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ENACTING DEMOCRACY IN "DEMOCRACY'S COLLEGES"

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The phrase "Democracy's Colleges" was first applied to land-grant universities as early as 1862 in recognition of their work on important public (often agricultural) problems and their enrollment of ordinary citizens who, in years prior, would have been excluded from the more selective system of liberal arts colleges and elite research universities operating in the United States (Cohen & Kisker, 2010; Ross, 1942). Since at least the 1960s, however, the moniker "Democracy's Colleges" has been more often applied to the nation's community colleges, both because of the close relationships they maintain with their local communities and because they perform a critical democratizing function in American higher education by accepting all comers, regardless of age, race, religion, socioeconomic status, educational preparedness, or professional/vocational goals.

Yet, although democratizing opportunity and facilitating social mobility is unquestionably important, we believe that America's community colleges—Democracy's Colleges—have a responsibility to go even further: They must, as Bernie Ronan (2012) has argued, also "*do* the work of democracy" (p. 34, italics added). Community colleges must engage students in transformative experiences that not only help them learn about civic or political ideas but also ask them to be "active, critical, reflective, and empathetic member[s] of a community of equals, capable of exchanging ideas on the basis of respect and understanding with people from many different backgrounds" (p. 4). Community colleges have a responsibility to help students grapple with complex or *wicked* problems for which there are no clear-cut solutions (Carcasson, 2013; Rittle & Weber, 1973), engage in those issues with others, discover shared identities despite profound differences, and ultimately take action on issues important to them or their communities (Ronan, 2011). In

other words, Democracy's Colleges must guide students in performing, or enacting, democracy.

Community colleges are uniquely suited to this kind of work (Kisker & Ronan, 2012). Community colleges educate two-thirds of all young people who enroll in higher education, and the vast majority of their students hail from nearby communities and return to them to work and raise families. Community colleges engage with K–12 school systems and community organizations. They offer education and training programs for adults and traditional-age learners alike. They send hundreds of thousands of transfer students to universities each year and collaborate with regional economic development agencies to design occupational programs in emerging and high-demand fields. In short, they are true stewards of place (Mathews, 2014), and as such their efforts to enact democracy can create ripple effects that extend far beyond campus or community borders.

Community colleges engage in multiple activities that help students learn about or participate in public life. These include service-learning, voter registration and get-out-the-vote drives, classroom discussion of policy issues, civic agency programs, candidate and election-issue forums, and community organizing and advocacy (Kisker, 2016; Ronan & Kisker, 2016). As we explore in this chapter, community colleges also participate in a robust set of deliberative dialogue projects. There is value in all of these approaches to civic engagement, but as we have argued elsewhere (Kisker, Theis, & Olivas, 2016), with the exception of deliberative dialogues and some civic agency programs, "most collegiate civic efforts focus on the problems that occur *in* democracy (i.e., specific policy issues), as opposed to the problems *of* democracy, or how citizens can help make democracy work better" (p. 3). This chapter describes a three-year project to build community colleges' capacity to deal with these *problems of democracy* through the art of deliberation.

Deliberation, which is frequently taught and practiced on college campuses through structured deliberative dialogues, provides a way for students to address wicked or endemic (as opposed to solvable) problems of democracy and become deeply involved in public decision-making (Shaffer, Longo, Manosevitch, & Thomas, 2017). Deliberation helps students understand issues from multiple perspectives, along the way building a skill set that is both relevant to the marketplace and critical for political participation. It also assists colleges in rediscovering and publicizing their civic mission and provides communities with residents who are well-versed in deliberative practices and able to apply their skills locally (Carcasson, 2013). As such, deliberation is one of the most effective ways in which community colleges can engage students in enacting democracy.

Embedding Deliberation in Community Colleges

It is with this belief that the Center for the Study of Community Colleges, the Democracy Commitment, and the Kettering Foundation embarked on a three-year project to embed deliberation as a civic skill in community colleges. In 2015, we began convening cohorts of faculty and staff from community colleges around the country.[1] All members of the Democracy Commitment—a national organization of geographically diverse institutions supporting the development and expansion of civic learning and democratic engagement within community colleges[2]—have acted as test cases for how we might work to establish deliberation as an essential practice within the community college sector as a whole.

