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Editors' Introduction: Special Issue on Higher Education

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Abstract

This issue of the Journal for Public Deliberation challenges colleges and universities to consider how their academic programs help strengthen American democracy. In this introduction, the editors summarize and connect the contributions in this special issue.

Keywords

higher education, teaching and learning, deliberative democracy

Editors' Introduction

What does 21st Century democracy demand of higher education? To answer this question, we first need to consider how to make democracy work the way it should. This question has been asked many times over, but recently it has resurfaced with heightened urgency *and* optimism. The tenor of public discourse in the United States has become increasingly shrill, negative, and partisan, and Americans tell survey researchers that our political system feels dysfunctional, ineffective, or untrustworthy. At the same time, there is growing interest and momentum in the work of democratic reform, evidenced by the work of advocates, reformers, scholars, and practitioners associated with organizations such as the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC), the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (NCDD), and the Democracy Imperative (TDI).

Efforts to strengthen democracy are organized and strategic, and these projects approach democratic renewal from both top-down and bottom-up perspectives. At the national level, the reform agenda includes increasing public engagement, transparency and ethics in government, tightening campaign finance reform, fostering inter-governmental collaboration, and overhauling electoral systems.¹ At the local level, universities, non-profit organizations, local governments, school districts, for-profit firms, public libraries, arts and humanities councils all host efforts to increase community capacity for action and change. Both national and local reforms emanate from a belief that democracy is strongest when everyday citizens come together, talk, listen, discover common ground, work through their differences, and collaborate to improve how problems are solved— what many call a more *deliberative democracy*.

There's also a sidebar conversation taking place, one that questions whether Americans are adequately prepared for democratic citizenship (used in the broadest, non-legalistic, sense). Do they have the knowledge, skills, and dispositions they need for active engagement in a deliberative democracy? There's no doubt that some people are scrappy organizers who are intuitively savvy and diplomatic. Research, however, points to a thirty-year decline in civic participation (the exception being the recent rise of Internet-based engagement) that parallels declining opportunities for civic skill development in various settings – K-12 education, higher education, voluntary associations, civic organizations, faith-based organizations, families, and neighborhoods.² We also

¹ For the past two years, AmericaSpeaks, Demos, and Everyday Democracy have convened experts and advocates from across the democracy reform work to generate a common set of priorities for strengthening public participation and creating a stronger democracy. The coalition's recently- released report, *Working Together to Strengthen Our Nation's Democracy: Ten Recommendations* can be accessed at

<http://www.whitehouse.gov/files/documents/ostp/opengov/sond2%20final%20report.pdf> .

² CIRCLE Fact Sheet, Civic Skills and Federal Policy, May 3, 2010, accessed at http://www.civicyouth.org/PopUps/FactSheets/FS_10_Civic_Skills.pdf.

know from research, such as the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching's publications on civic and political engagement and national initiatives such as last summer's *No Better Time*³ conference, that when people develop a combination of knowledge, skills, motivation, and principles, they are more effective citizens.

The Purpose of This Issue

In this special issue of the *Journal of Public Deliberation*, we examine the role of higher education in reinvigorating U.S. democracy. It is premised on several assumptions – leaps of faith, really – on our part. First, we presume that colleges and universities are ideally positioned to respond to this need, to help citizens develop the knowledge and skills they need to participate in a deliberative democracy. Second, colleges and universities should be exemplary institutional members of their local communities and of democracy more broadly, and in that capacity, should be agents for analysis, public discussion, and action on both local and national issues. And third, no one discipline or office on campus “owns” democratic learning and engagement. All disciplines, interdisciplinary programs, and co-curricular departments can contribute to an institution's role as a catalyst for change in local communities and democracy more broadly and in cultivating citizen knowledge, skills, motivation, and principles.

This issue offers a “sampler” of discipline-based programs and activities that are tied in important ways to deliberative democracy and have significant potential to contribute to the democratic renewal agenda. These essays focus primarily on teaching and learning, but they also cut across the realms of teaching, research, and service, blurring the lines between those three traditional academic responsibilities. We believe that as democratic learning continues to develop on campus, transcending those categories will help deliberative scholars and practitioners do their work in the name of both research and pedagogy. Too often deliberative work is tied only to service or non-curricular student engagement efforts, which are only sustainable when connected to “core functions” of host institutions.

The idea for collecting a series of papers – what we call Catalyst Papers – was generated at the first Democracy Imperative meeting in July 2007. About 40 people – faculty from across disciplines, campus leaders, and civic leaders – gathered for several days at the University of New Hampshire to discuss the role of higher education in U.S. democracy. We all shared concerns about the state of our nation: the vitriolic tone of public discourse; citizen disengagement from

³Last summer, the Democracy Imperative and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium co-hosted a national conference, *No Better Time: Promising Opportunities in Deliberative Democracy for Educators and Practitioners*. Summaries and a final report from *No Better Time* are available at <http://www.unh.edu/democracy/>.

politics; the adversarial nature of public policy making; the decline of social capital (the social networks and mutual trust that bond communities); a public increasingly polarized by differences in values, political ideology, faith, and social identity; the highest levels of economic inequality since the 1920s; persistent patterns of disparity and achievement gaps; the state of civil rights in the aftermath of 9/11; and everyday acts of intolerance, incivility, selfishness, and unethical behavior.

We were also encouraged by promising experiments in democratic dialogue, deliberative politics, and social equity work. Across the country, thousands of communities were approaching public problems through structured democratic processes that emphasize principles of inclusion, reason, respect, and collaboration. We were buoyed by the work of democracy-building exemplars like Everyday Democracy, the Kettering Foundation, Public Conversations Project, *AmericaSpeaks*, and the Taos Institute, and we noticed the exponential rise in membership of organizations such as the NCDD.

