

FOCUS

ON

The Impact of Public Deliberation in Oklahoma

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service • Oklahoma State University
Fall 2006



In the June 2002 *Journal of Extension*, Scott J. Peters highlights Cooperative Extension's historic role in developing leadership and building relationships between individuals and institutions to engage people in identifying, understanding, and taking action on a variety of public issues and problems. He also notes that this work of organizing to engage people in solving their own problems has had a positive impact but has also been controversial. For some, organizing for public action sounds too "political," and some people in the Extension system hold the view that Extension is supposed to be "nonpolitical." Peters goes on to say that the work of organizing people for public action is educational and fits squarely within the tradition of Extension education. He concludes that much of the historical and contemporary work of Extension has included a politics of practical problem solving, of relationship and capacity building, for collaborative public work.

Consistent with the historic mission of Cooperative Extension and the current challenges of addressing complex social problems, Oklahoma Cooperative Extension, Family and Consumer Science programs created a program called Citizen Engagement through Public Deliberation. The Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD), a statewide partnership founded in 2000 to foster participation in reasoned and informed decision-making for the public good. The OPPD is an informal partnership composed of representatives from statewide and regional organizations, agencies, higher education institutions, and groups that share the vision of fostering civic involvement in public decision-making through deliberative forums. The partnership has sponsored seven Moderator and Recorder Academies (previously called Public Policy Institutes) to prepare approximately 225 Oklahomans to convene, moderate, record, and report deliberative forums. After several academies were conducted, OPPD wanted to examine the impact of these citizen and professional development opportunities. A study was conducted in several phases to determine how people who attended the academies were using deliberative concepts in their lives. The studies revealed that participants used the concepts of public deliberation in a variety of settings, including university classes, high school social studies programs, community meetings, and neighborhood forums. The majority of those interviewed said that **common ground for action** was found during the public dialogue. In addition, sixteen study participants reported that they had an interesting story about their experience with public deliberation that they were willing to share.

In-depth personal interviews were conducted to capture a variety of Oklahoma experiences involving public decision-making using deliberative concepts. Brief case statements were developed for each person interviewed. The case statements were written in third person form, using pseudonyms to conceal the research study participants' identities—a requirement of the research methodology.

This Focus Newsletter features a sampling of the case statements documenting how public deliberation has and can be used in everyday situations throughout Oklahoma, situations that require people working together to solve challenging problems facing our state.

To obtain a summary of all the case studies contact either Dr. Renée Daugherty, renee.daugherty@okstate.edu or Dr. Sue Williams, sue.williams@okstate.edu.

A handwritten signature in black ink that reads "Glenn Muske".

Glenn Muske
Interim Assistant Director
Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

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Land Use Battles

Wearing blue jeans and cowboy boots, Carl leaned back in his chair, hands behind his head, making himself as comfortable as possible. His desk paraded a proud alma mater mascot and other college paraphernalia. Office walls displayed agriculture education and 4-H awards. Carl was proud to be a native Oklahoman and explained how his career in agriculture, animal science, and sales had led him to his current position with Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service.

One day, Carl received a frantic call from a county Extension educator asking him if he would facilitate a forum on land use planning. A large cooperation had purchased land in the county and planned to build a multi-house poultry operation. The community was in turmoil. Some residents wanted the land zoned due to growing concerns that the pollution from the operation would lower property values in the surrounding community. Other residents did not want government zoning laws interfering with future property and land usage. Carl agreed to moderate the forum and used the National Issues Forums “Land Use Conflict: When City and Country Clash” discussion guide. “I felt that through the training I had received from the Public Policy Institute, I could handle the volatile situation and have a good discussion,” said Carl.

The heated debate had already started before the 25 participants had filed into the small conference room. County commissioners, farmers, city managers, a newspaper reporter, and residents made up the diverse crowd that would fuel the discussion. Before the forum began, the Extension educator informed Carl about a particular participant that had a tendency to cause trouble. “Does he have a gun?” Carl asked sarcastically. “Well, no,” replied the educator. “Well then, we’ll be okay,” said Carl.

Carl decided ground rules would be necessary. “We’re here to deliberate this issue, not to argue it,” Carl said. He explained the NIF guidelines, and with little persuasion, the participants—including the “trouble-maker”—agreed to follow the rules.

As participants discussed each choice, they were able to understand each other’s opinions and concerns. “You could almost see, individual by individual, the change come over them [participants] when they’d hear the other person’s side to the issue and gave it some thought,” explained Carl.

Participants examined the costs and benefits of each choice. “They didn’t necessarily agree on everything, but they understood where each other stood and why,” said Carl. By the end of the forum, common ground

had been found. Participants agreed to form a task force to continue discussing the issue. The group decided not to zone the land, but instead developed some county ordinances that were suitable to both sides.

