

Reimagining Civic Education in Colleges and Universities: The Influence of
Deliberation on Students' Perceptions of Political Participation

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Abstract

A focus on public dialogue and deliberation is critical for civic engagement programs in higher education because such skills provide students with the knowledge necessary for addressing wicked problems in American democracy. Throughout the 2014-2015 academic year, the Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) partnered with the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) at Lone Star College-Kingwood (LSC-Kingwood) in carrying out a series of community deliberative dialogues in order to capitalize on the city of Houston's Citizenship Month and provide a shared civic experience for students. This article describes a study in which the authors performed a qualitative analysis of student responses to four open-ended questions administered at four of these deliberative forum events—two focusing on the mission of higher education, one on energy, and one on guns on campus. The analysis revealed that the forums influenced and changed the ways in which students had previously experienced or talked about politics. The results suggest that academic institutions must think more purposefully about how they embed these types of opportunities into their civic curricula across the span of students' education, allowing students to develop the skills needed to construct a different type of politics for addressing wicked problems in an effective and productive manner.

Keywords: deliberation, dialogue, community engagement, civic education, service-learning

In their seminal work “Dilemmas in a General Theory of Planning,” Rittel and Webber (1973) argued that “the professional’s job was once seen as solving an assortment of problems that appeared to be definable, understandable, and consensual” (p. 156). They pointed out, however, that “the professionalized cognitive and occupational styles that were refined in the first half of this century ... are not readily adapted to contemporary conceptions of interacting open systems and to contemporary concerns with equity” (p. 156). They maintained that today’s problems are “wicked” problems, as opposed to the tame problems that modern experts were taught to solve (e.g., the streets have been paved, and roads now connect all places; houses shelter virtually everyone; the dread diseases are virtually gone; clean water is piped into nearly every building, and sanitary sewers carry wastes from them; schools and hospitals serve virtually every district; and so on.) Wicked problems have no definitive solutions as measured by standard technocratic notions of success because it is impossible to compare solutions in terms of their efficiency. Not only do wicked problems have no definitive definition, but the solutions cannot be good or bad, true or false; they can only impact a problem and, in turn, give rise to additional spillover effects in other areas.

Drawing from Rittel and Webber’s (1973) work, Carcasson (2013) noted that while “wicked problems cannot be ‘solved’ ... the tensions inherent in wicked problems can certainly be addressed in ways that are better or worse” and that “tackling wicked problems requires different forms of inquiry, communication, problem solving, and decision making than we often see on politics or public policy research” (pp. 38-39). Civic skills are useful because they teach young people the skills needed to deal with wicked problems. Specifically, Carcasson outlined three strategies commonly used to address wicked problems. First, expert strategies seek to tame wicked problems by placing decision-making authority in the hands of relatively small numbers of stakeholders, thus reducing the wickedness of the problem. Second, adversarial strategies, like markets, are zero-sum, with some interests winning and others losing. Third, deliberative strategies discard the zero-sum mentality and instead adopt a win-win perspective. Carcasson argued that deliberative strategies are superior because they result in more legitimate decisions since all stakeholders have had a role in defining the problems and forming the solutions. In short, deliberative strategies get more buy-in from affected groups. Given public dissatisfaction with the current state of American democracy—with Congress having an approval rating of 13% in Gallup polls—the problems of

democracy are clearly related to the emphasis on expert and adversarial processes for solving wicked problems at the expense of deliberative processes (Theis, 2016).

Civic education in most U.S. colleges and universities has essentially followed one of three paths. First, it has been relegated to political science classes in which one learns about institutions, parties, and voting. Second, it is represented by student life and the amalgamation of student clubs and extracurricular activities that focus on citizenship and leadership (e.g., college Democrat or Republican clubs, debate teams, “Get out the Vote” drives, and student government). Third, civic learning in higher education is often circumscribed by volunteerism and service-learning. Very few civic activities in higher education involve students as creators of their civic life; rather, they emphasize a passive or subordinate view of students in their communities (Boyte, 2009; Carcasson, 2013; Theis, 2016). Moreover, much of today’s college experience emphasizes the importance of expertise in solving various societal problems. In that vein, civic education exists largely within the domain of political science classes, and, unfortunately, as a discipline, it seems that political science is ill equipped to provide all students with adequate civic education (Theis, 2016).

