

# CONNECTIONS

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# Erskine College Hosts a Legislative Orientation

By Virginia York and Jay West

On January 13, 2003, the Drummond Center at Erskine College sponsored an orientation for newly elected South Carolina state legislators. The event was held at the Capitol City Club in Columbia, South Carolina, on the day prior to the opening of the state legislature. The first session was meant to introduce newcomers to some of what they might expect as legislators. Governor David Beasley, Representative James Smith, Senator Jim Lander, and Representative Jim Harrison provided witty and wise observations on the subject. In the second session, Scott Clemons, a former Florida legislator; Virginia York, a fellow of the Citizen Leadership Institute at Gulf Coast Community College; and Rick Stuart, the chairman of the Bay County Chamber of Commerce Redistricting Committee, discussed the use of deliberative forums

in helping to promote a better understanding of difficult political issues.

Clemons began by discussing the dilemma a legislator faces in considering whether to act as a trustee or a delegate (John Cavanaugh's article provides a good analysis of these roles). He explored the consequences and tradeoffs of each choice and then described his own experiences as a representative when he overcame his skepticism and tried a deliberative approach that he had first encountered at a Public Policy Workshop put on by the National Issues Forums. When the issue of tort reform was placed on the legislative agenda, Clemons enlisted support from the Citizen Leadership Institute to convene a forum on the topic at a community college. This was not a usual town meeting, which is often adversarial.

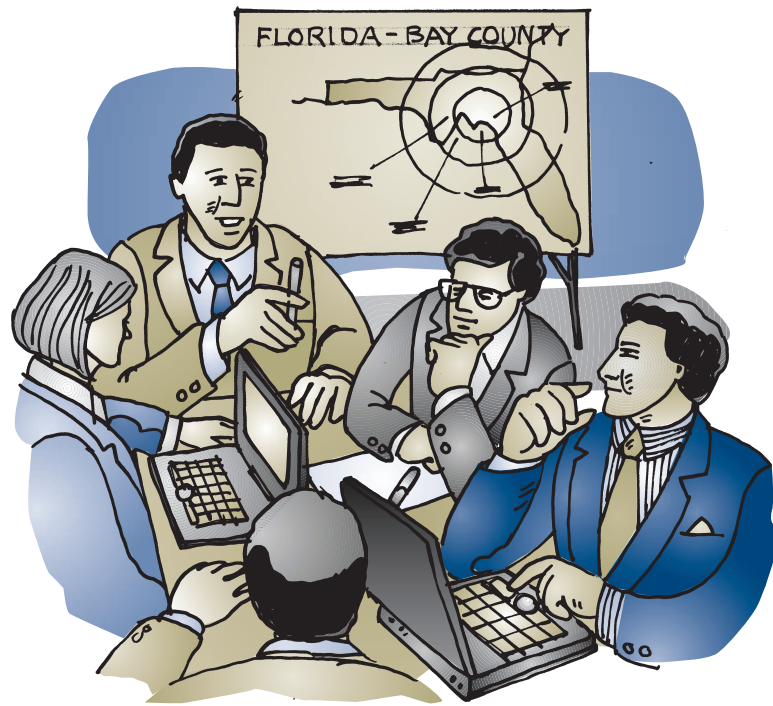
*[Scott] Clemons began by discussing the dilemma a legislator faces in considering whether to act as a trustee or a delegate.*



Photo courtesy of Erskine College

Left to right: Jay West, Erskine vice president; Senator Jim Lander; Governor David Beasley; Representative James Smith; and Representative Jim Harrison.





*Clemons acknowledged that forums do not always work perfectly and that they could be messy in practice.*

Participants used a National Issues Forums book to set the agenda, and skilled moderators guided the discussion on approaches to tort reform. The audience did not debate the issue, but instead they deliberated about how Florida might address tort reform. The state representative was provided with a safe space where he could listen to his constituents wrestle with a complex issue before he deliberated about it with his peers in Tallahassee.

Virginia York then described the deliberative forum process and how the habit of deliberation between policymakers and citizens has matured in Bay County, Florida, over the last decade. York explained that the local college is the annual site for a deliberative forum before the legislative session begins. Representatives and senators sponsor these forums and listen to citizens consider what direction the state should seek in current bills before the legislature. The forum provides a venue for elected officials to begin a new session with a clearer perspective on the values and concerns of the people in their districts. Senator Charlie Clary has recently expanded these popular forums to include all of the legislators representing Florida's panhandle region.

And finally, Rich Stuart related how Bay County, Florida, used a deliberative forum to frame the issue of redistricting. A citizens' forum was convened to discuss the issue in relation to the state legislature and the U.S. Congress. The findings were presented at a state legislative committee

hearing, which resulted in an agreement by Republicans and Democrats on the best direction for Bay County in redrawing district lines. Stuart noted that the citizens in the forum came to realize that both political parties had a shared perspective on the future implications of redistricting and wanted what was best for all of the citizens of Bay County.

The South Carolinians who attended the orientation raised some tough questions about how the process changed behavior and led to nonpartisan cooperation. They also wanted to know about the roles of the press and lobbyists and about the reactions within the political parties to these deliberative efforts. Clemons acknowledged that forums do not always work perfectly and that they could be messy in practice.

This straightforward statement gave added credibility to the discussions. Participants came away with a better understanding of how forums can provide a safe place for policymakers and of how citizens, by struggling among themselves over some tough issues in these forums, come to realize the difficulties that their legislator encounters in working with his or her peers.

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