

FOCUS

ON

Citizen Engagement through Public Deliberation

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Do you often hear stories of angry, frustrated citizens who feel they have little power to influence important decisions affecting their lives? Politicians and media pundits often reassure themselves by characterizing that frustration as apathy, instead of looking deeper at the desire of regular people to express their views on public issues but believing they do not have a venue to do so.

Deliberative forums provide a safe non-partisan venue for citizens to struggle with challenging issues facing their communities. These forums are based on the idea that in a democracy citizens have a responsibility to get together to talk through their common concerns, to weigh possible alternative actions to address these problems and eventually send signals to officeholders and others about the desired direction for public action.

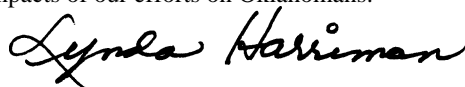
Making choices about how to deal with public issues is difficult because people favor different approaches and the options for action may conflict. Any strategy for public action will have consequences that have to be anticipated. Consequences will have a range of concerns that pull people in different directions both individually and collectively. People have to work through these conflicts and deal with the trade-offs until they have a shared sense of direction for moving ahead and some idea of what fellow citizens are willing to do to solve the problem.

Moving citizens to **common ground** often requires a positive catalyst—**public deliberation**. It is a means by which citizens make tough choices about basic purpose and directions for their communities and their country—a way of reasoning and talking together. It is neither a partisan argument where opposite sides try to win or a casual conversation conducted with polite civility.

For over 20 years, the Kettering Foundation of Dayton, Ohio has been studying public deliberation and has learned that public deliberation makes a difference, as follows:

- Deliberative forum participants come from every part of society.
- Virtually everyone is capable of deliberating about important public issues. Educational level, for example, is not a barrier.
- Forum participants reconsider their own opinions and judgements
- Forum participants reconsider the views of others and develop a greater understanding of those viewpoints.
- Participants approach issues more realistically and are willing to consider costs, consequences and trade-offs associated with various policy directions.
- People define their self-interest more broadly.
- Deliberation leads many to feel a greater sense of confidence in what they can do politically. That is, people become more inclined to see themselves as political actors capable of making a difference.
- Participants become more interested in political and social issues.
- Deliberation in a community enhances communication among groups.

The Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service has joined with the Kettering Foundation and several other organizations throughout the state to foster a deliberative habit for the citizens of Oklahoma. This issue describes some of our efforts to foster citizen engagement through public deliberation as well as the impacts of our efforts on Oklahomans.



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OKLAHOMA COOPERATIVE
EXTENSION SERVICE



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Supporting Public Deliberation in Oklahoma: The Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation

By **Renée A. Daugherty and
Sue E. Williams,**

Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service

Developing a habit of public deliberation in Oklahomans is an ambitious undertaking—one that requires a partnership of efforts and resources from several organizations. And that is exactly what has happened in Oklahoma.

Determining Capacity to Partner

The partnership idea began with project directors Sue Williams and Renée Daugherty, OSU faculty members in the College of Human Environmental Sciences and Extension state specialists. They brainstormed a list of 10-15 statewide organizations that were potentially concerned with citizen involvement in public decision making and had local affiliates throughout the state. Contact persons provided a list of local affiliates—about 100 persons total.

With financial support from the Council for Public Policy Education and the expertise of the OSU Bureau for Social Research, Williams and Daugherty conducted a study to determine the capacity of organizations in Oklahoma to partner on an effort addressing public deliberation.

Of the list of local affiliates provided by the statewide organizations, about 80 persons completed telephone interviews about 15-20 minutes in length. Interviewees discussed their local affiliate's capacity and willingness to work on public deliberation:

- Motivation factors—what motivated the organizations to support public deliberation
- Resources (meeting space for deliberative forums on public issues, financial support, promotion support and human resources)
- Partnership—willingness to partner (statewide and locally); suggestions for how to do so.

The study findings showed strong interest in and support for a statewide effort to foster public deliberation. Williams and Daugherty used the findings to outline a concept called the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation.

Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation—OPPD

The OPPD is a partnership of statewide organizations working to foster citizen involvement in public decision making through public deliberation. Each organization has designated a representative for OPPD meetings.

The OPPD gives leadership to the **National Issues Forums (NIF)** project in Oklahoma by conducting the following:

- Public Policy Institute—At the PPI, people learn to moderate, convene, record and report outcomes of deliberative forums using NIF materials.
- Local issue forums—PPI participants return to their communities and organize local steering committees to convene forums.

The OPPD completed its first PPI in February 2000. PPI participants are now forming local steering committees.

With its first PPI completed, the OPPD is turning its attention to mentoring the local steering committees and monitoring their progress.

And the partnership is also addressing its growth. Currently, the following organizations are partners in the OPPD:

- Central OK Human Rights Alliance
- Langston University—Cooperative Extension System
- OK Academy of Mediators and Arbitrators
- Oklahoma Bankers Association
- Oklahoma City University
- Oklahoma Conference of Churches
- OK Council for the Social Studies
- Oklahoma Department of Libraries
- Oklahoma Extension Association for Family & Consumer Sciences
- Oklahoma Library Association
- OSU Campus Life
- OSU Cooperative Extension Service
- OK Supreme Court—Alternative Dispute Resolution System
- University of Oklahoma—Continuing Education

For information about becoming a partner organization, contact Williams and Daugherty.

