

CONNECTIONS

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Experiments in **ORGANIZATIONAL INNOVATION**



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Decentralizing the Center: Reflections from a Center for Public Life

By Cristin F. Brawner

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life (DMC) is a nonprofit, nonpartisan organization dedicated to increasing active citizenship, community collaboration, and effective decision-making in Alabama. The DMC's interactive workshops equip Alabama communities to employ democratic practices in their unique contexts. We convene local, regional, and statewide learning exchanges that promote shared learning and decision-making among Alabama citizens, networks, and institutions. The DMC also invests in civic learning for Alabama's next generation through teacher workshops,





undergraduate internships, and action civics opportunities for young people in grades 4-12. Additionally, we develop deliberative issue guides, author statewide reports on civic health, and share stories of Alabamians who are making a difference.

The center was founded in 2005 by former students of David Mathews: Robert H. McKenzie, Ray Minor, and Cathy Randall. I joined the center as an intern in 2009 and have held every job since, serving as executive director since 2015. As the Mathews Center has grown over the past decade, our perspective on our role has evolved. Rather than pursuing a franchise model, our dedicated board of directors and staff have intentionally worked to create “hubs of interaction” among networks, groups, and individuals.

HUBS OF INTERACTION

I believe that centers for public life should strive to create hubs of interaction rather than networks of franchises. We must eschew the copy-and-paste tactics of community engagement in favor of one that allows organizations to develop autonomously in response to the unique opportunities, challenges, and resources that meet them locally. This model promotes shared learning rather than organizational dependence. Instead of relying on a centralized architecture that prioritizes a single organization, the hubs of interaction approach proliferates like a rhizome, serving as the connective tissue *among* individuals, organizations, and institutions. Whereas the franchise model prioritizes the *nodes* of a network, the hubs of interaction approach give primacy to the *connections*. Although this approach requires an organization to cede power in many ways, I believe that the result is more powerful, sustainable, and effective.

Moving to a hubs of interaction approach can take different forms, depending on the organization. The DMC evolved from a service-delivery mode of programming to a model focused on convening, connecting, and equipping. In the early days of the DMC, we spent most of our time moderating forums—

our direct service delivery programming—in communities across Alabama. By doing so, we built trust and Alabamians began to see the transformative power of deliberative decision-making around their most pressing issues. The transition began when we started asking: “How can we work ourselves out of a job?” We shifted to convening local, regional, and statewide workshops that equip communities to use democratic practices in their contexts. As a result, communities—rather than the DMC—have ownership of the practices, the decision-making, and the outcome.

For example, this year the Mathews Center assisted the city of Montevallo, Alabama, to engage their community in deliberation around a contentious nondiscrimination ordinance. We provided support for naming and framing a deliberative issue guide, hosted training for moderating forums, and connected the organizers to partners at Auburn University who had experience bringing Alabamians together around difficult issues. Montevallo residents worked together to write the issue guide, convene forums, moderate and record the deliberations, and then communicate the emerging common ground and tensions to the city council members following the forum series. They

engaged hundreds of residents in deliberation, and the resulting ordinance the city council passed reflected the common ground that emerged.

FACILITATING LEARNING EXCHANGES

The Mathews Center seeks to further a hubs of interaction approach by facilitating learning exchanges for Alabamians and their communities. DMC learning exchanges bring formal networks, informal associations, and groups of concerned citizens together to learn from one another. These exchanges prepare participants to utilize and



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adapt democratic practices for their diverse contexts, and they promote shared learning among communities. During learning exchanges, we at the DMC take a backseat role. We organize, host, and convene the exchange, often with the help of statewide partners and sponsors, but our community partners provide the lion's share of the speaking, instruction, and facilitation.

In addition to local and regional learning exchanges, the DMC convenes an annual Civic Institute that brings together hundreds of Alabamians of all ages from every region of the state to find ways to work better together. The daylong gathering introduces attendees to the Mathews Center's mission and work, but, most important, it features learning

exchanges organized by community partners and spotlights Alabamians who are making a difference. Every year at the Civic Institute, we see the formation of new partnerships, the flourishing of mutually beneficial relationships, and the growth of dynamic networks among attendees. We measure the success of the event by the new nodes and connections that develop in an ever-evolving, growing network.