The colleges participating in our project were divided into three cohorts, and each fall one or two cohorts came to the Kettering Foundation's Dayton, Ohio, campus to participate in a research exchange. It was during these exchanges that participants discussed concepts such as wicked problems, how deliberation provides transformative opportunities for students to explore these difficult issues, and ways in which community colleges can act as stewards of place in tackling complex community challenges. Following each research exchange, we worked with institutions in that year's cohort to train faculty, staff, and students in the art of hosting and moderating deliberations, and in subsequent months, each college held least one deliberative forum with students and/or community members. Members from the previous year's cohort returned to Kettering the following fall—together with the incoming cohort—to share their experiences and reflect on the year's work.

In designing the project in this way, our intention was to train the trainers. When faculty and staff are equipped to become the resident experts in deliberative practices on their own campuses, they become ambassadors for the promise and practice of deliberation over time. They can also train successive cohorts of students to act as moderators for deliberative dialogues among their peers and community members, which helps build a critical set of skills that will benefit the students for years to come (Theis, Kisker, & Olivas, 2018). Furthermore, we sought to develop a network of community

1. Participating colleges were Tarrant County Community College-Southeast (TX), Guttman Community College (NY), Lane Community College (OR), Delta Community College (MN), Monroe Community College (NY), St. Paul Community and Technical College (MN), Santa Fe College (FL), College of the Canyons (CA), Kirkwood Community College (IA), Piedmont Virginia Community College (VA), and Wright Community College (IL).

2. The Democracy Commitment is now an initiative of Campus Compact. More information can be found at its website (www.compact.org/the-democracy-commitment/).

colleges, experienced in deliberation, that would connect to and augment existing Kettering networks. Our train-the-trainer project design, described in more detail in the following section, has also led to numerous successes and challenges, which we share in hopes that they will help community colleges and other institutions embed deliberation as a civic skill on their campuses.

Our Train-the-Trainer Approach

Following each research exchange, John Theis and Alberto Olivas visited the colleges in that year's cohort to train a group of roughly 20 to 25 faculty, administrators, student leaders, and/or community members in the theory behind deliberation, as well as the practice of holding and moderating deliberative dialogues. Whether the project lead at the campus level ought to be located within college administration (e.g., student life office, president's office, or a center for civic engagement) or within an academic discipline (e.g., communications or political science) is an unresolved question, and there are successful examples of both models. Regardless, we found it especially important to ensure participation of an interdisciplinary group of faculty members in these trainings, as—given their ability to reach a large and diverse set of students—they are frequently the most effective ambassadors for deliberation on campus. However, helping college leaders and other administrators gain an understanding of and appreciation for the power of deliberation is also useful, as they can then act as champions for this type of transformative civic work on campus and in the community (Kisker et al., 2016). In many ways, our deliberation trainings emphasized the ways in which colleges can build the capacity to continue training future moderators and champions, thus creating self-sustaining deliberation programs.

The deliberation training itself consists of engaging trainees in considering the role of the community college as a steward of place and how institutions can facilitate dialogues among students, faculty, staff, and community members that enable them to work through differences and discover common ground, priorities, and values that are widely held in the community. During this part of the training, we describe the differences between deliberative dialogue (where expert knowledge is eschewed and emphasis is placed on the citizen as a problem-solver) and the more familiar adversarial models, such as debate and persuasive speechmaking. This helps clarify the strengths, limitations, and useful applications for each dialogue model, so that deliberation is presented not as superior to debate, but rather as better suited to dealing with many of the most challenging issues in our communities. We use the concept of wicked problems to explain the differences between dialogue and debate, and to highlight the need for deliberative dialogue on

campus. In particular, we stress that deliberation is an effective strategy for productively engaging students and community members in understanding and developing strategies to address the persistent and endemic problems in their communities.

