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Polling for an Educated Citizenry

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Two years ago, when a student at Carnegie Mellon University became concerned about perceived grading bias, he proposed an amendment to the university's student-rights policy. Drawn from David Horowitz's "academic bill of rights," the proposal included assertion of a student's right to have his or her "work evaluated based on the stated course and program criteria and appropriate knowledge of the subjects and disciplines they study, as outlined by the relevant faculty."

In the wake of allegations by Horowitz about liberal bias in college classrooms and hearings by the Pennsylvania legislature, the issue raised substantial concern and confusion. Indeed, some on the campus debated whether the proposal was a new right for students or simply a statement that made explicit what was already contained in the university's policy.

At about the same time, a new initiative, Campus Conversations, had formed at Carnegie Mellon to use deliberative polls — a process of discussion and informed decision making — to gauge student opinion on life, learning, and values. The first polls dealt with diversity and moral values in private and public life. The process of the deliberative poll, developed and trademarked by James Fishkin, at Stanford University's Center for Deliberative Democracy, differs from that of traditional public-opinion polls. While a traditional poll solicits intuitive responses from people who may not be well informed on the topic, a deliberative poll indicates what people think about an issue if they have had time to consider and discuss it among a group of peers and to ask questions of a panel of experts.

To determine how people on the campus really felt about the student-rights policy and the proposed change, the university held a deliberative poll last April to discuss the issue. In preparation, a core group of faculty and staff members met weekly to develop the topics and materials used for the background documents. The university libraries contributed staff time and resources, and the Student Senate agreed to advertise the event and take seriously the outcomes of the deliberations. Finally, the Coro Center for Civic Leadership, in Pittsburgh, co-sponsored the event, seeing the conversations as a way to engage younger voters in community-minded activities.

In addition to a randomly selected sample of students and faculty members, we sought interested participants in several ways. Heads of campus organizations supplied names of members who might be interested in participating, and posters, fliers, and e-mail messages advertised the event and raised awareness of Campus Conversations in general.

Both students and faculty members participated in the poll, and their discussions were moderated and documented. Many of the participants shifted their beliefs after learning more about the issue. In the end, participants voiced overwhelming opposition to Horowitz's bill of rights and opted, by a large majority, to retain the current student-rights policy. The results were published in the student newspaper and used by the Student Senate to settle the matter.

Regardless of the particular outcome of this event, the use of deliberative polling at the campus level has important consequences for our university — and, perhaps, for the country as a whole. Liberal democracies of the kind we see forming around the world are only the beginning of what the political scientist Benjamin Barber calls strong democracies, or those based on participatory politics. While "thin" democracies provide the constitutional essentials of universal suffrage and freedom of assembly and of the press, those rights provide no guarantees that citizens will see themselves as any more than isolated individuals who periodically vote, if they choose to do so. Recent work in citizenship theory has made clear, as the political philosopher Will Kymlicka writes, that "the health and stability of a modern democracy depend, not only on the justice of its basic

institutions, but also on the qualities and attitudes of its citizens."

Those qualities and attitudes are often highlighted by proponents of "deliberative democracy," who emphasize the responsibility of the citizen in becoming a truly informed and engaged individual — a person willing to listen to all sides of an issue and to let the force of the better argument, in all its richness, become a guide to an informed opinion.

Deliberative polling fulfills those requirements on our campus by soliciting the opinions of students and faculty members, who are diverse in gender, ethnicity, degree program, and political affiliation. It provides that group, and the campus as a whole, with comprehensive, well-designed information on all sides of a topic, and it offers a forum that is guided by trained moderators and facilitators.

Deliberative polls reflect the ideals and interdisciplinary nature of the university's curriculum in their very design and delivery. They serve to educate our students in the virtues of a strong democracy and to encourage them to see themselves as citizens of a community. It has been a truly remarkable experience: Students and faculty members came together and conducted an engaging, respectful, and structured conversation with insight and thoughtfulness. More than 90 percent of the participants supported the process and evaluated the experience positively.

Other colleges have grappled with the issues surrounding academic freedom and the "academic bill of rights" as well. Last spring Princeton University held a campuswide referendum on a student "bill of rights," and, like much of the debate in our current political climate, it evolved into a battle waged by campus Democrats and Republicans. Messages and fliers were distributed throughout the campus, and constituencies rallied their forces. At the end of the day, a victory was claimed, and the bill of rights was passed with 51.8 percent of the vote. *The Daily Princetonian* reported the results and added that one of the first complaints might come from a student who felt that introductory economics courses failed to include Marxism in the curriculum. Hard feelings linger, and for many the legitimacy of the result remains in doubt. This is not to say that one result would have been better than the other, for campuses may or may not have policies that address the issues raised by Horowitz and others. We do claim, however, that the approaches of the two universities to this issue differed — and that moderated, structured conversations have advantages over mere tallying of votes.

Speaking of the process, then, and not of the outcome, we see at least two models of democracy at work here. One sees the public sphere as a war of words and advertisements aimed at garnering the most votes; the other sees the public sphere as a place where informed discussions can help answer the political question, "What ought we to do?"

As more and more complex and controversial issues — cuts in Medicaid benefits, gay-marriage prohibitions — return to state legislatures and become measured to a large degree by public opinion, it behooves us to do whatever we can to improve the quality of that opinion and to legitimize decisions that it influences. Deliberative polling and other forms of structured, democratic dialogue have the potential to make those improvements to our social decision making. And the use of Campus Conversations is one way to start.

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