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# Getting Grounded:

## An Interview with Linda Hoke on **Listening** to Southern Communities

By Alexandra Robinson

**S**outhern Growth Policies Board, a public policy think tank based in Research Triangle Park, North Carolina, has been experimenting with new ways of working in and with communities. Formed in 1971 by the region's governors, Southern Growth aims to strengthen the South's economy and increase the quality of life for Southerners by developing and advancing economic-development policy recommendations.\*

Since 2001, Southern Growth has charted a *listening* process, which has as its centerpiece a series of deliberative forums in communities all across the South. The community deliberations serve a dual goal for Southern Growth—they fundamentally inform the organization's research *and* they endeavor to strengthen the participating communities in the

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\*To learn more about Southern Growth Policies Board, see their Web site: <http://www.southern.org>.

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## Getting Grounded

process. I sat down in March of 2009 with Linda Hoke, director of the Council of the Southern Community at Southern Growth, to talk about the organization's new ventures with communities, and she described the journey to becoming a *listening* organization.

\* \* \*

### **Can you tell me a little about how Southern Growth Policies Board has changed over the years?**

When I first came to work for Southern Growth—and it will be 20 years ago this summer—it was really a very different organization than it is now. At that time, we were primarily doing what I would call academic research. I spent a lot of time in the library researching economic-development topics. I also spent a lot of time interviewing people on the phone—mainly the experts that were involved in a particular issue. And then we would publish reports on those different topics before moving on to another topic.

The pivotal moment for us really happened when David Mathews spoke at Southern Growth's annual conference following the 1998 *Commission on the Future of the South*. At the time, we felt like we were losing our connectedness. We were looking at ways to connect to more people in the region, and at the same time we were very interested in the research that was going on about social capital and how that might contribute to stronger communities. And so when David came and talked about leadership—he talked about “leaderful” communities rather than communities full of leaders—it really struck a cord with some of the thinking that was going on in our minds. We learned more about the work at the Kettering Foundation and then decided—as an experiment—that we would try to get more people talking about economic-development issues in their communities. We produced our first issue guide in 2001, *Pathways to Prosperity: Choosing a Future for Your Community*, which took a broad look at how to make our communities more prosperous. The guide looked at growth issues, and it looked at both the more traditional

economic-development approaches where you would try to recruit companies, and also what Southern Growth was increasingly trying to promote—growth from within, building entrepreneurship, and that type of thing.

This was a little bit scary for us because we had always had control over our message before. At the time, we really felt pretty strongly that one path was perhaps the right path. So it was kind of scary to open it up to the possibility that people might tell us something that was *wrong*. It was a real leap for us to go down that path.

***That is particularly interesting. You quoted Jim Clinton, Southern Growth's executive director at the time, as saying “Pathways to Prosperity as a project . . . became a vehicle that changed me and changed my approach to where we were headed.” However, people were admittedly a little frightened of the prospect of losing control of the message. But, deliberation just won't work if you try to lead people to one option over the other, right?***

We were really more used to an educational kind of role—of going out there and presenting the message to the public: *this is what you should be doing*. So it was very different to not be delivering the message.

***Right. So it seems like the nature of the organization has sort of flipped.***

The organization has changed such that we are a lot more about connecting people now. We have always had an interesting combination of people, but I think we've done even more. I think that this whole listening process, as we call it now, has really contributed to that in terms of bringing different people together that aren't normally connected. I think that that's been a real strength for the organization, and I think it's strengthened communities where there are people

who come together from different perspectives and who don't normally have the opportunity to talk about economic-development issues together. For example, we might bring together the business community with educators, and maybe with community-development people or young people. So, that's definitely been a new direction that the organization has moved in.

***It seems like a pretty dramatic change. How has your work changed?***

It is a dramatic change. In terms of my day-to-day work, yes, it has changed a lot over the past 20 years. It's probably a little less writing and more convening and listening to people now. One of my favorite parts of the work now is the forums. I think they are really interesting and we always learn a lot from them.