Our deliberation trainings also offer opportunities for attendees to experience a deliberative dialogue moderated by one of our trainers, as well as a chance to practice moderating in simulated deliberative settings. Through these experiences, trainees are introduced to key concepts and principles of effective public engagement practices, methods for identifying an issue's stakeholders and convening representative and diverse members of the community to engage in deliberation, and the practices and strategies of effective moderators and recorders (note-takers), including how to troubleshoot and evaluate dialogues. Throughout the trainings, experienced moderators provide feedback to participants and pose practical questions about issues they may face when moderating deliberative events on or off campus (see Kisker et al., 2016, for more detail about our deliberation trainings).[3]

In the weeks or months following each college's deliberation training, faculty or staff representatives organized and hosted at least one deliberative event on campus. Some campuses utilized faculty or staff moderators at these events; most focused on training and using student moderators. Likely as a result, most of these first deliberations were held in classroom settings, which allowed student moderators to gain experience facilitating dialogues among peers. New moderators often perceive classroom dialogues to be "lower stakes" than larger campus or community deliberations, although the latter can be made less intimidating by assigning each moderator to a small-group discussion. Classroom deliberations are also useful to a college's overall work to embed deliberation as a critical skill on campus, as students who find participating in a dialogue to be a transformative experience are frequently eager to become moderators themselves.

The community colleges that participated in our project implemented deliberative practices in a number of other settings, too, including campus-wide conversations or events, campus-community events, faculty professional development seminars, interactive conference presentations, first-year honors seminars, town halls with local representatives, and so forth. Additionally, several colleges are beginning to work with community organizations to host deliberations related to problems of homelessness, drug abuse, peacebuilding, and so forth.

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3. Visit www.youtube.com/watch?v=_DdjHCfgPjY for a video about deliberative dialogues at community colleges.

As community colleges introduce and work to establish the practice of deliberation on campus, we encourage them to provide multiple opportunities for students and others to moderate dialogues and as much constructive feedback and support to new moderators as possible. This allows students to strengthen their own moderating skills, and when good practices and suggestions for improvement are discussed in a supportive, small-group environment, moderators can also learn from their peers' experiences. Although formal trainings for new moderators are important—often trainings can be accomplished in two-hour sessions acquainting students with basic moderating skills, followed by opportunities to hone those skills in classroom or campus forums—the act of providing and receiving feedback from peers and more experienced moderators can be an effective way to ensure a consistent supply of moderators, as newly trained students take the places of those who transfer or enter the workforce.

Project Successes

As part of our annual Kettering research exchanges, faculty and staff representatives from the participating colleges reflected on their successes and challenges, and some provided feedback from students. Over the three years of this project, several commonalities emerged. One common success was the sheer number of students, faculty, and staff attending deliberation training events and dialogues, in some cases exceeding expectations, as well as the level of support—both verbal and financial—lent to the initiative by presidents and other senior administrators. Deliberation trainings were also very well received by faculty participants, many of whom reported being able to immediately apply elements of the training session to their classrooms, in particular strategies for promoting discussion among students.

Perhaps more importantly, the introduction of deliberation on campus appears to have an enormous impact on students' views and perspectives on the world. As one student participant wrote, "Everyone is a little ignorant of what everyone else is going through. . . . I learned a lot about individual experiences that I never would have considered." Another student shared similar sentiments: "This was a good opportunity to hear a broad range of ideas from different people of different backgrounds. By the end of the discussion we seemed to have one thing in common: a desire for change." (See Theis, et al., 2018, for a more in-depth discussion of how deliberation affects students' perspectives and views of the world.)

Project participants also reported that students who participated in a deliberative dialogue and/or moderator training made substantial gains in civic learning and critical thinking. As one faculty member wrote:

"Deliberation is an opportunity to build critical thinking and reasoning skills. Students not only have to think about the entirety of an issue but also must do so in a rational and logical manner." Another concurred, noting that by participating in a deliberation, "students learn to make connections between what is taught in the classroom and the problems they face, or eventually will face, within their federal, state, and local government, community, and democracy." Many colleagues believed that these gains in civic learning and critical thinking would have a direct impact on students' persistence rates and success in school.

Finally, project participants also felt that deliberation positively affected students' sense of civic agency, or their view of themselves as individuals who can make an impact on the world and/or promote social or political change. In some cases, student participants in a deliberative dialogue were quite clear about the effects of that experience on their civic agency. As one wrote, "My perspective has dramatically changed towards poverty and towards getting involved in my community." Similarly, another student related that they now have "a deeper understanding of how change can happen." Project colleagues felt strongly that this growth benefits not only the students but also the campus and community as a whole. As one wrote: "Dialogues are helping the college to promote a sense of 'public work' among the campus community, as well as to foster greater civic responsibility amongst our student population." A common refrain among colleagues in our research exchange was that dialogues can help students practice active citizenship, as opposed to passive citizenship. This, one participant wrote, "is the moral obligation of the community college to its students, community, and nation."

