

CONNECTIONS

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University

Institutions,
Professions, and the Public:
Focus on the
Public-Academy
Relationship

that will allow these organizations to exist in the coming years. If there is enough merit in preserving fraternal organizations as a way to actively involve students in campus life, to enhance learning about community living and democratic life, then the support and encouragement of headquarters, campuses, alumni, and foundations such as Kettering will be needed. Fraternal organizations in North America are on nearly 1,000 campuses, and they are not likely to go away. It benefits us all to take fraternities and sororities seriously and to establish mutually beneficial models for their

enhancement. Empowering members to take responsibility for themselves and requiring that brothers and sisters share the responsibility for improving them represents one of the only rays of hope on the horizon and the Kettering Foundation has supported deliberation as a starting place in doing this.

Laura Hayboe, a former graduate student at Miami University in Ohio, coordinated the Fraternal Futures program under the direction of Dennis C. Roberts, Ph.D., associate vice president of Student Affairs at Miami University. Dennis Roberts can be reached by E-mail at robertd2@muohio.edu.

Increasing Student Civic Engagement through Balanced Democratic Dialogue

By Allison Crawford

While colleges and universities are rediscovering their role in preparing the young for civic life, few studies suggest how they might best go about this. Two forms of democratic dialogue are in common use on many college campuses: the National Issues Forums (NIF) and study circles sponsored by the Study Circles Resource Center (SCRC).

The central purpose of NIF and study circles is to engage citizens with their communities. Both use deliberation as an approach to decision making in which individuals, through conversation, gain a better appreciation of others' opinions. Both provide background information and training. NIF gatherings make use of "issue books" — on health care, race relations, and other topics. Study circle

participants receive guides posing questions for each of four sessions.

Still, differences exist. While NIF gatherings generally involve a large group that meets once, study circles involve multiple small-group sessions, ending in a larger, shared meeting. While both provide training for organizers, the SCRC uses a "facilitator," who is instructed to help the group talk respectfully and productively. NIF uses a "moderator," who, with more responsibility for the outcome, is charged with tracking time, asking probing questions, and providing an overview.

Within each model, participants initially identify themselves and their relationship to the issue. Commonly with NIF, 15 percent of the 150-minute



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meeting is devoted to this; with the SCRC study circles, the entire first session (usually two hours) is spent in this way. The additional sessions focus on relating the problem to the community, discussing preferred futures, and formulating a plan.

NIF and SCRC both avoid pushing participants in a set direction. The NIF process is called “choice work,” with participants weighing the costs and consequences of various options. Here, wrestling with conflicts is important; otherwise, participants might simply have what an NIF curriculum guide refers to as “a nice discussion and then say, ‘Let’s do all of the above.’” Study circles are more open-ended, with facilitators eliciting alternatives from the meeting.

Exposing College Students to Public Talk

Clearly, a call has emerged for a new civic-minded education that produces students prepared to practice democracy. Clearly as well, NIF and SCRC have an on-campus role to play — a role I believe would be strengthened by a more complete understanding of college students, their developmental stages, and learning styles.

Today’s college students may be industrious and goal oriented, but they are not fully mature. This reflects Robert Kegan’s model of self-evolution. According to Kegan, “second order” individuals do not readily reason abstractly, discern patterns, or simultaneously value their own and others’ viewpoints. “Third order” individuals have learned abstract reasoning, view relations as reciprocal, and acknowledge that shared feelings can override individual interests.

The transition from second to third order, Kegan believes, occurs between ages 12 and 20.

Kegan’s theory suggests the limitations of classroom behavior. Commonly, such behavior is passive, with students taking notes from a professor regarded as an expert. It is not behavior likely to produce civic-minded adults.