The media, textbooks, and popular culture never tire of reminding individuals of their place in society. Concomitantly, politics has become increasingly adversarial, with a decrease in cooperative political action (Spragens, 2009). Today, parties and groups line up their experts and engage in adversarial politics in an effort to win elections so they can implement their preferred agendas. In many ways, students model on their campuses what they see in their political system and leaders, engaging in debate teams and tournaments, and partisan clubs such as campus Democrat or Republican groups. In addition, each election year, schools carry out “Get out the Vote” drives, and candidates make photo-op appearances on campuses. These forms of political education on campuses, while playing a role, are about amassing facts and making arguments while lining up converts on one’s side rather than listening to different perspectives or interests and working toward common solutions.

In recent years, as *civic engagement* has become a buzz term in higher education, schools have been renaming their service-learning programs “civic engagement programs.” In fact, Campus Compact has made civic engagement central to its mission, and scholars are writing about service-learning as civic engagement. Yet, as so often happens, much of the emphasis on civic engagement

is simply old wine poured into new bottles. As Saltmarsh (2009) noted astutely, much of what passes as civic education focuses on service and volunteerism. While useful, service and volunteerism are inherently apolitical and fail to grapple with questions of power and agency, typically creating feel-good activities that do not address underlying causes of problems but instead deal with their symptoms.

The challenge for any institution of higher learning is to move beyond contemporary forms of political education—whether they include lecture-based government classes, joining the college Democrats, or volunteerism—and develop civic education programs that seek to teach deliberative skills to students. Only then will civic education programs begin to deal with the problems of democracy by developing specific skills that help to address wicked problems. As Ronan (2011) pointed out, civic engagement must move the whole person along a continuum from civics, voting, and patriotism toward deliberation, concord, and public action. Deliberation, concord, and public action are crucial to civic engagement because they provide students with the skills to tackle the problems of democracy and because, as Ronan noted, they are deeper and more transformative. Moreover, deliberative strategies comprise the essential mechanism for transitioning from patriotism, voting and civics toward deliberation, concord, and public action. The civic skills Ronan identified are not knowledge- and data-based but rather experience-based. Higher education must therefore respond to the problems of democracy by providing democratic experiences that allow students to develop skills such as deliberation and public work.

In the 2014-2015 academic year, the Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) at the University of Houston-Downtown (UHD) partnered with the Center for Civic Engagement (CCE) at Lone Star College-Kingwood (LSC-Kingwood) to capitalize on the city of Houston's Citizenship Month and to provide a shared civic experience for students. Specifically, the two centers worked together to carry out a series of community deliberative dialogues over the course of the academic year. Participants in the forums were asked to read issue guides prepared either by the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) or in partnership with NIFI. The issue guides were structured to frame three approaches citizens might take in addressing the various wicked problems that were under discussion in the forums. Furthermore, the forums were structured so that each table included ten participants, allowing for space for people to talk to and with each other. Each table included a trained student moderator to keep the conversations productive and a

recorder to capture the discussions (which would be presented in a final report). The student moderators and recorders had been trained at both UHD and LSC-Kingwood. At UHD, students take a semester-long communications course that focuses on naming and framing issues, and they moderate and record a forum in the community as part of the final project. They also write the final report after they moderate the forums. At LSC-Kingwood, students engage in an extracurricular training that prepares them to work in the community through the CCE. In this study, we considered how participation in a two-hour forum influenced how students discussed politics. This study examined results of survey analysis from four deliberative forum events—two focusing on the mission of higher education, one on energy, and one on guns on campus.