Challenges in Using Deliberative Practices on Campus

Despite these successes, project participants also noted several challenges inherent in embedding deliberation on campus. Some of these are logistic in nature and might be experienced at any institution. These include difficulty securing space on campus to hold deliberations or moderator trainings; challenges securing the participation of key campus stakeholders given other events or commitments; and relatively high levels of faculty and staff turnover, which can impede progress toward institutionalizing a culture of deliberation.

Other challenges may be more inherent to community colleges. For example, some colleges have found it difficult to embed deliberative practices into a quarter system or among a highly transient group of students. Similarly, several project participants noted that a major challenge was the fact that "community college students don't do optional." Because many

students have work or family conflicts and/or commute to campus, recruiting students to deliberations or moderator trainings outside of regular class hours can be challenging, although offering food or extra credit as incentives can be effective.

Other challenges to embedding deliberative practices in community colleges have to do with faculty or administrative fears about holding such events. These fears can take many forms (see Kauffman, 2016, for a detailed analysis of faculty fears about engaging in civic work on campus). At one participating college, for example, faculty and staff worried that the "usual suspects" (i.e., those who already have established beliefs that are so firmly held that they will impede civil dialogue) would be the only ones who would show up to deliberative events. Although this can happen, project colleagues noted that this does not necessarily negate the impact of the dialogue on the "usual suspects" or other attendees, as participants typically feel heard and understood, even if they do not change their own or anyone else's minds. Another frequent discomfort has to do with moderating dialogues, and specifically the lack of an "expert" as a moderator. Although most participants understood that deliberation is not meant to reduce the value of expert knowledge but rather to elevate the experiences and beliefs of all citizens, several felt that it might be useful to have deliberations—especially those including community members—moderated by someone who has substantial subject-matter expertise.

A final challenge relates to institutionalizing the deliberative process on campus—in other words, securing its practice, funding, and support among college leaders. As one colleague reflected,

> The hardest task likely may be building a culture of deliberation both on campus and in the community . . . and [to] clearly connect the practice to the college mission. More importantly, scheduling and discovering an effective process for public involvement will be key going forward.

Another colleague argued that institutionalizing deliberation on campus would be only the first step. As she wrote,

> Only when civic engagement becomes part of the . . . community college lexicon will it begin to be a statewide movement. In addition, the concept must become part of the larger dialogues taking place within a system, especially those concerned with equity and student success, as well as guided pathways. It is essential that civic engagement become part of these system-wide conversations; otherwise, some campuses will continue to move forward with their own local efforts while others will lag behind.

Training moderators and holding deliberations without external support and buy-in from the campus community will not be enough to ensure that deliberation becomes and remains a critical component of how colleges engage students in political discourse. Faculty must also form internal networks on campus, develop discipline-specific topics and approaches to deliberation that are connected to the curriculum, and periodically revisit the role of deliberation as a part of the teaching and learning dynamic (Kisker et al., 2016). Furthermore, college leaders and other administrators must create opportunities for community members to come to campus to participate in deliberative events and act as champions for the practice, both on campus and off. For colleges located proximally to other institutions of higher education, this may include building a reputation as a regional center of excellence in deliberation and offering trainings and other resources to nearby colleges, universities, and community organizations.

Conclusion

As we have learned in the course of this project, deliberation is far more than simply an opportunity to discuss democracy. It provides students and others with essential skills related to public discourse (Carcasson, 2013), but it also has the power to be transformative in students' lives, enriching their "capacity to act together to solve social problems" (Mair, 2016, p. 113). By participating in and moderating deliberative dialogues, students actually get to experience democracy working as it should. Moreover, they realize that they have the ability—through listening, empathizing, and seeking common ground—to facilitate this enactment of democracy. These opportunities are perhaps the most important and long-lasting gifts that Democracy's Colleges can bestow on their students and other members of the campus and surrounding communities.

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