**The Civic Summit: Deliberative Dialogue as Civic Engagement[[1]](#footnote-1)**

**Kara Lindaman**

Department of Political Science

Winona State University

P.O. Box 5838

175 W. Mark St.

Winona, MN 55987

[klindaman@winona.edu](mailto:klindaman@winona.edu)

In April 2013, Winona State University’s American Democracy Project hosted the Civic Summit, a celebration in civic engagement in honor of retiring university president, Judith Ramaley. With the release of American Association of Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) *A Crucible Moment: College Learning and Democracy’s Future* (2012), Winona State University intentionally engaged in practices to embed civic responsibility and civic skills within the culture of the university and surrounding community. Winona State University’s American Democracy Project participated in similar deliberative and participatory democracy-building activities previously with the Deliberative Polling Project in 2009 on Alcohol Abuse in the Winona community. Learning from this deliberative exercise, WSU launched the Civic Summit with a new process or procedure to engage the community in public issues. The issue selected in 2013 was higher education. Although the processes and rules governing the deliberation were drastically different, there are many learning outcomes and lessons learned in comparing these two deliberative events, which ultimately both seek the goal to increase civic capacity and empower students and the local communities.

Deliberative Polling Project 2009

The procedure of deliberative polling does appear to try to bridge the two methods of traditional social science polls and deliberative forums: a randomly selected sample of the population answers survey questions identifying the range of attitudes and demographics important to the polity; the sample participates in an extended meeting, having studied briefing materials on specific issues; moderators supervise small group discussions, which provide questions to be fielded by panelists, including relevant policymakers; and, finally, participants in the meetings are polled in a post-test which can measure changes in attitudes. Our deliberative polling experience at Winona State University employs Fishkin’s deliberative polling project® model (Fishkin and Luskin 1999) to foster civic engagement amongst the university and surrounding community.

Our deliberative poll studied the issue of alcohol abuse in the community of Winona, Minnesota. The issue was representative of the divide between the community and the university, which was exacerbated by a general perception that college students abuse alcohol and that students and the university should be held responsible. It is due to this (mis)perception that the administration of Winona State University selected alcohol abuse to be studied. With the death of a WSU student from alcohol poisoning in December 2007, the university was deemed the focal point for policy entrepreneurialism. In response to the prioritizing of alcohol abuse, the university formed a Campus Community Partnership Group with stakeholders comprised of university officials, staff and students from Winona State University, St. Mary’s University, Southeast Technical College, the local law enforcement, city government officials, and local tavern owners. This stakeholder group became the natural force behind the labor and resource intensive process of the deliberative polling project. As one of the projects supported by the AASC&U American Democracy Project, Winona State University was selected to implement a deliberative polling project in 2008-09 with the training and methodological support provided by the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University.[[2]](#footnote-2)

With three deliberative polling project student interns, the deliberative polling project process was followed as closely as possible. A random sample of the Winona community was drawn. This was unique from the other deliberative polling projects on 15 other campuses which concentrated solely on their university, or primarily student, populations. From our RDD sample in the first two weeks of March 2009, we collected 561 completes using a phone bank of 12 faculty offices (phones) and close to 80 student “volunteers.” The telephone survey consisted of 32 questions and concluded with an invitation to deliberation day.[[3]](#footnote-3)

Respondents from the telephone survey received verbal and written invitations and reminders for deliberation day held on April 25, 2009. The Briefing Document on alcohol abuse was mailed to each of the 561 completes.[[4]](#footnote-4) From the intention to invite only those participants who completed the telephone survey, the response rate for deliberation day decreased considerably.[[5]](#footnote-5) Forty-one percent of respondents said they wanted additional information, and were interested in attending deliberation day; and it was hoped that 100-150 citizens would attend. However, only 50 attended deliberation day, and nearly one-half of those were specially invited to observe or were volunteers to moderate small groups. At the end of the day, there were 28 completed post-surveys. The post-survey consisted of the same questions from the RDD telephone survey, measuring information or attitudinal change, and evaluation questions.[[6]](#footnote-6)