Analytic Approach

We used the construct of “thematic analysis” in order to analyze responses to the open-ended questionnaires and acquire a better understanding of how students perceived their participation in the deliberative dialogue forums. Thematic analysis is one of the most commonly used methods in qualitative research (Braun, 2006; Guest, 2012; Daly, Kellehear, & Gliksman, 1997; Ferday & Muir-Cochrane, 2006). In conducting our thematic analysis, we drew on a “six-phase guide” (Braun, 2006, p. 5). The six phases include familiarization with data, generating initial codes, searching for themes among codes, reviewing themes, defining and naming themes, and producing a final report (Braun, 2006). Additionally, we decided to use open-ended survey questions due to the unique situation of being present with over 400 individuals participating in a process while needing to capture their lived experiences around that deliberative participation. Though it is often more common to use in-depth interviews or participant observations in quantitative research, open-ended questions are instructive for certain types of research (Guest, 2012). Ultimately, we decided on this research design in order to examine the qualitative responses of 195 students, which provided us with saturation around the topic in a way that was insightful. Additionally, we chose to first pilot our questionnaire with a focus group of students to understand how they thought about the questions. We then pretested the survey questions at a forum of 200 people. As a result of the pretest, we determined that administering questionnaires before and after the forum was unnecessary for examining how people were talking about politics as a result of their participation and, in fact, made it more likely that they would not complete the final questionnaire. This forum illuminated the ways in which people were

answering the questionnaire and whether they were providing full responses. (After the pilot, we did indeed change the wording of certain questions.)

We analyzed 195 completed questionnaires, which had been administered to students in three subject-specific forums. Forty-one students participated in the energy forum, 76 in the two mission of higher education forums, and 78 in the guns on campus forum. Students attending the forums represented diverse ethnicities: 14.87% were African American, 7.18% Asian American, 36.92% Hispanic or Latino/a, 1.54% Native American, and 30.26% White/Caucasian, with 6.15% identifying as “Other.” Additionally, many participants indicated that this was the first forum they had ever attended (41.03%) or that they had previously attended between one and three forums (34.44%). The student participants, therefore, were racially and ethnically diverse, and relatively new to the concept of deliberative democratic participation. After each of the forums, we administered four open-ended survey questions (see Appendix A) designed to ascertain participants’ perceptions of politics in light of their participation in the deliberative forum. The four questions were:

- Did the forum influence how you see the role of everyday people in politics? If so, how? If not, how do you see the role of everyday people in politics?
- Did this forum influence your understanding in any way about how people can talk to each other? If not, what is your experience with how people generally talk with each other about politics?
- How was this deliberative forum different from other political discussions?
- Before you came to the forum today, what types of activities would you have thought about as democratic activities? Are you thinking differently now?

These qualitative questions generated 14 themes (see Appendix B), which offer a more nuanced understanding of how students changed the way they talk about politics after participating in one deliberative forum.

Student Perceptions of the Influence of Forums on Everyday People in Politics

Student responses to the first question—“Did the forum influence how you see the role of everyday people in politics? If so, how? If not, how do you see the role of everyday people in politics?”—were mostly positive, with about 75% of the qualitative remarks indicating that the forums did have an influence on the participants. For those remarks that indicated influence, several themes emerged, including: (1) the importance of perspective sharing, (2) the role of forums in providing valuable components to the political system (e.g., tools for transcending polarized thinking), (3) the idea that the forums exposed students to an aspect of politics they had not experienced previously, (4) the role of forums in reinforcing the importance of an empowered citizenry. The remaining 25% indicated that the forums did not influence their conception of everyday citizens, but these comments pointed to a pervasive sense that many students continued to feel hopeless about the political process, despite their participation in one forum.

Students discussed the ways in which forums create opportunities for perspective sharing which are an important aspect of democratic politics. The majority of comments reflected the importance of forums as venues for everyday people to hear different perspectives, such as “generational” perspectives or perspectives from “different backgrounds.” Students noted their appreciation for getting to “experience different viewpoints” without people “imposing their beliefs on them.” Participants noted that not only did they learn from perspective sharing, but that the forums “broadened” their perspectives as well. In fact, many participants indicated that as a result of their participation, they understood others and the particular issue better than they had previously.

