

## **Building Community Partnerships: Determining Organizational Capacity to Support Public Deliberation in Oklahoma**

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### **Abstract**

Land-grant institutions have a role in creating engaged citizens, and public deliberation is a valuable tool to accomplish this mission. Meeting this challenge requires a network of institutions, agencies, organizations, and groups with similar missions working toward a common goal. This article describes a study conducted at a land-grant institution to determine the capacity of a state to support the concept of citizen engagement through public deliberation.

### **The Challenge**

**T**he Kellogg Commission on the Future of State and Land-Grant Universities (1999) commends land-grant institutions for the contributions they have made to social well-being and at the same time challenges these institutions to change. The commission concludes that it is time to go beyond outreach and service to "engagement." Embedded in the engagement concept is a commitment to sharing and reciprocity through the development of partnerships. These partnerships are based on mutual respect among the partners, and acknowledge the contribution each partner makes toward addressing public needs. To meet the challenge of engagement the knowledge and expertise of the public institution must be put to work on the problems facing the people and communities that these institutions serve. This paper acknowledges that meeting this challenge is one of the greatest demands facing higher education today.

The outreach component of the engaged institution can address significant societal problems by creating genuine learning communities, encouraging lifelong learning, finding effective ways to overcome barriers to change, and building greater social and human capital. Close partnerships with the community help demonstrate that higher education is about important values such as informed citizenship and a sense of public responsibility. The Kellogg Commission recognizes the demands of such an undertaking when it reports, "All of this is a lot to ask. But it is hardly a more ambitious vision for the 21st century than Justin Morrill's 19th century vision of higher education" (Kellogg Commission, 1999).

### Role of Public Deliberation

Over time, American society has demonstrated substantial capacity for civic innovation. The future of democracy depends on our ability as a nation to deepen and extend such innovation to solve major public problems. Such efforts can be based on the foundations that have been slowly built through the public work of citizens as well as through community networks. This is a process of building social capital. Social capital refers to those stocks of social trust, norms, and networks that people can draw upon to solve common problems. According to Sirianni and Friedland (2001), networks of civic engagement, such as neighborhood associations and church groups, represent important forms of social capital. They further state that these networks facilitate coordination and communication and thus create channels through which information about the trustworthiness of other individuals and groups can flow and be tested and verified.

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The challenge facing individuals in community leadership roles, is to base decisions on the needs of the diverse groups impacted by those public decisions. Further, citizens must realize that they have responsibilities that cannot be delegated. It is up to the citizens to establish the legitimacy of government, provide direction for its policies, create and sustain political will, and evaluate the work of government and other social institutions (Mathews 2002).

Public deliberation is a way of reasoning and talking together in a deliberative forum. It is a means by which people make tough choices as a citizenry. Deliberation involves weighing the views of others, and forces people to anticipate consequences and identify the trade-offs they are willing to make to set a common public direction. The goal of public deliberation is to make sound decisions as a community and country about what action is best for the public as a whole (William's 2001).

Citizens are made, not born. The skill of citizenship is learned by practice (McKenzie 1996). For the process of public policy formation to work as it should, citizens must act. To act together, citizens must make choices; they must engage in deliberative dialogue across diversity, rather than just considering policy directions within homogenous interest

groups. To use deliberation effectively, citizens must make public judgments and create a coherent public voice. That public voice creates common ground as the basis for public action. Kukay, Thomas, and Lacy (2001) contend that engaged and informed citizens are indicators of the civic health of a community. They further state that an informed and interested citizenry provides the legitimacy and support necessary for effective implementation of any policy under consideration. Although an engaged citizenry is critical to a healthy democracy, crucial public decisions are often completed before policymakers attempt to involve the public. Such token co-opting is a way of selling public policy to the public rather than using genuine citizen input to form public policy.

Land-grant institutions have a role in creating educated and engaged citizens, and deliberation is a valuable tool to accomplish this mission. However, to meet this challenge will require an engaged institution working with other agencies, organizations, and groups with similar missions. Implementation of this concept of engagement requires partnerships composed of groups and organizations that have made the commitment to support public deliberation on a large scale. Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Service is collaborating with the Charles Kettering Foundation to foster citizen involvement in public decision making through public deliberation. The National Issues Forum (NIF) project of the Kettering Foundation provides materials that frame social issues for public deliberation. However, to develop a habit of deliberation across the state, a network of partners must come together to pool resources. Cunningham and Tedesco (2001) indicate that today's effective partnerships entail active participation and reciprocity among multiple partners striving toward common goals. Collaborative and consensus-based decision making are the hallmarks of these effective partnerships.