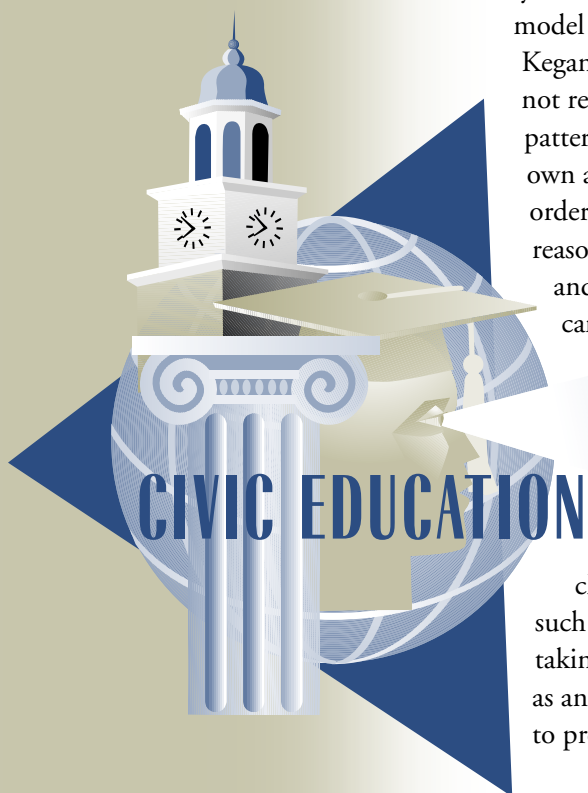
While college students say they learn best through group discussion, their classroom experiences are typically limited to lectures and note taking.

The merits of the NIF and SCRC approaches can be assessed within Kegan’s framework. Worth noting is that the latter’s nonhierarchical structure and its emphases on bonding and on communication skills are well matched to Kegan’s description of the student personality.

The study circle puts considerable responsibility in the hands of the participants. Commonly, this promotes an exchange of ideas. One student remarked, “I was particularly impressed by my study circle’s conclusion that ‘resources’ should be defined to include more than financial capital.” Students commented that study circles helped build such social capital, through the formation of bonds, and allowed them to make a connection with the world outside their campus “bubble.” In this, the “getting to know you” component is key. The Topsfield Foundation’s work on study circles suggests that the single most effective way to overcome people’s initial hesitancy to discuss public issues is to have them talk about how the issues affect their everyday lives.

Overall, study circle participants spoke well of their experience. Still, shortcomings were identified. The most common was a lack of diversity — a low representation of nonstudents, low-income persons, and minorities. Diversity is important. In a discussion, opinions not expressed by persons present are not likely to be discussed. Second, some said a lack of “active leadership” could lead to participants becoming entrenched in their positions or could allow discussion to drift away from unpopular viewpoints.

NIF gatherings are more structured, which also has advantages. For example, by supplying “the skills and the voice,” they allay student concerns of being uninformed, provide academically challenging choice work, and contribute to understanding of what citizenship entails. Further, students who doubt they have enough information for informed participation benefit from the



“issue book” made available prior to the session. One student wrote, “It is difficult to deliberate about issues of which you have no knowledge.”

