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THE KETTERING FOUNDATION’S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

2015

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One small Indiana college is making a difference in the local community.

Sara A. Mehltretter Drury

In January 2013, Wabash College started participating in research exchanges at Kettering with a cohort of centers for public life. Wabash College is a small, liberal arts institution with less than 1,000 students located in Crawfordsville, Indiana, a rural county of approximately 38,000 people. Our development over the last three years has been encouraging and energizing—both in the community and on campus. Wabash College is now the site for an interdisciplinary initiative, Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse (WDPD), and our work advances the kinds of communication that cultivate democracy—deliberation, dialogue, advocacy, and debate. The initiative has grown from a faculty-led process to a collaborative partnership with faculty, students, and community members.

We have worked with community partners to hold a number of public deliberation events. For our first project, we tackled a challenging but important issue: substance abuse. Recognizing the importance of community knowledge, we set up interviews to learn more about the concerns of local people, and at the same time, looked for state and national data to contextualize some of these local experiences. We also interviewed community leaders—a local counselor, the coordinator of the Prescription Drug Task Force, a probation officer, and an executive director of a nonprofit organization that works with youth in the community. We worked with our campus media director to create a video of these interviews for the event, which can be viewed at https://youtu.be/Z1dfcfMR5CO.

More than 100 community members participated in the forums on substance abuse in November 2013. As they worked through three possible approaches to addressing substance abuse, we found that nearly every small-group table had at least one person who was personally affected by the problem. The conversation moved beyond typical positions and pushed our community toward finding innovative solutions. In a few follow-up meetings, participants reviewed and prioritized potential actions, but acknowledged the challenge of comprehensive changes. Still, we were encouraged to learn that several months later, a local organization working on substance abuse issues used the priorities identified in the forums as a starting point for developing a strategic plan.

An important part of this work has been involving undergraduate students from Wabash College. The transition from a faculty-led initiative began in spring 2014, when Wabash College began developing a strategic, interdisciplinary initiative that focused on equipping undergraduate students to stimulate productive conversations in communities to address problems—what would become WDPD. In WDPD, students work with partners on and off campus to facilitate deliberation, dialogue, and advocacy work. One of the most exciting benefits for our campus has been an increase in student-driven conversations on challenging issues. Students in WDPD work with faculty and staff...
across the college to develop discussion guides for courses and then facilitate forums on issues such as energy, climate change, and mental health.

WDPD also continues to work with our local community. Experienced students take leading roles in researching, planning, facilitating, and reporting on public deliberation events. In the spring of 2014, we turned to our local partners to find out what issues they felt needed public discussion. Crawfordsville mayor Todd Barton and the local economic development organization both suggested that community participation was needed to prioritize quality-of-life improvements in the county. We applied for and received a grant from Indiana Humanities to research and facilitate a public conversation on “The Next Montgomery County: A Community Conversation on Quality of Place.”

WDPD students held focus-group interviews to learn more about the local quality of place, and we worked collaboratively to design a process that allowed community members to authentically assess their quality of place—both strengths and areas for growth—and then prioritize the most important areas for growth. The student facilitators then led their group through a deliberation, which produced a strong public voice about the most important improvements and a growing sense of the community needing to all come together to address our quality of place. Three undergraduate students cowrote a report and presented it to the public as a way of demonstrating accountability for the deliberative process, and the report was used in the city’s application for the Indiana Stellar Communities Program. In August 2015, Crawfordsville was named a Stellar Community, a designation that will bring state funding for community improvements—many mentioned by citizens in the quality of place conversations.

Our experience as a young center has helped us to see the possibilities of working collaboratively in a small community. Community partners say WDPD’s work is aiding innovation. For example, Mayor Barton commented that deliberation “moves well beyond the process of facilitating discussion that is merely problem based. It guides the discourse into the positive processes of consensus building and the creation of realistic solutions.” Another community partner, Karen Branch of the Montgomery County Youth Service Bureau, expressed that the “truly collaborative” approach of deliberation and public problem solving has “increased awareness of issues and mobilized community efforts to help solve problems.” Wabash College has established pathways toward more participatory problem solving and enhanced civic capacity on our campus and in our community.

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