A realistic approach to achieving the goals of an educated and engaged citizenry that actively addresses public issues requires systems thinking (King and Hustedde 2001). Many organizations and groups are incorporating systems thinking into their structures. King and Hustedde cite an example of cancer institutions integrating their mission with other health organizations and local economic development. This is an example of systems thinking that helps people and institutions recognize and understand the interdependencies of issues (Kretzmann and McKnight 1993). Further, systems thinking embraces the idea that no single organization or set of resources is adequate to address the complex issues facing today's citizenry and their communities.

In the context of this article, systems thinking means diverse organizations and groups coming together to foster public deliberation that results in citizen engagement in public decision making. Such an approach is also based on the idea of a resource mix. This concept suggests that one organization or entity is not responsible for providing all of the human and fiscal resources needed to meet an objective. Rather a mix of resources is created by a wide variety of organizations and groups with a common goal. Building a project or program on multiple resources from multiple sources is consistent with the Kretzmann and McKnight (1993) concept of Assets mapping. Assets mapping determines the assets of individuals, informal organizations and formal organizations, that might be used to meet a common community need or goal. The literature suggests that this approach enhances the likelihood that a diverse and committed group of organizations, each providing a portion of the resource mix, can sustain a project or program over time.

This article reports efforts to determine the potential for supporting public deliberation on a statewide level. The objectives of the project were to investigate:

- Which civic organizations, professional associations, or institutions will provide resources (space, opportunities, promotion, materials, etc.) to facilitate public deliberation
- What motivates community organizations and groups to provide these resources
- How to develop a sustainable network of organizations and groups to support the development of a deliberative habit on a statewide basis.

### Methodology

**Identification of appropriate organizations:** A list of groups and organizations in Oklahoma with missions and/or goals consistent with the concept of deliberative democracy was generated. Existing directories and databases as well as a brainstorming strategy were used to develop the initial list. Through telephone and face-to-face contacts, the project directors met with contact persons who represented each identified group or organization to discuss the project. Discussions focused on a briefing on the National Issues Forums (NIF) program and the extent to which this program would mesh with the goals and objectives of the group or organization. In each discussion, the project directors asked the contact person to identify the conceptual link between their organization and public deliberation.

Because the identified contact person represented a statewide or centralized perspective rather than a local one, each was asked to provide five to ten names of individuals who would be likely partners at the local level. A total of one hundred persons representing thirteen groups and organizations at the local level were identified.

**Bureau for Social Research:** The project directors collaborated with the Oklahoma State University Bureau for Social Research (BSR) on the survey portion of this project. The BSR has expertise in customized project design, interviewing and data collection, and data management and statistical analysis. The BSR provides resources for a variety of research methodologies, quality control, well-trained interviewers, and impartial, unbiased services.

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**Instrument:** The project directors developed a telephone survey (33 questions) to address the project objectives. Through this instrument, local contact persons provided information about their organizations, including:

- Demographic information
- Resources: Specifically, capacity and willingness to provide:  
Space: Meeting space. Follow-up questions determined capacity and usage restrictions, if any.
- Fiscal: Funding for refreshments, advertising, and NIF booklets or videotapes.
- Forum promotion: Print and/or post promotion flyers, include articles in their newsletters, and sponsor radio spots.
- Human: Send one or more persons to an Oklahoma Public Policy Institute (PPI), as well as provide one or more persons to organize and facilitate public forums locally.
- Motivational factors: Why the organizations were motivated to support public deliberation using the NIF model.
- Network/communication: Willingness to network. The instrument also solicited suggestions for implementing a statewide program in Oklahoma.

**Pre-interview packet:** Prior to the telephone interviews, the project directors sent a pre-interview packet to all one hundred local contact persons. A sample copy of the packet was also sent to each statewide contact person who had provided the names. The pre-interview packet contained a letter that explained the purpose of the project and gave an overview of the NIF, as well as requesting the person's voluntary participation in the telephone interview. Packet enclosures included a brochure on the NIF program and a list of topics to be addressed in the telephone interview.

**Interview procedure:** A telephone survey methodology was used. Telephone interviewers trained by the Bureau of Social Research contacted the one hundred local contact persons over a three-day period in April 1999. Interviews ranged in length from approximately five to twenty minutes. Of the 100 persons, 88 were available during the interview period. Seventy interviews were completed for an 80 percent response rate.