The group had several meetings following the forum. “They may have come to a reasonable conclusion without having this initial forum,” said Carl, “but my feeling is that it would have taken them a long time to get there, and there would have been a lot of hurt feelings and controversy that ensued.”

The participants and the community were able to see the effects of public deliberation. “I think the surrounding communities are better off because they now have something [deliberation] to base their policies on,” said Carl.

Carl stated that the Cooperative Extension Office received recognition for the deliberation services provided. “People now know we [Cooperative Extension] can come in and help conduct forums, not just provide the traditional Extension services—agriculture, 4-H, and family and consumer sciences,” said Carl.

Carl plans to continue introducing the concept of public deliberation to his Extension educators and encouraging them to seek formal deliberation training. He would also like to frame issues that are facing rural Oklahoma—lack of water and health care.

Dirty Work

An office full of trash greeted Tim at 7:58 a.m. on a Monday morning. To a clean-cut, professional business man like Tim, it was just another day at work. As the program manager for a state university issue management program, no job was too big nor task too dirty for Tim. He worked with industry leaders, municipalities, organizations, and communities helping them manage agriculture and natural resource problems in the state. His new project was facilitating the development and growth of landfills and waste management in a large Oklahoma community.

Corporations in this particular community were dumping waste out of compliance with the law. Sixteen entities, including landfills and waste collection companies, were involved in the case. The operations of these organizations were creating concerns within the community. Water quality, traffic problems, and environmental impacts from odor and dust were issues that needed to be

addressed. Tim decided that deliberating the issues among the entities was the best way to solve the problems before lawsuits became involved.

Ironically, the entities involved that needed to deliberate the issues were business rivals. “They were competitors deliberating on what they could do better to compete with each other!” said Tim.

The managers and owners of the corporations have met six times over an eight month period to discuss the problems. Tim established ground rules for the discussions and created a purpose and mission statement for the meetings.

“These people, who are typically business, for-profit thinkers, are now developing a community- or social-based interest in their work,” said Tim.

Tim admitted that keeping the group focused on the mission of the meetings was challenging. Competing interests between

the public sector and the profit sector brought differing opinions to the table.

Although deliberations are not over, the group has made progress. The corporations have taken ideas and suggestions generated in the discussions and implemented them into their management strategies.

“Profits have gone up for some of these entities, and so far they have avoided lawsuits,” said Tim. “They [corporations] made their operations more efficient by hearing other people talk about similar activities in the same industry setting.”

“People respect the process of deliberation,” said Tim. “They trust it.”

Tim will continue to work with the entities until all waste management issues are addressed. Tim’s agency is also in the process of planning deliberative forums in communities across the state on a number of issues, including drug abuse, health care, and employment.

Youth Voice Changes

Not a hair out of place, sitting very elegantly in her suit, Beth finished a long conversation and hung up the phone. She had just committed herself to working on a new project that would consume any of her spare time. That was Beth's way of doing business—always up for a new challenge, not able to say no. Wearing many hats, Beth was not only a business woman but also a teacher, a mother, and a hopeful soon-to-be politician.

From the classroom to the Oklahoma State Department of Education, Beth had committed her work and life to improving the lives of others by educating students and teachers about community service. Her new endeavor involved coordinating a national high school civic engagement program, Project 540.

Project 540 taught students deliberative democracy through a series of dialogues. During the dialogues, students were asked to express their concerns about their school, community, and nation. Students were then led through a sequence of problem-solving techniques to resolve the top issues identified by their peers. Student facilitators led dialogues in small groups of 20 to 25 students. Each school established a student leadership team with the responsibility of collecting the

students' issues, creating a top issues list, and developing a civic action plan—the students' recommendation for change. Thirty-five Oklahoma high schools participated in Project 540, engaging more than 20,000 students in public deliberation.

Beth integrated several public deliberation strategies into Project 540. "Ground rules were established at the beginning of the process that created an atmosphere of respect," said Beth. "This allowed students to feel that their ideas were valid."

Students' issues ranged from unclean school bathrooms to the war in Iraq. "High school students were shocked by Project 540," said Beth. "It was the first time anyone had asked for their opinion on real issues."

Students listed the consequences and benefits of their proposed solutions before civic action plans were finalized. This developed a sense of common ground among the students.

"Students recognized that most issues can be resolved by listening and talking, and they have decided that it [deliberation] is an effective means to solving problems in their own schools and communities," said Beth.

Several of the students' civic action plans were implemented. At one school, students identified a need for a safe place to "hang out." So the students, with the help of the school and community partners, refurbished the tennis courts.

School administrators have also seen the positive impact of Project 540, and some schools have implemented the program into the curriculum. Beth stated students realized deliberating was a "different type of talking." One teacher said, after Project 540, students would come to class and say, "Okay, Ms. Wilson, we have an issue, and now we've got to have a dialogue to discuss the problem."