***And how does the community deliberations piece fit into the larger mission of Southern Growth?***

When we started this we really had dual goals. One goal was contributing to our research so that we felt like it was grounded in reality. We were trying to get away from this ivory-tower mentality, so

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we were not just doing academic research that had no basis in reality. We wanted to get out and see what people at the community level were really thinking. And another motivation for doing this was that we tended before to have more connections at the state government level and fewer connections at the community level. And yet so much change occurs at the community level. We felt that in order to really strengthen the South we needed

## Getting Grounded

to be reaching more directly into the communities.

Our mission I would say is to improve the economy and quality of life in the South. So part of it is learning about the specific topic that we are focusing on each year. But part of it is this process. We

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**Our mission I would say is to improve the economy and quality of life in the South. So part of it is learning about the specific topic that we are focusing on each year. But part of it is this process. We hope the process of doing the forums is strengthening communities, and we hope that that will strengthen the South in turn.**

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***Have you learned something from this work about how people can come to see themselves as economic citizens—actors in their communities that can actually do something to change their communities?***

In a lot of communities we found, especially early on when we first started doing this, that a lot of people would say: *this is the first time anyone has ever asked my opinion about anything in the community.*

We found that a lot last year, when the forums focused on young people and their engagement in communities. Because this was the focus, we had a lot more young people involved. I think there was a lot of eye opening on both sides, especially when there were young people and adults in the room together. The adults expressed surprise that young people were often thinking the same things they were—they didn't expect that. The adults were excited about youths' enthusiasm about doing something in

the community—they didn't really expect that young people would be interested. And for their part, young people were surprised that adults listened to their ideas and opinions.

Another thing I feel good about are the changes you can see in communi-

ties from year to year. We had one community last year—Richmond, Kentucky—that had a forum involving a lot of young people. And they were so excited about what came out of that forum that this year they did a forum on energy. They had more than 170 people come to the forum. And they made sure

that young people were a key part of this forum. Because they were such a large

group, they needed to break into smaller discussion groups at different parts during the event. They made sure that there were a couple students at each table, and then asked the students to do the reporting out for the groups. So, they are really seeing young people as much more of a resource in their community.

One of the other interesting things that we found, starting early on, was that—no matter what the topic being discussed—some communities would report on benefits outside of the topic. This is one thing that we were hoping might happen. One of the things that we were hearing from them was that they thought this might help with race relations. We weren't talking about race relations—we were talking about rural development, or technology-based development. But, the forums brought together people who hadn't really come together before to talk about the community. And they found that to be really valuable.

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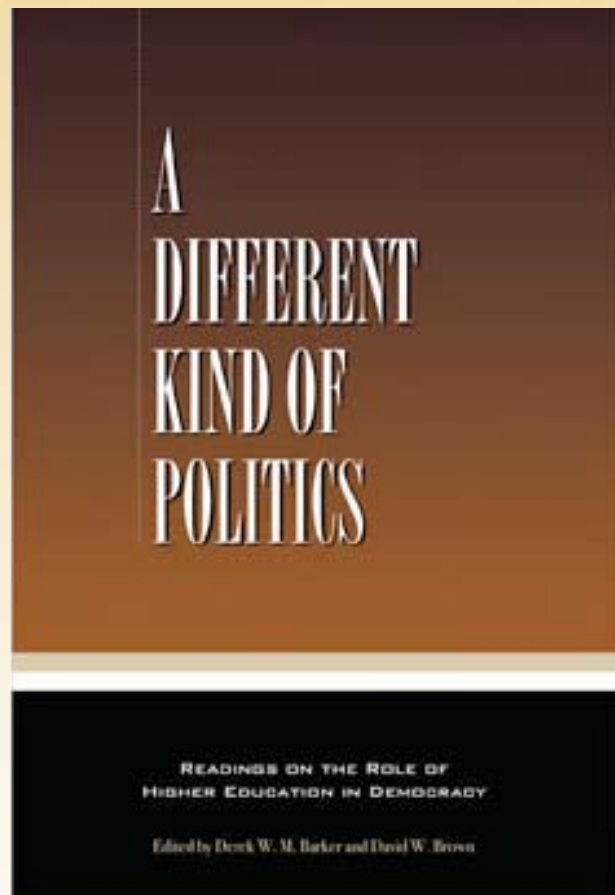
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