Public Deliberation and the Oklahoma Library Association

By Anne Masters

Oklahoma Library Association

When the Oklahoma Library Association (OLA) learned the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation, then-President Debra Engle recommended that OLA participate, citing that she felt sure the group needed to be “at the table.”

The OLA and its members need and want to participate in helping Oklahoma citizens to access and use information. The process of public deliberation is certainly an important information sharing process. Freedom of information and providing information on all sides of an issue are basic to American libraries.

OLA members include librarians from public, school, academic and special libraries as well as citizens interested in improving libraries in Oklahoma. Debra Engle and Anne Masters repre-

sented the OLA at the Public Policy Institute held in Tulsa in February. This experience sparked discussion between the two representatives about how to further OLA’s involvement.

How can the OLA further public deliberation and NIF in Oklahoma?

1. Awareness. Inform librarians about the OPPD and the National Issues Forums, the resources published to support the forums, and the process for initiating local forums.
2. Local steering committees. Encourage librarians to partner locally by serving on local steering committees to do the following: convene/promote forums, provide space, make NIF issue booklets available through the li-

brary collection, complete the PPI course, etc. Public, school and academic libraries are all potential facilities for hosting NIF forums.

The May/June issue of the Oklahoma Librarian will begin the awareness process. Also, OLA can contribute to the development of a network of citizens interested in the process of public deliberation. Members will receive information on PPI participants in their communities or areas of the state who are trained NIF moderators and recorders.

By connecting librarians, social studies teachers, cooperative extension educators and others, the OPPD can build a strong foundation for public deliberation in Oklahoma.

Public Deliberation and Leadership: Applications for College Freshmen

By Stephen P. Haseley

Coordinator, Leadership Development Programs, Oklahoma State University – Campus Life

When my program at OSU was invited to become part of the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD), I immediately saw the advantages public deliberation could bring to student leadership development.

I coordinate and instruct a yearlong course on leadership theory and concepts for 200 OSU freshmen known as the President’s Leadership Council (PLC). The PLC is a very competitive and prestigious group of freshmen who receive a scholarship to study, enhance, and practice leadership.

As a leadership skill, public deliberation is a method of interacting within the social process of influencing, and it offers PLC’ers a different way to talk and

another way to act within any community in which they find themselves – currently or in the future. The freshmen spend at least the first semester learning leadership development skills related to the heart of public deliberation.

In late 2000, PLC’ers participated in deliberative forums using the National Issues Forum (NIF) topic “At Death’s Door: What are the Choices?” One outcome was that several PLC’ers desired to undertake advanced training in the skills of organizing, moderating, and recording NIF forums.

On February 1-3, 2001, seven PLC students completed the Oklahoma Public Policy Institute in held in Tulsa by the OPPD. Since then, they have conducted

two NIF forums for their colleagues on “Violent Kids – Can We Change the Trend,” and “Money in Politics – Who Owns Democracy”, with more forums to come.

Public deliberation is leadership in action. It is assisting individuals, in this case college freshman, to appropriately prepare to deal with real issues in productive interactive ways and means. Finding common ground and forming and implementing constructive actions with others to resolve and/or cope with these significant life issues is the heart of effective leadership. The practice of learning and practicing public deliberation has enriched the PLC experience.

Public Deliberation and Social Studies

By Eugene Earsom

Oklahoma Council for the Social Studies

Why would a social studies educator be interested in learning more about the National Issues Forums and the activities of the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD)? At least part of the answer is obvious: by definition, social studies is the integrated study of the social sciences and humanities to promote civic competence. Civic competence is the knowledge, skills, and attitudes required of students (and adults) to be able to assume what Thomas Jefferson called “the office of citizen.”

There are more pragmatic reasons, however, for the classroom teacher to explore the issues studied in one of the forums (or “fora” for you Latin purists!) sponsored by the OPPD. Oklahoma’s core curriculum PASS (*Priority Academic Student Skills*) establishes what every student should know and be able to do at different points in his/her academic

career. At several grade levels and in several sets of competencies, there are skills that are sometimes difficult to teach or, in the abstract, may be beyond the abilities of some students.

In the interactive nature of a public forum, however, teachers themselves can acquire new ideas and innovative approaches to helping students learn how to distinguish among propaganda, fact and opinion, to identify cause and effect relationships, and to make inferences and draw conclusions. These particular skills are from PASS competencies for Civics in Grades 6-8.

Similarly, students completing instruction in a high school course in United States Government, a course to be required for graduation beginning with the Class of 2003, should be able to “analyze in writing, discussion, and debate current issues confronting local, state, and na-

tional governments in terms of perennial challenges to democracies.” Some of these challenges mentioned in PASS include majority rule and minority rights, individual rights and the public interest/good, and levels of taxation and the expectation of public services.