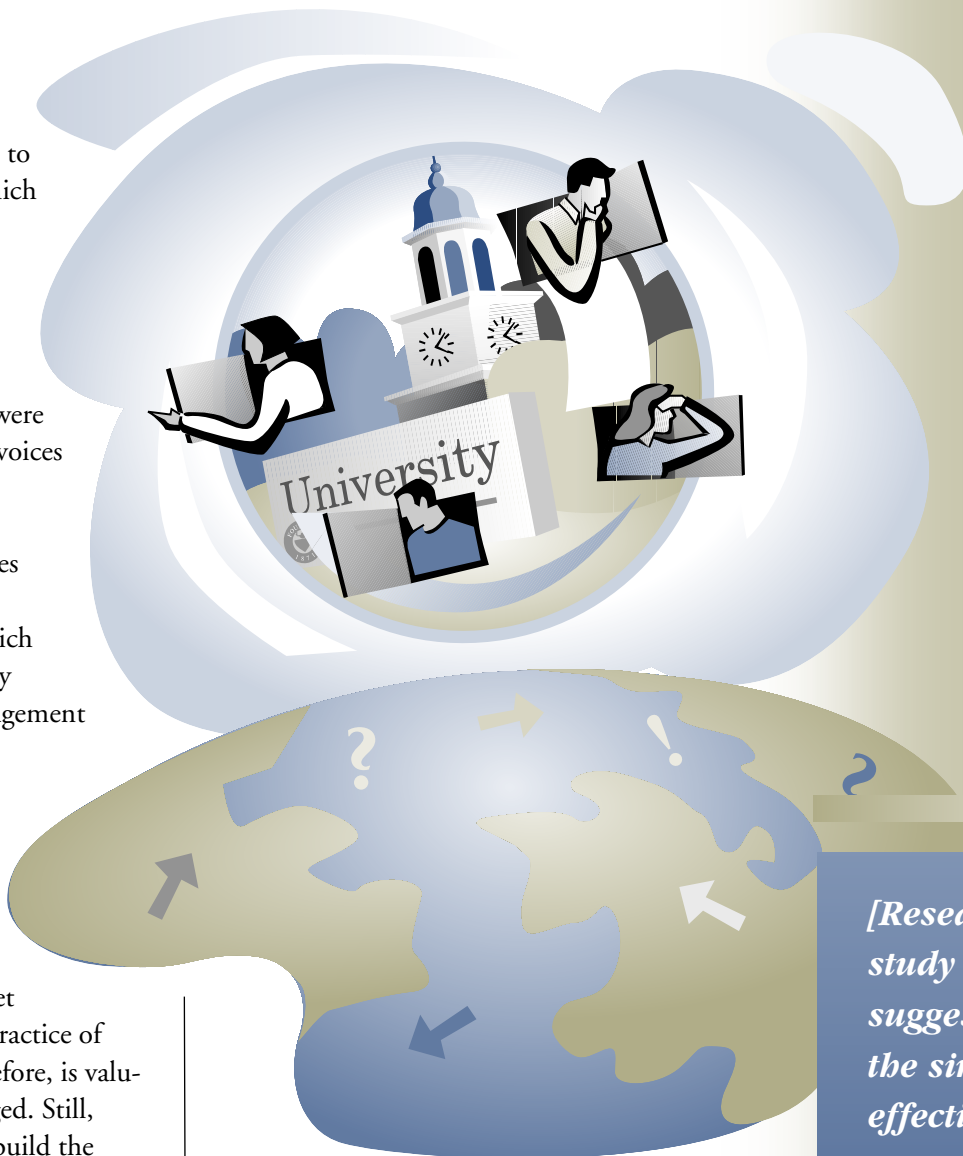
Though most students spoke highly of their participation, they did recognize drawbacks: What would happen if common ground were not reached? How could all voices be included in a consensus? Voices, they thought, went unheard: “Our speaking styles and levels of understanding were obviously different, which may be why we had difficulty coming up with a public judgement on our issues.”

Maintaining a Balance for the College Student

Kegan and others urge that, to be aided in their cognitive and civic development, students should be met where they are. Classroom practice of deliberative discussion, therefore, is valuable and should be encouraged. Still, choice work alone may not build the empathy needed. Since identity is a focal point among students, such deliberation should aim at moving students from a self-based orientation to a more community-minded one. This can be a natural connection. One student wrote, “Just the act of deliberation fosters the ideas of cooperation among individuals, problem solving, and tolerance.”

Students value deliberative exercise but also express a need for more process in their conversations. Beale and Schoem refer to the need for a “content/process balance.” Literature, theory, and empirical content help participants to form their ideas and comments, while the interactive process of discussion allows for the expression of ideas, insights, and personal experiences.

Some may argue that students are getting all they can out of NIF deliberations and that an adjustment of the bal-



ance between process and content is not needed. I believe, however, that if NIF added opportunities for personal sharing to the necessary choice work, students would not only be community leaders, but would be better listeners, more able to bring understanding and concern to their daily decision making.

Deliberation is a starting point that can move a student from mere “fact gatherer” to one who can process information and form opinions on new and different ideas. For the experience to be comprehensive, students must also be taught to learn with their hearts. Students who are passionate and engaged in critical thinking can benefit the larger community.

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