Our experience suggests that deliberative polls might serve to engage people in the democracy process, as Fishkin suggests in his criticism of town halls and other methods—but further attention and consideration must be paid to two important areas. One area is that of representation. The representativeness of the samples attending deliberation day has been a topic of much contention in the literature on deliberative polls. In our deliberative poll, we find a more basic question to emerge: Is the deliberative poll meant only to represent the positions of the larger community, or is it meant also to provide a participatory venue for civic engagement? It would be valuable were deliberative polls to do both, and Fishkin often suggests that they do—but the limitations of the deliberative polling model may neglect the promises for participation in favor of representation. In addition, and closely related to the first issue, is the question of education. The sample attending deliberation day is meant to gain factual information from briefing materials, panel presentations, and group discussions—to what extent does this experience educate individuals, and transform them into engaged citizens? Again, while the possibilities here are suggestive, the limitations of the model did not allow us to pursue this question. By considering the contribution, limitations, and the potential provided in our experience of deliberative polling, we offer some suggestions for future ideas of the American Democracy Project work at Winona State University to build sustainable civic capacity.

Lessons Learned from the Deliberative Polling Project

The issues of representation and education are closely connected, and both pose problems but also possibilities for the future of deliberative polls. In our deliberative polling project, representation was key. In the drawing of our random sample, special attention was given to ensure its representativeness. Although this does not answer Merkle’s (1996) criticism between respondents and participants, it provided the local community (the universities and the larger stakeholders) baseline data to approach the issue of alcohol abuse. It should be noted these data have been used by local stakeholders to identify the concerns of local citizens regarding the issue of alcohol abuse, which are discussed in the ongoing Campus Community Partnership Group on alcohol abuse.

Since the participants in deliberation day are drawn only from the RDD completed survey respondents, theoretically the sample at deliberation day is designed to be representative, and we made every effort to follow this model. However, this does not address the larger theoretical arguments of engaged citizenship and participation. The sample at deliberation day was much too small to have any significance, however it does seem representative descriptively at best.

Low response rates might reflect a difficulty experienced by other methods; as Fishkin says, “The same can be said for all survey research” (Fishkin and Luskin 1999, 14). The debate over the representativeness of deliberative polls is important. Fishkin says, “A deliberative poll is not meant to describe or predict public opinion. Rather it prescribes. It has a recommending force: these are the conclusions people would come to, were they better informed on the issues and had the opportunity and motivation to examine those issues seriously. It allows a microcosm of the community to make recommendations to us all after it has had the chance to think through the issues” (Merkle 1996, 589). But, this is the point to consider the emphasis on representation, and whether such an emphasis neglects the equally important issue of participation—particularly insofar as deliberative polls might be considered venues for citizen engagement.

Another issue for deliberative polls is that of education. In terms of education, the model facilitates the process of participants in deliberative polls becoming more (and better) informed on political issues, such that they then can speak for the rest of the polity.

Lack of information is a real concern. Fishkin objects to traditional polls that individuals fail to give informed opinions (Fishkin, Luskin and Jowell 2002, 456); that respondents have not thought about the issues; that “roughly half the sample ... generally admits to having no idea where the Republican and Democratic parties stand or places them incorrectly” (457). To correct for this problem of citizen competence, deliberative polls give participants information and then observe the differences that the information makes (461).

Our pre- and post- surveys test the effects of deliberation, defined as the deliberative polling project, on information and attitudinal change. Since the project focused solely on alcohol abuse in the local community, it did little to set the agenda or prioritize community efforts on a different issue or problem. However on the issue of alcohol abuse, the results of the RDD telephone survey show that respondents do not answer questions correctly on alcohol abuse in their communities. Once they receive the briefing document, participate in small group discussions, and ask questions of panelists, they answer the post-survey more correctly. In fact in all eight information questions, where there is a correct and incorrect answer, the percentage of those answering correctly increased after deliberation.

Initially, these results support the deliberative polling project® model as an intervention, however there are significant limitations to any conclusions regarding its sustained effects. It should be noted there is no independent significance found in the briefing document, or the small groups, or the larger plenary sessions; respondents who answered the post-survey knew the correct answers to the information questions (questions 2-8). Another limitation noted should be that not only are there concerns regarding the representativeness of the post-sample due to its small size but also whether or not the ability to answer questions on alcohol abuse more correctly after deliberation is indicative of the effectiveness of deliberation in the larger citizenry. There are likely inherent biases in the sample which participated in deliberation day—higher percentage of college students and younger ages—which likely may affect how they learn and process new (and correct) information in groups.

Our pre- and post-surveys also tested this premise in attitudinal change, whether or not there would be a change in the strength of opinions on strength of preference questions after deliberation day. Again on the surface, the participants in deliberation day tend to have stronger preferences.