Students indicated in their comments that, in general, forums provide valuable components to the political process. Students recognized that the deliberative forum was “really different” from how everyday people generally act (or do not act) in politics. They also indicated that such forums are important to politics and “needed to occur more frequently” because they provide a “space” to have “thorough conversations.” In their comments, students described five basic characteristics of forums that they believed were different—in important ways—from how everyday people generally participate in politics. First, they noted that forums are an effective means for citizens “to work together to find ways to

improve our lives.” Second, they indicated that forums help people “formulate our ideas so that we can exercise our vote in a better way.” Third, students indicated that everyday people are not the only people who should participate in forums to improve the political process; leaders should as well. As one student noted, “I think government officials should have to participate in these types of forums.” Fourth, students spoke of the potential of forums to foster understanding and prevent partisanship. As one participant noted, “Forums like these present a healthier model of political exchange than what we see on television or in our current Congress.” Fifth, students noted the potential for forums to build the capacity and will of everyday people. As one participant commented, “The forums are an important way to build concern with people.” While comments highlighted students’ views around the benefits of deliberation, perhaps the most surprising comments were those in which some students indicated that they did not perceive the forum as political at all. As one student noted, “We didn’t even discuss any politics.” This suggests that the deliberative pedagogy provides such a stark contrast to dominant models of adversarial and expert forms of political discourse that students do not recognize it as “politics.”

Many of the participants indicated that the forums exposed them to some aspect of “politics” for the first time. One student, for instance, noted, “I’ve never been fully exposed to politics. It was a brand new experience for me.” Others revealed that, in participating in the forum, they learned “how changes are made in the community,” while some commented on the ways in which the forum impacted their understanding of political involvement. As one student said, “I’ve heard multiple times in my high school government class the importance of citizens being involved; however, it finally sank in today hearing it from students and highly esteemed citizens of the community.” Another stated, “I never thought a state representative would be at a meeting like this and actually listen to what we had to say.” Still another student commented, “Because of this forum, I realize how ‘politics’ have a serious impact on how some people live their life each day.” Finally, another student said, “I was surprised by how civil people acted in these forums.” These types of comments indicate a new understanding that students developed as an outcome of participating in one forum about the political process itself.

Additionally, students indicated in their comments their belief that everyday people should play an empowered role in politics. Many of the participants already

viewed everyday people as being active; however, others indicated that the forum changed their views of everyday people. For instance, one participant commented, “I see now that people are hungry to participate in discussions of key issues of the day.” Another student noted, “I learned that we have a bigger voice than we think we do in politics,” and another stated, “I think these forums help to increase participation.” Other students expressed that the forums educated them about how they can become more involved. As one student noted, “I have realized because of this forum that my opinions and voice are unique and that I can advocate for change.” Students also realized that degrees shouldn’t impede people from becoming involved in politics. As one student contended, “We had several community leaders who play major roles in their community but who do not have degrees that match their importance. I think everyday people must realize that they don’t have to have a degree to play an important role.” Students also acknowledged the need for forums to serve as platforms: “Everyday people do need a platform to express their ideas.” Another participant maintained that “everyday people should try and better their communities.” “If people are not active,” one person stated, “they won’t have any way to know what is actually going on in politics. Forums such as these are important.” Another commented, “This forum influenced me to think that we need to speak up more [about] what we want and hold our politicians more accountable.” Finally, some of the participants found themselves a little surprised by their interactions with the students. As one community member revealed, “I realized that students are aware and are concerned about political issues.” Similarly, a faculty member present was “encouraged by the participation of students.” Indeed, many of the participants noted that the forums did in fact either educate them, enhance their awareness, or otherwise encourage them to view politics as an entity that calls upon empowered everyday citizens.

Some students did, however, indicate that they were not influenced by their participation in the forums. Most of the negative student comments centered on general conceptions that either people do not feel empowered to participate or that there is not much opportunity for people to affect change. For instance, one participant commented, “I think we feel kind of hopeless as everyday people in politics. We discussed several times the control of corporations [over] government or the seemingly still bureaucracy.” Another commented, “I am surprised at how many people do not feel they can make a difference in policy.” Another person noted, “There are more people in politics causing more harm than good.” One student commented, “In politics, politicians are more like dictators than

deliberative.” The level of optimism that a single forum fostered was in some ways surprising. Equally telling, however, were those comments that signaled people’s lack of hope surrounding politics.