### Findings

The groups and organizations were collapsed into five categories: higher education, civic organizations; government agencies; trade and professional associations, and volunteer educational organizations. To provide a useful perspective, the findings are presented in three ways:

- Data breakdown by each of the five organization categories.
- A summary across all interviews.
- Suggestions for a statewide network.

**Data reported by organization category:** The seventy local contact persons who completed the survey represented thirteen organizations in five categories. They provided data that can be used to determine the mix of resources available to support a statewide partnership to foster the deliberative habit throughout the state.

**Summary of all interviews:** In general, the interviews reflected positive responses to supporting public deliberation in Oklahoma. Forty-four local contact persons (63%) responded that their organizations could provide one or more meeting spaces. Twenty-two local contact persons (31%) indicated that their organizations would be willing to provide funding for advertising, with 18 of those persons indicating a funding potential of \$50 to \$100. When asked if their organizations could provide \$100 or more, 14 percent indicated

**Table 1. Mix of Resources Available to Support Citizen Engagement Through Public Deliberation**

	Higher Educ.	Civic Org.	Govern. Agencies	Trade & Prof. Assoc.	Volunteer Educ. Org.	Totals
Number Responding	N=5	N=10	N=24	N=23	N=8	
Meeting Space	2	3	15	16	8	44
Fund Advertisement	1	2	8	10	1	22
\$50	0	2	8	10	1	21
\$50-\$100	0	2	6	10	0	18
\$100	0	2	2	10	0	14
Print Promo Flyers	3	5	13	13	2	36
Post Promo Flyers	4	10	19	16	7	56
Has Newsletter	4	9	15	16	6	50
Publish Promotional in Newsletter	4	8	15	15	6	48
Place Radio Spots	2	5	13	9	3	32
Provide Refreshments	3	5	14	18	6	46
Purchase Booklets	0	1	10	8	0	19
Amount of Booklets (\$)	0	300	15747	715	0	2589
Purchase Video Tapes (\$)	0	4	11	10	1	26
Amount of Tapes (\$)	0	60	275	156	15	506
Send Person to PPI (#)	4(6)	6(13)	13(21)	11(19)	2(2)	36(61)
Provide Organizers/Facilitate	4	8	18	14	6	50
Network Locally	4	10	23	15	7	59

that they could print promotional flyers, with 56 (80%) indicating that their organization would post promotional flyers. In addition, 48 (68%) respondents indicated that their organization would publish promotions in their newsletter.

There was also support for funding the purchase of NIF educational materials. Nineteen of the 70 local contact persons (27%) indicated that their organizations would be willing to fund the purchase of issue booklets for local deliberative forums. Of those 19 organizations, 12 could provide at least \$100

of funding for NIF booklets. The highest dollar amount indicated was \$500 (one contact person). The purchase of NIF videotapes was also supported. Of the 70 local contact persons, 26 (37%) responded affirmatively. Nineteen (70%) indicated that their organizations would be willing to fund the purchase of one videotape, though 5 persons said their organizations would provide \$100–200 for this purpose.

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In other questions related to both funding and human resources, 36 persons (51%) said their organizations would be willing to send one or more persons to complete a Public Policy Institute to prepare moderators and recorders to facilitate public forums. While 20 persons said their organizations would be willing to send one person, 9 said their organizations would be willing to send 2 persons, 3 said their organizations would send 3 persons, and 4 said their organizations would be willing to send 4 persons.

A crucial element in fostering a deliberative habit in the citizenry is the involvement of local persons in organizing, facilitating, and networking to support citizen engagement through public deliberation. In this study, 50 local contact persons (71%) indicated that their organizations would be willing to provide one or more persons to organize and facilitate forums locally. Further, 59 persons (84%) said their organizations would be willing to network with other organizations in their community to foster deliberation.

When respondents were asked why their organization is motivated to support public deliberation, 63 (90%) indicated that their organization emphasizes community service, and 66 (94%) indicated that approaching public problems through public deliberation is the right thing to do. Further, 41 (58%) indicated that public deliberation was part of their mission. Thirty-four responses indicated that organization members had suggested the use of public deliberation or that public deliberation was part of their long-range plan. In addition, 28 responses indicated that public deliberation is needed in their area. Only 5 respondents indicated that citizen engagement through public deliberation was mandated by their governing board.



