service-learning assignments. Yet, while this community development and civic engagement is well intentioned, many of these endeavors do not seem to adequately engage students, or the communities in which they work, in the deliberative processes that can inform both student learning and community voice (*Mathews 2002*). In other words, these projects do not appear to go far enough in creating citizens who “assume public responsibility through the very process of governing” (*Giroux 2006, 72*).

The problem here appears to be that many university and college service-learning projects seem focused more on “helping” other peoples’ communities, for which there is a perceived need, than on learning *with* these communities, which can then lead to the communities guiding their own development and destiny (*Kretzmann and McKnight 1993*). In fact, service-learning and community service have often been criticized for providing college students with superficial contact with the communities being served, thereby undermining students’ appreciation of the complexity of the social problems they witness and having adverse effects on their learning.

Another problem with traditional service-learning activities is the degree to which these experiences are “transferred over” into the “real world” or internalized by the participants. Indeed, oftentimes these service-learning and community service projects tend to take an “apolitical” stance that in fact serves to obfuscate the political, social, economic, and historical root of most social problems. As a result, students tend to “see problems as belonging to individuals rather than see them in their broader context” (*Farland and Henry 1992, 11*). And therein lies the problem for the U.S. university and college system: creating an intrinsically motivating learning experience from which students study the broader sociopolitical and economic context of the problems they encounter while concurrently developing the civic skills, knowledge, and disposition to be active practitioners of democracy and effect social change.

### **Public Deliberation on a University Campus**

Like any other public institution of higher education, California State University, Dominguez Hills (CSUDH) has a social and moral

obligation to prepare students to be successful participants in society and to make positive contributions to the common good. The impact CSUDH makes as an institution of higher education is not only at the individual student level but also at the macro (social) level in that it helps shape society.

CSUDH is one of the most ethnically diverse universities in the state of California, as well as one of the most diverse in the western United States. According to the CSUDH website, the campus is “35.5 percent Hispanic, 30.9 percent African American, 22.7 percent White, 10.3 percent Asian, and 0.6 percent American Indian.”<sup>1</sup> Thus, at CSUDH, multiculturalism appears to be more than just a motto; it is a way of life and learning. Yet, what does this multiculturalism mean to an urban university community and what are the advantages and challenges of having such an ethnically diverse student population? Moreover, how do diversity and civic engagement intersect on this campus to enrich the students’ learning experiences and academic endeavors? Or better yet, can these two constructs intersect at all to make the students’ learning experiences more enriching?

As an urban university in one of the most populous and ethnically diverse regions of the country, CSUDH has been making attempts to tap into and understand the multicultural nature of its campus and county. Moreover, since CSUDH is committed to the concept of creating a *communiversity*, “an institution that sees its future tied to the community that it serves and a community that sees its future growth and development enhanced by the presence of the University,”<sup>2</sup> the university has been attempting during the last few years to engage students, faculty, and community members in campus decisions that most affect their professional and personal lives.

As a grant recipient from the CSUDH WASC<sup>3</sup> Steering Committee, this researcher’s task was to develop a project that would address two of the fundamental core issues of the university’s accreditation self-study report: (1) Core Issue Three—Diversity: Facilitating Meaningful Interactions among Members of Our Learning Community and (2) Core Issue Four—Civic Engagement: Integrating Campus and Community Initiatives through the Concept of *Communiversity*. This researcher felt that these core issues could best be accomplished through public deliberation about issues of race and ethnic relations on campus and in the surrounding communities. The focal guiding question of this researcher’s work was: How does diversity at CSUDH lead to an

enhanced awareness of multicultural perspectives and an enriched academic experience of intellectual engagement?

Materials from the National Issues Forums (NIF), which works in collaboration with the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, were used as part of this study. NIF has materials that cover issues related to civil rights, education, economic issues, health and well-being, and international and foreign policy. Participants in the campus forums deliberated using the NIF issue book *Racial and Ethnic Tensions: What Should We Do?* This booklet provides detail on the purpose of the NIF booklets:

The issue book provides NIF participants with a framework for dealing with the issue. The issue book outlines the issue in a nonpartisan way and then presents for public deliberation three alternative approaches for addressing it. Rather than conforming to the ideas of any single advocate, each of these three approaches represents a distinct set of American priorities and views that informs and structures the deliberation without persuading or biasing the participants. The approaches are not necessarily exclusionary. Instead, each presents an array of ideas and options, along with the costs and consequences of each, for participants to consider and deliberate about so that they may, and often do, construct their own approach to the issue. (*NIF 2003, 4*)

### **Public Deliberation at CSUDH**

During the fall 2006 semester, this researcher and his student assistant conducted two public deliberation sessions for students, both undergraduate and graduate, in the area of race and ethnic relations to see how these impact the students' daily experiences at CSUDH and in their communities. All participants were also provided with booklets giving background information on the topic as well as three approaches for addressing this issue. Data was gathered and analyzed using pre- and postforum surveys developed by NIF as well as from participant-created posters during the sessions.