Deliberation’s Influence on Students’ Understanding of How People Can Talk about Politics

The second open-ended survey question was, “Did this forum influence your understanding in any way about how people can talk to each other? If not, what is your experience with how people generally talk with each other about politics?” In the questionnaires, 90% of respondents indicated that the forum did, in fact, influence their understanding. The student comments broke down into four main themes: (1) Students’ attendance at the forums provided hope for many regarding a better way of discussing politics; (2) the forums influenced students’ understanding of the importance of everyday perspectives; (3) students perceived the “habit of talk” as important to the political process; and (4) students observed that the way forums were structured positively influenced the type of discourse produced.

Students commented that forums provided hope for a better way of doing politics. Many participants indicated that their previous conceptions of politics had been negative and that the forums changed their perspective to one of hope. Students, for instance, described politics as “overwhelming and extremely negative.” They also said that their previous experiences of talking about politics with others had been marked by “very heated debate,” using words like “anger,” “rude,” and “disruptive” to characterize the exchanges. Some students admitted to avoiding discussions of politics altogether.

Student participants, however, described the forums in a very different light. As one student commented, “This forum made me realize that touchy conversations and topics can be discussed in a reasonable atmosphere,” and “I see now that political discussions can definitely be civil and respectful.” One student even remarked, “This forum gave me hope for our future.” This was such an important theme that we have chosen to include the following additional comments in an effort to convey the conviction behind students’ hope:

- “This forum influenced how I see people can talk about politics because the conversation was constructive and productive. No one was rude or disruptive and people had real opinions.”

- “This forum was a lot less stressful than I thought it would be.”
- “This forum made me think we can actually do something.”
- “Yes, I was surprised about this exercise ... it widened my perspective about politics.”
- “Politics seem to be something that people are passionate about. For the most part, people don’t share their thoughts because they disagree with one another. I will begin to pay attention to our representatives to see if they are truly representing us.”
- “It made me realize that by being honest with others in a respectful manner, they will listen. It showed how important it is to make others feel as though they are included.”
- “In general, people don’t talk politics. This forum provided a good platform to encourage productive discussion about important issues.”

Indeed, students participating in the deliberative dialogue forum perceived discussing politics as something useful that could result in action.

Many students commented on the importance of people’s “habit of talk.” Many forum participants were influenced to view people’s habits or attitudes as important aspects of talking about politics—specifically, such human qualities as open-mindedness, respect, tolerance of differing viewpoints, understanding, and the ability to listen to and hear others. Practitioners might exercise some caution about some of these insights, however; they should be careful to consult evidence that ensures these qualities would indeed help political systems. This is not a finding that necessarily negates the need for other forms of advocacy, like protesting and debate; rather, participants’ comments point to the importance of adding these qualities to political discourse.

The forums influenced students to acknowledge and value the importance of everyday perspectives. In addition to the habits students attributed to effective political discourse, they also discussed the importance of incorporating perspectives from everyday people. They noted that people must get their views out, talk with others, and to help “educate” each other. For instance, one participant stated that “we have to get people talking to each other because without conversation, people stay in their bubbles and become ignorant.” Another

participant noted, “Everyone has an opinion and each opinion matters, and we need to talk to each other about different topics.” Indeed, the emphasis on the importance of sharing perspectives among a community of people stood out as an important theme that emerged as a result of students’ attendance at the forums.

