

CONNECTIONS

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Communicating the Value of Deliberation

by Amy Harper

“Briefings are a good way to introduce the concept of deliberation.... It’s a concept that needs to get out there, and this is a great way to do it.”

As *Connections*’ readers know, the Kettering Foundation takes a keen interest in how National Issues Forums (NIF) might demonstrate the value of public deliberation. Interviews with Michelle Scott and Robert Walker about their recent experience with an NIF briefing at Montgomery College in Rockville, Maryland, suggest that such efforts do promote deliberative democracy.

Scott is director of the Office of Equity and Diversity at Montgomery College, and she is a cofounder of the college’s Center for Community Leadership Development and Public Policy (CCLDP). She is also a member of the NIF network. Walker helped to establish CCLDP, which is also home to a Public Policy Institute (PPI). In November 2001, the Office of Equity and Diversity and CCLDP cohosted a briefing in connection with the release of the NIF research report on “Money and Politics.” The report, by John Doble Research Associates, Inc., analyzed the results from forums around the country on this issue. The briefing at Montgomery College was one of four held over the course of three days.

The audience included officeholders, citizens, teachers, and school administrators as well as representatives of the media and local civic organizations. Follow-up requests from participants indicate that the briefing had an impact on both newcomers to NIF as well as those who had some previous experience with them. “We are doing work with people we invited to the briefing,” said Scott. “They came here for one thing and found another.”

Local officeholders, for instance, “found out that things are happening at the college, that it’s an untapped resource,” said Scott. “We’ve been asked to facilitate things as a result.”

Walker agrees that the briefings had an impact on the wider community. “Local political organizers and parties continue to stay in touch with us about continuing deliberative practices,” he said. Nothing concrete has developed yet from these contacts, but “[the briefing] gave us a connection to a group of people. It generated social capital. Without the briefing, people would not have been in touch with this kind of practice.”

“Briefings are a good way to introduce the concept of deliberation,” said Paul Taylor, former executive director of the Alliance for Better Campaigns. “It’s a concept that needs to get out there, and this is a great way to do it. The more people learn about the process, the more attractive it may be.”

Taylor attended an earlier briefing held at the Offices of Common Cause in Washington. He was particularly interested in a finding that was “right down the line” with the Alliance’s advocacy work. Forum participants supported the idea of giving free airtime to political candidates. Taylor subsequently wrote an article for *The Political Standard*, the Alliance for Better Campaign’s newsletter, highlighting this finding (“Citizens, Meeting in Community Forums Around the Country, See Free Air Time as Best Way to Check Money in Politics,” *The Political Standard*, November/December 2001).

The Montgomery College forum connected the Office of Equity and Diversity with the Commission on Women and the National Organization of Women. These three groups are now working to frame an issue around the status of women in Montgomery County. Although Scott acknowledges that it’s “a slow-building process,” the Montgomery College event also led to collaborative efforts with the Commission on Aging. She says the process takes “good word-of-mouth promotion.”





Students from Roberto Clemente Middle School share their NIF experiences at the National Press Club.

The briefing also led to a fruitful relationship between CCLDP and an area middle school. Gayle Starr, assistant principal at Roberto Clemente Middle School in Germantown, Maryland, was familiar with NIF before attending the briefing. She had recently participated in a forum, and her husband is acting director of CCLDP. But the briefing she attended offered another approach to NIF that appealed to her. In addition to the “Money and Politics” report, it

included a presentation about NIF in the Classroom.

After the briefing, Starr persuaded school officials and teachers to hold a forum on public schools with a group of eighth graders and their parents. The title of the forum was “Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade?” According to Starr “the kids ate it up [and] asked, ‘When can we do another one?’” Two subsequent forums were held, one for a group of seventh and eighth graders that

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Roberto Clemente students line up to view the taping of "A Public Voice."

"Students say ... they feel as if they are being treated as adults, that they've been heard, and that their opinions are respected."

focused on racial and ethnic tensions and one for all seventh and eighth graders that focused on violent kids. A group of students also attended National Press Club briefings last year and this year, and school staff attended a PPI at Montgomery College to learn about moderating and issue framing.

Students have responded well. "They feel empowered by the forums," said Starr. "Students say, for the first time, they feel as if they are being treated as adults, that they've been heard, and that their opinions are respected."

The students, said Scott, "have begun the process of cultivating a public voice. They expect they will have a voice. They expect they will be heard."

A recent incident underscores this observation. After a confrontation between two groups of students — one primarily African American and the other primarily Hispanic — Starr decided to suspend the leaders of each group. A student, however, pointed out that suspension would not solve the problem. "He said, 'What we need to do is talk it out.'" Starr agreed, and the two groups came together to work through their problems.

"Some of those children who sat around the table with me, I never would have thought they were getting anything out of the forums," said Starr. But the practice of deliberation at the school forums had clearly left its imprint. "The

students went through the process of naming, framing, and deliberating about the issue," said Starr. "They identified the problem and the options and searched for solutions. They took behaviors from the forum into the discussion." In fact, one student, after it was all over, compared the experience to a forum.

"By the time they left, they were shaking hands," said Starr. "They felt as if they had come up with a solution they could live with. They felt heard, and they felt it was in their hands. This was a problem they created, they had to come up with a solution, and they did."

In addition to the forums in school, Starr also convened a community forum on terrorism right after the war on Iraq began. About 30 people attended, and most of them spoke English as a second language. They were not typical forum participants, and they were reluctant to talk at first. At the end, however, "you couldn't shut them up," said Starr, and they asked if there would be another forum the following week.

Scott, who has been working with the middle school over the last year and a half, says the NIF process has "changed the culture" of the school and the way administrators and teachers engage students. "It's been a very interesting journey," she said. Some teachers and administrators "didn't believe that students brought enough intellectual or maturity currency to engage with them. They found out otherwise. Students really want to engage in an intellectual kind of way."

When Starr first proposed holding a forum, the chairman of the world studies department was reluctant. According to Starr, "she did not think children at that level were capable of such lofty discussions." Now, several forums later, "she's somewhat of a zealot. She really believes in the process."

Walker uses these experiences at the Roberto Clemente Middle School as an example when talking to people about the value of deliberation. "It's an opportunity to show how this goes somewhere," he says.

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