Facilitating learning exchanges, rather than organizing events where we impart knowledge and community members listen, requires giving up control. Control of the message and process is most organizations' default mode. Moving away from this model is challenging work requiring humility and trust. The result might be the perceived weakening of the organization, but it leads to healthier, stronger communities rich in the capacity to solve their own problems. I believe the transition is worth the struggle.



PROMOTING NETWORK LEARNING AND DEVELOPMENT

As the number of Alabamians engaging others through democratic practices grows, the DMC supports that work through a joint-learning approach to partnerships that promote network learning and development. We have developed organizational protocols and practices to emphasize

joint-learning with trusted partners rather than a strong centralized structure. For example, joint-learning agreements with faculty mentors at higher education institutions across Alabama serve as the foundation for the DMC's undergraduate internship program. Faculty mentors, in partnership with community organizations, design and direct community-based programming for undergraduate interns. In this decentralized set up, rather than supervising a score of interns out of the DMC office, students live, learn, and work alongside communities across the state. Furthermore, learning is an expected outcome for all participants: students, faculty, community partners, and the DMC.

Promoting network development also means a shift from partnering primarily with individuals to working with informal associations and groups of citizens collaborating to solve a community problem. In the beginning, most of our partners were *individual* concerned citizens wanting to tackle *specific issues*. Today, most of our partners represent *networks*, small and large, of individuals and organizations working to tackle a *range of issues* more democratically. As democratic practices become embedded into the way they work together, interact, and address challenges across our state,



If we serve as connectors and network builders, we are helping communities grow their own capacity rather than supporting the continued ineffective duplication of efforts.

we will make greater strides in solving our most deep-rooted problems.

Let me be clear: I love working with individual concerned citizens—they are often some of the most committed people I know. However, we as centers for public life would be doing a disservice to communities if we did not attempt to connect individuals and small groups as they work separately to address our most pressing issues. It is disheartening to discover in one small community disconnected individuals and organizations working toward a common goal around a particular issue, without attempting to work together because of lack of knowledge of one another, or worse, territorialism. If we serve as connectors and network builders, we are helping communities grow their own capacity rather than

supporting the continued ineffective duplication of efforts.

RETHINKING OUR ROLE IN THE COMMUNITY

I came to see the DMC as a hub of learning and experimentation about five years ago, after we had established a trusted reputation in Alabama. As we worked with more organizations and networks across the state, I saw that our partners were learning from one another rather than simply taking what they learned from us and applying it in their communities unmodified. As that began to happen, we came to see ourselves primarily as connectors, convenors, and equippers. In rethinking our role, we wanted to build on that dawning self-awareness and ensure that communities, networks, civic organizations, and others in Alabama did not need us to do their work across our state.

One thing has become clear about the nature of this work: the relationships you build cannot be transactional, they must be ongoing and mutually beneficial. Organizations that insist on a top-down, centralized approach to community engagement will struggle to build a foundation of trust on the shifting sands of their own self-referentiality. How to accomplish this has not been a straightforward path for us. Despite

being committed to a joint-learning approach from the outset, in the beginning, we often took the direct service delivery model because we were an unknown organization. Becoming a trusted community partner takes time. People often have to “see” the work before they will trust you. Building that trust took more than five years of spending time in communities and walking alongside networks as they built and exercised their civic muscles. The work of building and maintaining trust continues today.

Much remains to be done for all Alabamians to be ready for active citizenship, community collaboration, and effective decision-making. We will have accomplished our mission in Alabama when democratic practices are embedded in the way individuals, communities, and networks work with one another to address the pervasive problems affecting our state. We believe that transitioning to a hubs of interaction approach helps us accomplish our mission by making us replaceable—the work can shift to others—and the emphasis revolves around the community rather than our organization. ■

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