Students also made observations about the positive influence the structure of the forums had on the type of discourse produced. Many of the students contrasted the type of discussion they had in the forum with “debate”—with most privileging the former over the latter. For instance, one participant wrote, “I understand that forums promote discussion over debate, and I found this productive for the discussion of politics.” Also, participants noted that facilitators were important components of forums because they were integral to ensuring that everyone had a chance to speak. Participants also highlights aspects of the actual structure of the conversations, such as size, tone, and the presentation of multiple options. For example, one participant wrote, “It was refreshing to have the discussion centered on the presentation of alternate solutions rather than advertising one perspective from a politician.” Another commented, “I think the forum is a great structure to talk about difficult topics. Generally, I think people avoid talking about politics.” One person contended, “With the right structure to a forum, a group can solve almost any problem.” Most interesting, students observed the ways in which communication was affected by the communication structures that leaders facilitated. In sum, student comments suggested that their experience with deliberative discourse at the forums generated insight and awareness around many current problematic practices in American culture’s typical form of political discussion.

Student Perceptions of Deliberative Forums and their Difference from other Political Discussions

The third question asked on the questionnaire was, “How was this deliberative forum different from other political discussions?” In our analysis of this question, we found three main themes: (1) Students’ appreciation of two-way interaction in political forums; (2) their observation of a more positive environment than they had previously experienced in other democratic activities; and (3) their perception of a more inclusive space in the forums compared to other experiences they had had.

Students commented that the deliberative forum placed greater emphasis on two-way communication than other forms of political discussion. Students frequently described the forum as positive because of the “interaction” it afforded. They liked the back-and-forth communication that prioritized “both listening and speaking.” As one student commented, “I spoke with other people ... I was not just spoken to.” Another stated, “Instead of sitting through a presentation, our group actually shared our own opinions.” The focus on equality seemed to be an important value for students. As one participant noted, “I felt like I was given an equal chance to speak.” Such comments point to the need for these types of egalitarian communication experiences for students.

Many students remarked on the different and more positive “culture” created in the forums. Participants consistently used positive words, such as “calm,” “respectful,” “open,” “understanding,” and “nonjudgmental,” to describe the atmosphere of the deliberative forum. As one person commented, “There was no judgment, no condescending tones, we were able to agree to disagree without negative implications.” As another reflected, “I wasn’t called a gun nut once. It was very nice seeing everyone civil.” On the other hand, some students shared their surprise that people didn’t “argue over one another” or “insult one another,” or that the discussion didn’t get “too heated.” Indeed, student comments suggest strongly that their experience of attending the forums was markedly different—and more positive—than their prior experiences with other political activities.

Students commented on the inclusivity of the forum as it pertained to people’s views, the types of evidence that were privileged, and the people who were invited to the conversation. Specifically, students noticed the design of the forum and its attention to the inclusivity of people’s views through deliberative structures such as “ground rules” and “facilitators.” As one student wrote, the forum “had rules that pushed everyone to participate.” Another person commented, “It allowed for all viewpoints to be considered, and not one view point was weighed more heavily than another.” Another participant spoke of the structure of the deliberation and how it “provided a safe environment to voice our opinions and feelings without resorting to anger and taking sides.” Participants also commented on attempts by the forum organizers to focus on a “fair” presentation of the issues. As one student noted, “It felt evenly grounded and fair, rather than one-sided.” Another student commented, “The presentation of ‘different options’ made this different.”

Students commented on the inclusion and privileging of multiple types of evidence, including the evidence of their own voices. As one participant noted, the organizers of the forum “allowed personal opinions and feelings rather than just facts.” Also, one student noted the use of the public voice instead of the expert voice, commenting, “We speak on terms we know and if we don’t understand something, someone can explain it to us with details.” Finally, students noticed that the composition of forum participants differed markedly different from that of other types of political discourse they had experienced. As one student commented, “I enjoyed that I had the opportunity to speak with fellow classmates as well as staff and faculty in a way that I don’t typically get the opportunity to do.” Another participant noticed, “It was exciting to see a bunch of people from other schools, our school, and our community participate in this deliberative forum.” Another noted, “I was surprised to see elected officials interested in participating and talking with students. It was refreshing.” The process was not invisible to students; they spoke often about the differences in the design of the deliberative forum in contrast with other political forums they had experienced.