For this project, the two classes chosen to participate in the forums were courses that dealt with issues of multiculturalism and diversity—Chicana/Chicano Studies (CHS) 100 (The Americas: European Cultural & Historical Synthesis) and Teacher Education (TED) 415 (Multicultural Education in an Urban Context). Ninety-four (N = 94) students were from CHS 100; thirty-eight (N = 38)

were from TED 415. Certain demographic information was also collected on the preforum surveys: gender, education level, age (range), race/ethnicity, and zip code of residence.

### **Findings from the Campus Deliberations**

According to the data collected and the deliberation discussions, many of the forum participants expressed a belief that there are still racial and ethnic tensions in their communities, and many were able to articulate personal experiences in which they had been (or perceived being) discriminated against. Growing up in the diverse communities that surround CSUDH, many spoke of feeling “afraid to walk” in neighborhoods in which they were the ethnic or racial minority. Meanwhile, others spoke of racial fighting in their high schools and of conflicts during the student walkouts of spring 2006.<sup>4</sup>

Participants’ comments reflected the notion that, despite contrary beliefs by many in American society, racism and discrimination are still very much widespread problems in bicultural neighborhoods and communities. The participants spoke of how “people are just being mean to other people because of the stereotypes” and how “people still do not listen and they still discriminate against others.”<sup>5</sup> Others, meanwhile, felt that “people can be ignorant and stubborn when it comes to other races” and that “many people refuse to use critical analysis and instead justify the tensions with stereotypes.” These stereotypes and racial biases, participants felt, were prevalent through all sectors of society, from young children to “government representatives [who] are racist as well.”

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Participants in the forums, however, also believed that “too many people still see everything through the lens of racial and ethnic discrimination” and that “special treatment that is based on race or ethnic background is unfair and causes more friction and resentment.” Yet, many of the forum participants also acknowledged that “in many ways, prejudice and discrimination are as common as ever in housing, education, business, and social settings.” In fact, this was the belief of over 80 percent of the forum participants. Additionally, the majority of participants (59 percent) expressed



the belief in their preforum questionnaires that “as a nation, we are sliding backward on the hard-fought progress made during the civil rights movement and over the last three decades.”

Despite general feelings of frustration with the issue of racial and ethnic tensions in our society, few of the participants in the forums felt they knew specifically what needed to be done to solve this problem. Participants’ uncertainty in the face of this problem is complicated by policymakers’ tendency to address this issue by imposing various actions on the public. These actions, however, often are controversial to one or more racial or ethnic groups, thus compounding instead of remedying the problem.

Finally, forum participants did not believe that acting “color-blind” was the best solution for racial and ethnic problems in our nation. Many felt that this approach wasn’t “realistic and doesn’t get us anywhere.” This was the belief held by over 70 percent of the participants. Some of the participants’ comments also reflected a belief that education was a key component in alleviating racial and ethnic tension in our society and that children should be guided at a young age to solve this problem. One participant also commented about the important role our government officials have in this process: “[The] powers that be must help to change the nation through education”; while another participant felt that “everyone is responsible for others; therefore it is our responsibility to educate our children to be more open-minded.”

### ***Deliberation about Three Approaches to Solving Racial Tension***

The primary focus of the forums was to have students deliberate about three common approaches that have been posed to tackle the problem of racial and ethnic tensions. These approaches were addressed in small groups, also referred to as “study circles.” As each approach was discussed, participants were asked to put themselves in the shoes of a person who supports it. They were asked to reflect on what would make this approach attractive to that person—even if they, personally, did not feel that way. Secondly, they were asked to deliberate about what the consequences or tradeoffs would be if we were to follow that particular approach. This process was repeated three times—once for each approach.

The deliberative process around the three approaches and the notes derived from these deliberations forced students to think about why others might support an approach that they personally may not. By framing the issue as an option with benefits, tradeoffs,

and consequences, and by identifying the ideals valuable to someone who supports a particular approach, participants were also able to reflect on their own biases and values. They were able to conceptualize that *all* approaches to solving problems have costs and benefits. Moreover, there may be common ground between the varying approaches that an advocate for one may not have even considered. Through the deliberation process, the task for the participants was therefore finding those areas of agreement as well as those areas of tension that need to be worked through in order to begin to take action (Mathews 2002).

