

Art & Culture

Campus Conversation to Discuss PA Ban on Same-Sex Marriage

Nov 10, 2007 7:13 pm | by Allison Piper

Pennsylvania legislators are considering a "Marriage Protection" amendment to the state constitution. As proposed, this amendment would not only define marriage as one man, one woman but would also prohibit same-sex pairings similar to marriage (e.g. civil unions). This is a highly-charged issue and chances are you have an opinion on the matter. But how many of you, before voicing that opinion, sat down to read detailed background information, contemplated well-thought-out arguments on both sides, and discussed the issue with your peers (and not just those who share your opinion)? This Wednesday, November 14th from 5 to 8:30 PM in Doherty 2315, a randomly selected group of Carnegie Mellon students, staff, faculty, and alums will do just that.

The event is part of a series of Campus Conversations, which in the past have covered topics such as public art policy and a student bill of rights. This initiative's goal is to discover what the community's opinion is on a given topic, in this case, Marriage in America, through a method called Deliberative Polling. Robert Cavalier, co-director of the Southwestern PA Program for Deliberative Democracy, calls the method "a model for improving democratic discourse." It takes an uneducated population, which in this case is the student body of Carnegie Mellon, and informs community representatives to discover the population's educated opinion. This random sample of citizens forms their opinion through intensive discussion, articulate debate, interaction with an expert resource panel, and lots of background information. The resulting poll is favored above traditional polling of an uninformed public or vocal special interest groups.

During Wednesday's Campus Conversation on Marriage the random sample, as well as a convenience sample, which welcomes any interested persons, will all meet together. Following the initial meeting, they will break into small discussion groups to deliberate the topics presented previously in a background packet. The results of the final poll, which concludes the Campus Conversation, will be passed on to the media as well as the Pennsylvania state Legislature.

Four other Pennsylvania universities will be taught the deliberative polling process by Carnegie Mellon and will hold their own conversations in the spring, and in September 2008 the first deliberative polling process with citizens (drawn from registered voters) will take place. The legislature will use these poll results to get a better idea of where the university communities and the voting body as a whole stands on the issue of a constitutional marriage protection amendment.

The deliberative polling groups will examine three courses of action and weigh their pros and cons. The first is the proposed Pennsylvania "Marriage Protection" amendment. The other two are the alternatives to this plan: one is the Civil Union, as created by Vermont, and the other is the legal recognition of same-sex marriage, as in Massachusetts. Debates for each plan range in focus from equal rights and benefits to the effect on children to the power of tradition. Carnegie Mellon is the first university to take part in this type of Deliberative Polling process and this is the first time such an eminent social topic will be discussed. In a fast-paced culture where Cavalier says there really isn't a lot to "cultivate citizenship," this direct form of democracy has been hailed by at least one presidential candidate as a method with "the potential to reinvigorate American democracy". Deliberative polling gets a group of people excited about being citizens and contributing to the common good, which is remarkable in the face of apathy seen at CMU and elsewhere. The chance to sit and discuss with a wide range of people and appreciate the opposing view transforms a typically heated topic into "a problem to work on rather than an issue to debate." Even if the group doesn't come to a consensus, really listening to opposing arguments and the viewpoints of real people, not just faceless special interest groups, lets the people involved make rational decisions based on facts and reason instead of blind emotion and demonizing of the opposite side. Now if only the entire population could be so informed...

If you're interested in participating or would just like more information, you can contact Coro Intern in Local Democracy Ashley Birt (abirt@andrew.cmu.edu). More information on Deliberative Polling can be found [here](#). Results and further coverage of the Campus Conversation on Marriage in America will be published in the Pulse following the event.