Deliberation’s Influence on Perceptions of Democratic Activities

The fourth open-ended survey question we asked was, “Before you came to the forum today, what types of activities would you have thought about as democratic activities? Are you thinking differently now?” In the questionnaires, 67% of the participants, after just one deliberative forum, indicated that they were thinking about democratic activities differently. Those who indicated they were not thinking about such activities differently already considered participation in a forum as a democratic activity. Specifically, students spoke to three general themes: (1) Students wrote about how they had widened their more traditional understanding of politics (e.g., debates, protests, writing their representative) to include democratic forums in small groups—something they rarely thought about prior; (2) students remarked that their understanding of who participates had expanded from just leaders and experts to everyday people, including their own (i.e., students’) democratic participation; and (3) they commented on the surprising joy they felt participating in a deliberative forum.

Many students noted that as a result of their participation, they understood deliberative forums as democratic activities in ways they had not previously. For the most part, participants noted that their prior view of “democratic activities” consisted of voting, though a few participants also mentioned debate, speaking out,

and protests. However, after participating in the forum, participants commented that their understanding of democratic activities had broadened to include participation in forums. One student noted, “I now understand democratic activities to include careful consideration of the deliberation process. Deliberation is both creative and informative.” Another wrote, “I now consider productive conversation an important democratic activity.” More specifically, forum participants realized that the decision making that occurred within the forum was democratic. As one person noted, “Every day we are involved in democratic activities like choosing what to eat, what music to listen to or which one is better.” Indeed, such comments suggest a heightened understanding—after just one forum—of what acting in a democracy includes.

Another closely related major theme for participants was their realization that “democratic activities” include engaging the views of everyday people in decision making. For instance, one student noted, “I am thinking of democratic activities differently now because at this forum everyone was able to voice their opinion about the issues at hand.” Another participant noted, “I used to think democracy was centered on support of the Democratic Party. Now I see that it is more about making our voices heard as citizens.”

Further, students noted their realization that politics was not the exclusive domain of government, leaders, or experts. Before participating in the deliberation, many students understood democratic activity as “something the government does.” One participant stated, “To me democratic activities were speaking at [the] court house with individuals who were experts on different ideas with different credentials. Now coming from this forum I realized anyone can partake in the forum.” Indeed, an analysis of the comments suggests that the forums increased students’ realization that politics is something that all people can participate in—not just leaders.

Not only did students broaden their understanding of democratic activities, but they specifically talked about how they thought about their own role in democracy. For example, one student commented, “I am thinking about democratic activities differently after tonight’s forum, and I would like to study more about ways I can improve and be a part of the society that I live in.” Another wrote, “I’d like to involve myself in more events like this.” Another stated, “I would have thought that more confident strong-minded people would take over, but we all had an equal voice.” One student explained that he realized he “should be more active

and informed.” Indeed, such comments reflect that the students had become more deeply aware of the important part they play in democracy.

A final major theme in the student comments centered on a newfound understanding of democratic activities and an awareness that being engaged is enjoyable. One student commented, “I thought of democratic activities as really boring, but this experience was surprisingly engaging.” Another observed, “The enthusiasm of the group validates the notion that everyone is looking for empowerment.” Another participant commented, “Before I thought of democratic activities as just listening. I wasn’t expecting to get to voice my own experience . . . I really loved the forum.” Thus, in using words like “engaging,” “enthusiasm, and “love” to describe the deliberative forum, students also revealed that they enjoyed the forums and wanted to participate more. Scholars might look to this finding as an important component for building public will. It seems that deliberative forums are tapping into some type of “joy” that many political processes seem to be currently missing.

Conclusion

The deliberative dialogue forums influenced and changed the ways in which students had previously experienced or talked about politics. Many students spoke of the influence their participation in the forum had, namely in relation to their increased recognition of the importance of deliberative forums to political processes, sharing different perspectives, and their own political participation. Students also spoke of the influence of the forums on their understanding of the importance of how they talk to each other as well as their newfound hope that better discussion skills can help improve communities. They noted the importance of everyday perspectives, a need for individuals to reexamine their discussion habits and to think about more productive habits, and the need to create spaces, like forums, in communities that make way for more productive two-way interactions. Additionally, many student participants discussed the ways in which their forum involvement differed from any other democratic activity they had experienced, including students’ appreciation of two-way interaction in the deliberative forums, and their observation of a more positive, more inclusive environment. Finally, students discussed how their participation in the forum influenced their understanding of “democratic activity,” including their recognition that forums are a type of democratic activity, and that democracy includes everyday people, not just leaders and experts. The students shared their surprise at actually enjoying

democratic participation. Indeed, the ways in which the democratic deliberative forums changed many of the participating students' thinking suggest that student political efficacy is built through deliberative forms of participation and dialogue.

