Colorado State University: Center for Public Deliberation

APLU INNOVATION AND ECONOMIC PROSPERITY UNIVERSITIES AWARDS PROGRAM

IEP CATEGORY • TALENT

Colorado State University: Center for Public Deliberation
ABOUT THE CENTER FOR PUBLIC DELIBERATION

Since 2006, the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) has dedicated its efforts to enhancing local democracy through improved public communication and community problem-solving. The CPD is an ongoing experiment in what happens when a local organization focuses all its energy, time, and expertise on elevating the conversation rather than winning the argument.

What is Deliberation?

Public deliberation is an approach to public problem-solving in which citizens, not just experts or politicians, are deeply involved in public decision making. Working with trained facilitators who utilize a variety of deliberative techniques, citizens:

• Come together and consider relevant facts and values from multiple points of view;
• Listen to one another to think critically about various options;
• Consider the underlying tensions and tough choices inherent to most public issues;
• Refine and adapt their opinions and interests; and ultimately,
• Come to some conclusion for action in the form of a reasoned public judgment.

MISSION OF THE CPD

Despite the dominance of adversarial methods of communication and the corresponding apathy, polarization, and cynicism that seems to define contemporary political culture, the CPD operates with the belief that, with help, individuals and communities can build stronger habits for the high-quality communication and engagement that democracy requires.

The Center is dedicated to three primary goals – to enhance the local civic culture, expand collaborative decision-making, and improve civic education at all levels (K-12, higher education, and citizen education).

Working as an affiliate of the National Issues Forum Network, part of the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation and the University Network for Collaborative Governance, the CPD designs and hosts an average of 20 events annually in the local community, including public
forums on national and local issues and various workshops tied to public participation, collaborative governance, and civic engagement.

**UNIQUE STUDENT-DRIVEN MODEL**

Deliberation requires safe places for citizens to come together, good and fair information to help structure the conversation, and many skilled facilitators to guide the process. The CPD was the first organization of its kind in the nation to rely on trained undergraduate students as non-partisan facilitators of public discussions on critical local issues. This model has since been replicated at institutions across the country, including IEP Designees University of Houston and Washington State University.

Undergraduate students in the CPD student-associate program take a three-hour facilitation class their first semester and then help run CPD events in the community. In their second semester, they take practicum hours and continue to assist with projects.

The CSU Center for Public Deliberation operates under the direction of Martin Carcasson, a Professor in the Department of Communications Studies.

The CPD was initially developed to provide opportunities for students to apply deliberative concepts from Carcasson’s Public Argumentation class to community issues. From the very beginning, however, the community seemed to have more ambitious plans for the CPD. Since its second year, all of the Center’s projects have originated from the community, each one begetting additional requests for process and facilitation support on difficult issues. It quickly became a critical impartial resource in Northern Colorado.

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**DELIBERATION IN ACTION**

**Case Study: Growing Older in Fort Collins**

In 2011, Larimer County recognized that a “Silver Tsunami” was about to hit the region with the number of residents over the age of 65 expected to more than double in the coming years. Community members decided to turn the “Silver Tsunami” into a “Golden Opportunity.”

Conversations among key stakeholders over the next five years produced the Larimer County Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities, which created four volunteer-led action groups. They worked on the following initiatives: public transportation training, a walkability study, alternative housing options, and candidate forums on senior issues.

Our early forums earned an award from the Colorado Association of Senior Centers. In 2013 the National Association for Area Agencies on Aging (N4A) awarded the city-community partnership a grant to develop an age-friendly plan.

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*Figure 2: Larimer County Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities*
providing capacity for deliberative discussions and collaborative problem solving.

Each year, the CPD runs projects for the city government, citizen boards and commissions, nearby school districts, and a wide variety of community organizations such as the United Way, community foundations, and the public library.

COMMUNITY AND ECONOMIC IMPACT

Since its inception, over 300 students have participated in the CPD student-associate program, hosting nearly 300 events that have attracted over 20,000 attendees and providing services to the community valued near $1.5 million.

Carcasson is committed to extending the philosophy and practice of the CPD to institutions and communities nationwide. He is a nationally-regarded expert and speaker in the field of public deliberation, serving on the faculty of the Kettering Foundation’s Centers for Public Life program, as a Senior Public Engagement Fellow with Public Agenda, and sits on the board of directors for the National Coalition for Dialogue and Deliberation.

The CPD relies heavily on the land grant mission of Colorado State University, as well as the university’s commitment to democracy and quality information. A rare “win-win-win-win” can be
realized when colleges or universities build and support strong deliberative engagement programs focused on their local communities:

- The students win by building a skill set very much in demand by employers – the ability to get people to connect and collaborate.

- The institution wins by strengthening its community ties in ways that make real, direct impacts without relying on the top-down expert model or taking sides on controversial issues. Additionally, the benefits of the university are highlighted through the caliber of its student talent. Community members are constantly amazed at the fact that students are not only attending a public meeting but helping run one.

- As a tenured faculty member with teaching, research, and service responsibilities, Carcasson wins by bringing all three aspects of his job requirement together, each sharpening and improving the other. Like most fields, the study of communications suffers from a disconnect between theory and practice, and the work of local centers and institutes focused on deliberative practice offer a strong response to those gaps.

- And the final “win” is perhaps the most important: the community builds greater capacity for deliberative engagement.

CSU President Tony Frank echoes these benefits in a video recorded for the Center’s 10-year anniversary: “The CPD model stands in sharp contrast to the metaphor of the ‘ivory tower,’ with its compartmentalized disciplines and students who sit in chairs, just waiting to be lectured to.”

Extensive student evaluations have shown that participating students enter the program disconnected or discouraged about politics but leave with a newfound faith in democracy when supported by good process. Carcasson argues that the mindsets and skill sets for deliberative inquiry and engagement taught at the CPD are critical to all students (K-12 and college) and a useful, overarching ideal for education, representing key democratic skills for all citizens, particularly our civic and business leaders.
ABOUT APLU

The Association of Public and Land-grant Universities (APLU) is North America’s oldest higher education association. APLU is a research, policy, and advocacy organization dedicated to strengthening and advancing the work of public universities in the U.S., Canada, and Mexico. The association’s membership consists of public research universities, land-grant institutions, state university systems, and affiliated organizations.

APLU’s mission is to: expand access and improve student success to deliver the innovative workforce of tomorrow; advance and promote research and discovery to improve society, foster economic growth, and address global challenges; and build healthy, prosperous, equitable, and vibrant communities locally and globally.

Based in Washington, DC, the association’s work is furthered by an active and effective advocacy arm that works with Congress and the administration as well as the media to advance federal policies that strengthen public universities and benefit the students they serve.

ABOUT THE IEP UNIVERSITIES PROGRAM

APLU and its Commission on Economic and Community Engagement (CECE) established the Innovation and Economic Prosperity (IEP) Universities Program to help higher education institutions codify, elevate, and advance their campus enterprise supporting economic and community development.

The IEP designation program recognizes institutions that have demonstrated a meaningful, ongoing and substantial commitment to economic and community development, growth, and economic opportunity.

The IEP awards program recognize exemplary and innovative projects in university-based economic and community engagement:

- **Talent** and workforce development
- **Innovation**, entrepreneurship, and tech-based economic development
- **Place** development through public service, outreach, and community engagement

Learn more at: www.APLU.org/IEP