

Topic: Center for Public Deliberation

Different kind of politics benefits community

This past summer, I established the Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University (www.cpd.colostate.edu). Its purpose is to enhance local democracy through improved public discussion and community problem solving. The CPD is nonpartisan.

Working from a communication studies perspective, CPD faculty and students focus on the deliberative process, not necessarily its product. Deliberation is an approach to politics in which citizens, not just experts or politicians, are deeply involved in public decision-making.

Working with facilitators who utilize a variety of deliberative techniques, diverse groups of citizens come together and consider relevant information from multiple points of view, listen to one another in order to uncover points of common ground and understand what people truly value, consider the underlying tensions and tough choices inherent to most public issues and ultimately seek to come to some conclusion for action in the form of a reasoned public judgment.

Deliberation requires safe, respectful places for citizens to come together, good and fair information to help structure the conversation and skilled facilitators to guide the process. The CPD is dedicated to providing these three key ingredients to Northern Colorado.

The benefits of deliberation can be valuable. Problems become community issues, rather than governmental ones. After being exposed to a broad variety of views and a rigorous process, public decisions are often better.



Martin Carcasson
Soapbox

Those who disagree with the decision often still respect its legitimacy if they were involved in the process and felt they were heard. Participants also earn the intrinsic rewards of practicing and honing their democratic skills, and are more likely to be involved again in the future.

The concept is not new. The CPD is a local representative of a growing "Deliberative Democracy Movement," anchored by organizations such as the National Issues Forum (www.nifi.org) and the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation (www.ncdd.org).

I started the CPD because, like many of you, I am frustrated with the cynicism, polarization and negativity tied to our political system and how people subsequently talk about political issues. The gap between what I teach in my classes about public debate and discussion and what my students experience, especially during campaigns, is far too wide.

Pundits from both sides of the political spectrum too often talk past each other, preach to their own choirs, misrepresent their opponents, oversimplify complicated issues and focus on politically rewarding issues rather than the publicly important ones. Such communication only fuels apathy and polarization.

What the CPD hopes to do, starting in our community, is help

change the environment and expectations so that such tactics are not as effective or frequent. The CPD will focus on local and state issues — where the public can more easily connect with lawmakers — but will also host conversations about national and international topics.

Thus far, reaction from Northern Colorado political leaders and community organizations has been encouraging, but it won't be easy. Deliberation, after all, is hard work. Attracting a broad diversity of opinions to public meetings is especially difficult. The time commitment is significant. Deliberation tends to go against the grain of human nature and the reward structure of our political system. But, like many other difficult but healthy tasks, deliberation can become a habit for a community. The more often it is relied upon, the easier and more natural it can become.

In the end, nurturing this community habit is our goal. Although we may never fully become a "deliberative democracy," I believe the closer we get the better, and the farther along we will progress toward becoming a "more perfect union."

Martin Carcasson is an assistant professor in the Speech Communication Department at Colorado State University and the director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation. The CPD is hosting a Kickoff Event and Community Issues Forum from 5:30 to 7:30 p.m. Wednesday at the Lincoln Center Columbine Room. Contact Carcasson at cpd@colostate.edu for information.