Developing the skills to analyze public issues, to evaluate candidates for public office, to evaluate the performance of public officials, and to communicate effectively with those public officials should be goals of all citizens of the United States. They are, in fact, skills we expect our students to possess when they graduate from high school in order that they are prepared for informed participation in public affairs. The classroom teacher’s “bag of tricks” will be expanded, refined, complemented, and greatly enhanced by his or her participation in an NIF forum.

Citizen Engagement in the Legislative Process

By Senator Jim Dunlap

District 29, Senate Republican Floor Leader

I recently attended the Public Policy Institute sponsored by the Oklahoma Partnership for Policy Deliberation and learned techniques that citizens can use to successfully participate in our political process. Public forums that yield a public voice provide valuable information for policy makers at local, state and national levels.

In recent years, the Oklahoma State Legislature has made significant strides to increase citizen involvement in our government. Hundreds of boards and commissions are made up entirely of private citizens tasked with the responsi-

bility of overseeing the operations and directing the policy of state agencies. The legislature has also created numerous citizen task forces throughout the years to study issues important to Oklahoma. These task forces advise the legislature on how to proceed in dealing with problems that we all face every day.

Beyond serving on oversight boards or advisory task forces, individuals can be actively involved by keeping informed of the actions of the legislature and by making sure your legislator knows how you feel about specific issues. Citizen groups often come to the capitol to ac-

tively advocate policy changes.

Whether you are asked to serve on an oversight board or an advisory task force, participation in a deliberation forum will provide information on citizen’s perspectives that should be considered in policy formation.

I encourage all of you to use your talents and abilities to serve your state when the opportunity presents itself. You will be making a contribution that will have a positive effect on generations of Oklahomans to come.

Mediation and Moderation: Concepts in Common

By Sue Darst Tate

Oklahoma Supreme Court Alternative Dispute Resolution System

Mediation and moderating for public deliberation in public forums are both approaches to conflict resolution. Mediation and moderation provide settings for addressing contentious issues in socially acceptable ways. Mediation is often the appropriate forum for the resolution of people problems disguised as legal problems. Moderation supports the exchange of ideas and perspectives so that communities of people can shape their own futures. Concepts common to both forums are empowerment, acknowledgement and the self-determination of the people.

References to **empowerment** appear frequently in mediation literature. In response to a national survey, participants reported that the greatest benefit they experienced was the opportunity to be

heard with respect and dignity. Participants in moderated forums experience those same benefits. Both mediators and moderators are trained to allow for venting of emotions. When sufficient venting occurs participants experience an empowering return of problem-analysis and problem-solving capabilities. **Empowerment through making one's own voice heard coupled with acknowledgement of the voices of others is a basic concept of participatory democracy.**

Helping people to listen to each other so that they can achieve acknowledgement of each other's viewpoints is also the work of moderators and mediators. In order for moderators and mediators to be effective they must be able to avoid imposing their own value sets on the participants. Both the moderator and the media-

tor must establish an environment of acceptance of the perspectives of forum participants and use that acceptance to build a bridge of understanding.

Experiencing empowerment and acknowledgement sets the stage for **self-determination**. Forum participants are the decision makers. Decisions achieved through effective mediation and moderation are based on investment through sharing problem-solving ideas and listening. Investment and ownership make taking responsibility for honoring and implementing decisions much more likely. Moderation and mediation contribute to a society that values and uses deliberative, fully informed decisions to shape the future.

Value of the Public Policy Institute as a Leadership Development Experience

By Claude Bess

Southeast District Extension Director

Public deliberation should be a major part of any leadership experience. A leader in a private or public organization must develop the skills it takes to help focus deliberation on a given subject or topic in a productive, non-threatening environment. The abilities and skills gained as a participant in the Oklahoma Public Policy Institute (PPI) have definitely enhanced my ability as a leader in the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension Service.

Extension Educators address current facts and issues affecting clientele on a daily basis. We ask clientele for assistance in identifying major issues that the Oklahoma Cooperative Extension can

address for the improvement in the quality of life for all Oklahomans.

In a way, we go through a public deliberation process each time we convene a program advisory committee or a county advisory committee. Each person who serves on our committees should have the opportunity to express their concerns and needs. The Extension Educator, much the same as the moderator of a public forum, must stay neutral and carefully weigh each person's input.

There are often conflicting views on an issue for Extension to address. When this happens, the skills learned in the PPI can prove extremely valuable in working through conflicts, increasing understand-

ing and arriving at common ground on which we can act to make a difference.

Also, as an administrator, I am often charged with the task of helping staff work through differences in the workplace. The skills learned in the PPI emphasize ensuring that all parties have the opportunity to express their views and to understand better the opinions and views of others.

I definitely support the Public Policy Institute as a leadership development tool and encourage anyone involved in planning a leadership development training to consider including public deliberation skills as a major part of the curriculum. It was a valuable learning experience for me.

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Deliberative forums involve active listening when participants share their thoughts on important public issues.



At a recent community forum using the NIF issue “Violent Kids: Can We Change the Trend?” the recorder (center, at flipchart) writes down participants’ comments on three possible policy directions.