**Table 2. Motivation for Providing Resources to Support Citizen Engagement Through Public Deliberation**

	Higher Educ.	Civic Org.	Govern. Agencies	Trade & Prof. Assoc.	Volunteer Educ. Org.	Totals
Number Responding	N=5	N=10	N=24	N=23	N=8	
Part of Mission	4	7	17	11	2	41
Community Emphasis						
Service Employment	4	7	23	21	8	63
Need in Area	3	6	9	8	2	28
Members Suggest Need	4	9	10	9	2	34
Part of Long Range Plan	5	6	13	7	2	33
Right Thing to Do	5	10	22	21	8	66
Mandated by Board	0	1	2	2	0	5

### Conclusions and Outcomes

Personal contacts with statewide representatives followed by telephone interviews with local contact persons proved to be a rich source of information upon which to build an educational program in Oklahoma. Specific conclusions include the following:

- The conceptual links identified by statewide contact persons were excellent predictors of the willingness of local groups or organizations to provide resources.
- There was consistency within organizational categories regarding the type(s) of support they were willing to provide. In other words, the project directors have a clear sense of which groups will provide financial support, space, human resources, and so on.
- The study identified a healthy mix of resources available to support a program of citizen engagement through public deliberation.
- Groups and organizations in Oklahoma have the capacity to support a public deliberation program in the state.

Based on the results of the study, the project directors moved forward to:

- Conceptualize an educational program titled Citizen Engagement through Public Deliberation.

- Cluster the data to determine support by geographic areas.
- Convene a meeting of representatives of statewide organizations to explore formation of an Oklahoma NIF network.
- Develop a network plan for facilitating public deliberation in Oklahoma.
- Conduct community forums at selected sites to spark interest in NIF.
- Conduct the Oklahoma Public Policy Institute.
- Monitor local community forum activity.
- Assess the impact of forum participation.
- Expand the Oklahoma NIF network.

#### Formation of the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation

In the months following the study, the project directors made progress toward a statewide network. In May 2000 they convened a meeting of representatives of several statewide organizations and higher education institutions to explore the formation of a statewide network. Approximately twenty persons participated. Organization and institution representatives expressed strong interest in partnering together, but in an informal partnership with limited structure, preferring to invest effort in fostering public deliberation rather than structuring a new organization. They also identified the need for in-depth training in public deliberation and deliberative forums. In response to that expressed need, the project directors conducted a two-day seminar on public deliberation in October 2000. Following the seminar, the organization representatives formed the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD).

Membership in the OPPD is open to any organization willing to work on fostering citizen engagement in public decision making through public deliberative forums. The OPPD is an informal partnership, and member organizations may enter and leave the partnership at any time depending on their capacity to participate. At any given time, there are approximately a dozen organizations in the partnership. Each partner organization has identified at least one employee or member to represent the organization at OPPD meetings and support the work of the OPPD. Some of the larger and more diverse organizations are represented in the OPPD by persons from two or more units within the organization or higher education institution. The definition of *partner* is very broad and flexible, allowing organizations and their representatives to participate

in a variety of ways at a variety of levels. The project directors have agreed to coordinate the partnership for the time being.

As the work of the OPPD has evolved and progressed, the partners recognized the need for a strategic plan. With a consultant, efforts began in 2001 and led to the development and adoption of a five-year strategic plan in early 2002. The plan acknowledges the history of public deliberation in Oklahoma, as well as the context in which the OPPD is functioning in the state, such as the political and economic climate, external and internal trends, technological factors, citizen needs, and uncertainties. The vision is that Oklahomans will embrace a culture of public deliberative forums when engaged in public decision making on issues with potential for contention and controversy. The mission is to foster participation in reasoned and informed decision making for the public good.

Pursuant to its mission and vision, the OPPD has developed a cadre of "products." One of the mainstays of the OPPD is workshops in which adults and older youth learn skills and strategies to facilitate public deliberation. One workshop fosters the development of conveners, moderators, and recorders to conduct deliberative forums, and the OPPD offers this a minimum of twice a year. A second workshop teaches participants how to name and frame local issues for public deliberation. A third workshop under consideration would teach how to report forum outcomes. The OPPD also convenes deliberative forums and study circles to introduce public deliberative forums throughout the state. In addition, the OPPD has undertaken three community case studies to examine practical applications of public deliberation in natural community settings.

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