Beth attributed her success as a public deliberation facilitator to her training at the Public Policy Institute. "The training at the PPI has imbedded in my thinking that we must always consider multiple perspectives of the issue and we must also consider the "empty chair" perspective—the perspectives of those who are not represented in the forum or dialogue," said Beth.

Beth said she will continue to use public deliberation and will support public forums in her district if elected to the state legislator.

Cowboys and Indians

A lone voice echoed down the empty corridor of the university hall. Gail's high heels clicked loudly along her tile office floor as she shut her old, wooden office door. Only a few short weeks ago, students and faculty had filled the college campus going about their daily business. However, in the middle of June, the campus seemed like a ghost town. But Gail's unique work kept her busy year round. As the director of Early Settlement in her region of the state, Gail managed 26 volunteers who provided mediation services for people who wanted to resolve civil cases outside the court system.

On a college campus enriched with Native American culture, Gail was involved with planning several conferences, including the 29th Annual Symposium on the American Indian. Gail, who had just attended the Public Policy Institute, decided to coordinate a

forum for the symposium using the National Issues Forums "Racial and Ethnic Tensions" discussion guide.

All symposium participants were invited to attend the forum as a breakout session. Some college professors gave students extra credit for attending the forum. Sixty people arrived to participate—more than Gail had anticipated. Tensions were high in the packed room. Racial tensions had risen on the campus in the past few years. Two participants, a Native American student and a Caucasian student, began arguing about their ancestors' rights and treaties that had failed. Throughout the dialogue, the two students had the opportunity to listen to each others' opinions and understand the "other side." The two students walked out "arm in arm" at the end of the forum.

One professor whose students attended

the forum said that the class dynamics had changed. Before the forum, the professor sensed animosity among some of the students, but after the deliberative dialogue, the students were positive toward one another.

Gail said the forum gave participants an opportunity to vent their frustrations and opinions. "Participants realized that this issue [racial tensions] was not a local issue—it's a national issue," said Gail.

Gail explained that the most challenging part of the forum was listing all the issues and having enough time to talk about them. "There are a lot of issues that people have that they never sit down and talk to other people about," said Gail.

Because of this experience, Gail realized she needed to become more involved in her community. She joined a local leadership club and is now an officer for the Chamber of Commerce.

FOCUS is a publication designed to direct attention to innovative Cooperative Extension Family and Consumer Sciences programs and to share program philosophy and updates of new and changing program directions. Your comments and suggestions for future issues are welcomed and appreciated. Please send all correspondence to FOCUS, Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension, 135 HES, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, OK 74078. FOCUS is published three times yearly by the Family and Consumer Sciences Cooperative Extension program.

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Issued in furtherance of Cooperative Extension work, acts of May 8 and June 30, 1914, in cooperation with the U.S. Department of Agriculture, Robert E. Whitson, Director of Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service, Oklahoma State University, Stillwater, Oklahoma. This publication is printed and issued by Oklahoma State University as authorized by the Vice President, Dean, and Director of the Division of Agricultural Sciences and Natural Resources and has been prepared and distributed at a cost of \$352.00 for 480 copies. 0106 GH.

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A Small Town's Prosperity

Holding hands, two children looked both ways and scampered across the street to the Dollar Store. The warm sun embraced neighbors greeting each other at the post office and café. Small town life was alive in this southern Oklahoma community of 4,000 people. Then, the unexpected happened—the only manufacturer in town left, leaving 300 people without jobs.

As a county Extension educator, Carol convened a forum using the discussion guide "Pathways to Prosperity" to "calmly help citizens take this negative situation and make it a positive." Held in the park, the forum attracted 25 participants—city officials, members of community organizations, the county leadership team, policemen, and teachers and youth.

"[Public deliberation] gave everyone a chance to say what they thought, to submit ideas, and also listen to others," said Carol.

She added that city and county officials benefited most from the forum because they had the opportunity to listen to many opinions. Participants felt their ideas were being heard because the forum was recorded.

Carol said that the participants did not realize they were deliberating until the end of the forum. "[Participants] couldn't believe that a meeting could run this smoothly while everyone still had an opportunity to voice their opinion," said Carol. "Anytime you can learn how to conduct any kind of effective meeting, I think you've learned something very valuable."

With only a short time to deliberate, the

participants did not solve the community's problem concerning job loss, but they did come to common ground. The community members agreed that these forums needed to be conducted in other communities throughout the county.

Although the participants were diverse, Carol felt the lower-income citizens were not represented. "I think it's important to have input from all citizens," said Carol. "When I conduct another forum, I'm going to make every effort to have people from different socioeconomic backgrounds."

Carol is planning two other "Pathways to Prosperity" forums in the county. She would also like to conduct forums focusing on water usage in the area.