While the goal of our analysis was to better understand what impacts, if any, a two-hour deliberative forum could have on students, we also note some limitations. Students and faculty at colleges and universities often encounter many constraints—such as students working long hours outside of class to earn money, limits on class time, lack of institutionalized support for programs, and difficulties on faculty time—which make it difficult to engage hundreds of students in long-term deliberative projects. As such, we were interested to learn if deliberation for purposes of education might have some kind of influence on how students talk about and thus understand politics. In a two-hour forum, it is unrealistic to think that students will gain enough meaningful experience to connect deliberation to action. Though the students did come up with action items at the end of all the forums, most of the action ideas were not about joining together for the purposes of public work. Furthermore, the development of a vocabulary around the recognition of competing tensions may be hard for students to recognize or talk about after participating for two hours. Matthews (2009) explained that while typical discourse could certainly use some civility, “deliberation is key because it takes onto account the things that are held valuable, which gives rise to moral disagreements” (p. 12). While it may be that our questions could have focused more specifically on this idea, it does seem that students were not able to talk about this aspect of deliberation in this way. As such, more research is needed on understanding how higher education institutions might get students to understand these types of insights about deliberation on a larger scale.

Additionally, the students who organized and moderated these forums had more of a sustained relationship with the deliberative forums. More research is needed to understand how their year-long work affected the way they talked about and experienced politics, and if they did so in a way that was different from the students who were exposed to the forum environment for only two hours. While these student moderators and leaders were not as directly exposed to the public-action aspect of deliberation, they did have more sustained experience with struggling with competing tensions—a key aspect of deliberation and of understanding wicked problems. As such, academic institutions need to think more purposefully about how they might embed these types of opportunities for students

within their civic curricula across the span of students' education, allowing students to develop the skills needed to construct a different type of politics for addressing wicked problems in an effective and productive manner.

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Appendix A

Four Open-Ended Survey Questions

- Did the forum influence how you see the role of everyday people in politics? If so, how? If not, how do you see the role of everyday people in politics?
- Did this forum influence your understanding in any way about how people can talk to each other? If not, what is your experience with how people generally talk with each other about politics?
- How was this deliberative forum different from other political discussions?
- Before you came to the forum today, what types of activities would you have thought about as democratic activities? Are you thinking differently now?

Appendix B

Fourteen Emergent Themes

1. Students noted the importance of perspective sharing.
2. Students described the role of forums in providing valuable components to the political system.
3. Students expressed the idea that the forums exposed them to an aspect of politics they had not experienced previously.
4. Students indicated that the forums influenced their realization of the importance of an empowered citizenry.
5. Student noted that the attendance at forums provide them hope for a better way of discussing politics.
6. The forums influenced students' understanding of the importance of everyday perspectives.
7. Students commented on the importance of people's "habit of talk."
8. Students made observations about the way forums were structured and the positive influence it had on the type of discourse produced.
9. Students noted their appreciation of two-way interaction in the forums.
10. Students noted their observation of a more positive environment than they had previously experienced in other democratic activities.
11. Students wrote about the benefits created by a more inclusive space than other political spaces they had experienced.

12. Students commented on how they widened their more traditional understanding of politics (e.g., debates, protests, writing their representative) to include democratic forums in small groups, something would not have considered prior to the forum.
13. Students remarked that their understanding of who participates expanded from just leaders and experts to the importance of everyday people's participation, including their own democratic participation.
14. Students wrote about the surprising joy they felt in deliberative forum participation.

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