The academics in the group were already experimenting with approaches to civic learning, political engagement, democratic dialogue, and programs in leadership or conflict resolution, but in many cases, they didn't know about each other or even the networks of individuals doing similar work. We agreed to form TDI, a network of educators and democracy-building practitioners who would work together to strengthen democracy in and through higher education.

Preview of the Issue's Essays

We start this issue with an updated version of TDI's original Framing Paper (Catalyst Paper #1) and *Statement of Principles and Practices*. That opening essay reviews in more detail the needs of democracy (e.g., essential civic skills for citizens) and where on campus one can expect to find democratic education and engagement.

At times, we see a divide between dialogue and deliberation – the perception of deliberation being that it is more policy oriented. We don't think this is a constructive divide, and we see dialogue as the foundation to good deliberation that leads to social change and policy making. Authors Ande Diaz and Stephen Hiroshi Gilchrist scan a broad range of activities to teach dialogue, programs such as Intergroup Relations Program, which began at the University of Michigan and spread to hundreds of campuses, nationally. This essay also discusses the more recent Difficult Dialogues initiative, a Ford Foundation program to advance intergroup dialogue, free speech, and academic freedom on 25 campuses nationally.

We then turn to the disciplines, beginning with Martin Carcasson, Laura Black, and Elizabeth Sink's article on Communication Studies, perhaps the fastest growing and most interdisciplinary hub for learning and studying the arts of

public deliberation. As their extensive essay shows, the communication discipline's core concepts connect with deliberative democracy, but the field struggles, nonetheless, to integrate those connections and transform students and communities.

In our third article, Katy Harriger reflects on the study of democratic theory and politics, interests at the core of the discipline of political science. She notes that although the origins of political science were civic-minded, the discipline evolved into the role of professionalized observer of politics rather than co-creator of democracy. This may be changing. As with many disciplines, political science is taking a renewed interest in the civic dimension to the work, both in research and pedagogy.

There is a significant values dimension to understanding and practicing deliberative democracy. Programs in philosophy teach students to examine and navigate public life through values inquiry and the open exploration of conflicting ideals. In their article on philosophy, authors Sharon Meagher and Ellen Feder trace the roots of democratic theory and practice. They call for "teaching specific texts that provide the foundation of our understandings of deliberation and democracy" and for "conducting our classes in ways that empower students to be critical thinkers."

If, as researchers suggest, the decline in opportunities to learn civic skills is strongly connected with the scarcity of meaningful K-12 civic learning experiences, then Sarah Stitzlein's article on teaching teachers is, indeed, critical. She explores both exemplary programs and smaller approaches for incorporating democratic practices and assignments, including forms of social justice and service learning initiatives, into various education programs.

Nancy Kranich reminds us that academic libraries are ideal hubs for practicing democracy. Libraries can offer engaging programs about real issues in U.S. democracy, without worrying about common structural and political barriers in academe, particularly entrenched academic silos that resist interdisciplinary approaches to public problem solving. Academic libraries can present thoughtful, engaging, and enlightening programs about problems facing democracy – programs that provide real and virtual spaces where faculty, students, and members of the surrounding community can gather together to solve pressing problems.

Certain learning practices – first-year seminars, learning communities, writing intensives, service learning, internships, capstones, original research, and diversity programs – have been tested repeatedly and are widely viewed as essential to effective teaching and learning. Community-based research is effective because it teaches many skills – inquiry, empirical observation, technologies, and critical thinking and analysis. When research is done collaboratively, in teams that include students, faculty, and community partners,

researchers also develop civic skills – communication, collaborative decision making, and public reasoning. In their article, authors Kiran Cunningham and Hannah McKinney review forms of engaged scholarship that can be designed, start to finish, with the skills and habits of deliberative democracy as core emphases.

The final two essays come from the perspective of a practitioner and a student. Matt Leighninger shares insights from his conversations with public officials, particularly their views on what knowledge, skills, and values they hope graduates of public administration programs will have by the time they seek employment. Our student author, Stephanie South, then offers a fresh perspective on what students gain from dialogue and deliberation programs, in the context of what the millennial generation hopes to gain from postsecondary education.

While the idea for this issue was generated at an academic conference, this collection would never have been possible without the hard work of many people. We are grateful to Ted Becker, coordinating editor of the Journal, for this unique opportunity. Matt Leighninger, director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, played an integral role not only as a contributor but, early on, as we conceptualized the issue and approached prospective authors. These selected authors came through with thoughtful and inspiring contributions. Each article was reviewed by outside readers, whom we thank. We owe a large debt to John Gastil who provided editorial advice and helped us get this issue over the finish line.

The ideas presented – and the disciplines and activities covered – in this special issue of *Journal of Public Deliberation* serve as a starting point rather than a conclusion or even a “to do” list. (We also recognize that many other departments and programs could have been included in this issue.) Our goal was to produce a “sampler” of essays that would trigger action, particularly more creative thinking, interdisciplinary programs, innovation across and between campuses, and stronger community ties. We view the ideas reflected in this issue as ones that can be combined and applied easily by readers in any field and at any college or university. We also hope these essays give practitioners insight into how universities operate and how to collaborate with them in the future. Finally, we hope this issue spurs future submissions to this journal addressing other campus deliberation and dialogue programs. This series is our call to academics and practitioners for action, and a reminder that colleges and universities can and should play an active role in fostering a more deliberative democracy.

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