### **Reflections on the Public Deliberation Process at CSUDH**

The findings of this study demonstrated that the CSUDH student population held diverse viewpoints about diversity, multiculturalism, and solutions to race and ethnic relations in our society and in our communities. Moreover, they pointed to a tolerant student body, one that, most likely due to its diversity, understands the complexity of race and ethnic relations in our country and on campus. None of the data collected indicated that the students at CSUDH saw the diversity of the campus as a liability or as a negative. To be sure, many of the students shared out their own experiences of dealing with discrimination and prejudice and their own beliefs on what should be done to address this issue.

While the forum data presented to the CSUDH WASC Subcommittee on Diversity is of interest, this researcher's own personal reflections about the process will be shared to inform other researchers or institutions of higher learning that may be interested in building a space for public deliberation either in their classrooms or on campus.

First of all, public deliberation must be understood as just one component toward developing civic engagement on a college campus. Used on its own, public deliberation is de-contextualized, void of its potential to allow participants to explore their biases, their beliefs, their values, and to forge courses of action for themselves and for their communities. Indeed, prior to public deliberation, participants must participate in the issues-framing process. This process requires participants to name their community problem, or concern, in public terms by coming to a common understanding on what the problem is and how it affects their community and them; by considering the complexity of the problem; and by formulating approaches for addressing the problem (Belcher et al. 2002; Mathews 2002).

With that said, this researcher violated “rule number one” of “authentic civic engagement” with this project. Specifically, this researcher named the problem and framed the issue for the students prior to their participation. While the topic was chosen based on the CSUDH WASC Core Issues, participants did not contribute to the naming and framing of the issue. Abiding by the above-mentioned rule would have required that students take an active role in identifying the problem and framing the three or more possible approaches. This element was omitted because this was a one-semester project and the forums were conducted in classrooms rather than campus settings. To fully capture the essence and the benefits of public deliberation, this researcher would have had to spend time naming and framing the issue in tandem with the participants prior to beginning public deliberation.

Conducting the forums in classrooms rather than in a broader public setting also imposed limits in that they became a class exercise rather than an authentic learning experience in which students were able to understand and appreciate the long-term effects of their participation. While students were informed that their participation would benefit the university in terms of its reaccreditation and that all data collected would be shared with the

President’s Office and with the WASC Subcommittee on Diversity for future program modifications and implementation, limited communication networks across campus restricted the participants’ access to the outcomes of this project.

The limitations of this study should not detract from the strong support public deliberation has both nationally (Mathews and McAfee 2003; Rickman 2002) and internationally (London 2004). Knowledge can be gained from areas of success as well

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as areas needing improvement. For the university system, implications from this study point to the need to provide more opportunities for students to engage in dialogues about issues that most concern them. There is a need to expand the participation of stakeholders in university-sponsored activities, such as forums, to build a greater sense of community and to identify factors that enhance student learning experiences and address issues that detract from them.

Public deliberation is not a “cure-all” for community and institutional ills, nor are its effects instantaneous. Public deliberation must become institutionalized and its knowledge production must be documented and used as a basis for action. Otherwise, participants will come to view public deliberation merely as an opportunity to gripe or a time to chat. Therefore, public deliberation cannot be an isolated academic exercise or a one-time event. Rather, it must be used across the curriculum as a legitimate component of civic engagement. By providing space where the campus community can come together to work through difficult issues, universities and colleges can promote the idea that public deliberation is about democracy in action. It is a chance to be heard and to hear others. It is, in simple terms, a necessary step toward creating a more inclusive and participatory democracy.

### **Endnotes**

1. <http://www.csudh.edu/oir/Profile.htm> (accessed April 24, 2006).
2. CSUDH WASC Core Issues, <http://www.csudh.edu/wasc/CoreIssues/CivicEngag/CivicEngag.htm> (accessed April 19, 2006).
3. WASC is the Western Association of Schools and Colleges, a nonprofit corporation encompassing three accrediting commissions (<http://www.wascsenior.org/wasc/>).
4. These were the student demonstrations in which mostly Latino students walked off their school campuses to oppose HR 4437, a House bill designed to classify undocumented immigrants as felons.
5. Qualitative comments have been edited for grammar and may not be verbatim.

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## About the Author

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