The Campus Community Partnership Group has been able to use changes in preferences or strength of attitudes in order to investigate further the public perception that universities and students are responsible for alcohol abuse. Specifically from Figure 3 and Figure 6, post-deliberation day participants attributed responsibility and blame for alcohol abuse to local tavern and bar owners. This was a surprise, particularly insofar as the local tavern league president was a charismatic speaker on the deliberation day panel. Since the deliberative poll, the tavern league has become more active, and has succeeded in regulating and limiting all-you-care-to-drink specials, which was a policy option continually dismissed as impossible before the deliberative polling project.

These specific data and this policy change cannot be directly or empirically linked to the deliberative polling project. Does it support the movement that democratic theorists emphasize, i.e., the change in participants from “I” to “we?” We cannot yet make this claim, insofar as the surveys and data do not measure these larger theoretical connections. However, on a short-term scale of policy responsiveness to deliberation, there may be some evidence in this limited case. In the policy change regarding the regulation of all-you-care-to-drink specials, there was preference or attitudinal change in one, unipolar direction that indicated this was indeed a problem.[[7]](#footnote-7) This type of preference change was not evident in the other aggregated survey responses. In addition, our results do point to one area of the deliberative poll surveys and data that could be changed, in order to begin to provide the kind of data that Mansbridge (2003) and others seek.

Beyond the Deliberative Polling Project

Winona State University’s experience with a deliberative poll suggests that attention to the small size of participants on deliberation day is necessary, not only for the representativeness of the samples, but for the enhancement of participation as well. Measures must be taken to ensure inclusiveness and openness in small group discussions -- but these must be acknowledged to be problems, before we can begin to redress them. In addition, as important as information is to a citizen-body, education through citizen engagement is particularly important to democratic citizens. In our study, deliberation was not only important in providing policymakers with information on preferences for making future policy decisions; but deliberation also appears to have led some participants to change their understanding of their own self-interests in light of the discussions they had with others. Since deliberative polls do not measure such change well, any conclusions must be drawn tentatively. But this does suggest the need for such a measure. Only then can we begin to use deliberative polls to fill the lacunae in deliberative democracy theories, as Mansbridge suggests it might, i.e., to understand better the change, if any, occurring in individuals through deliberation from the I to the we.

One thing that may be concluded: participants were overwhelmingly positive in the evaluations of their experience. Our data support Michael Morrell’s findings on the consequences of deliberation on internal efficacy (2005). Although the deliberative polling project, as in Morrell’s case, does not have a measurable effect on internal efficacy, it may indeed have positive effects. Morrell finds the positive effects in citizens feeling more competent in the deliberative abilities. In our case, we measure the positive effects on deliberation on participant satisfaction. Participants in deliberative day were overwhelmingly positive in their evaluation of the experience. There was not one negative response (value 1). While it is difficult to measure their internal efficacy at the point of deliberation day, it is worthy to note participants viewed their experience as valuable and possibly willing to engage in deliberation again.

**Civic Summit, 2013**

From the lessons learned in 2009, Winona State University engaged in another process of deliberation through the National Issues Forum (NIF) Issue Guides. With a continued effort to build the university’s civic infrastructure, WSU received permission from the Kettering Foundation, the National Issues Foundation, and the American Commonwealth Partnership, to pilot the NIF Issue Book “Shaping our Future: How Should Higher Education Create the Society We Want?

In contrast to the Deliberative Polling Project, a survey was not distributed to measure the community’s opinions on higher education. In fact, the participants engaged in the deliberative forum were those likely assumed to already have an interest in the issue of higher education. Invitations to stakeholders or interested parties affecting higher education in the community of Winona were sent, with special attention given to public, private and nonprofit interests and groups. A formal invitation was mailed from the university president’s office, which had the additional motivation for members of the community to attend.

Over 100 individuals attended the deliberative forum at Winona State University on April 19, 2012. The diversity of the attendees was remarkable. There were high school students, college students, K-16 administrators, media editors and journalists, local law enforcement, business owners, and community members. Although they attended with preexisting attitudes and opinions on higher education, they fortunately represented a broad distribution on attitudes towards the role of higher education.

The participants were placed in small groups where students served as moderators, timers, and recorders. Each group was assigned by the diversity of backgrounds, and the structure was such that open and honest discussion was encouraged from everyone.[[8]](#footnote-8) Based on the structure provided by the NIF Issue Guide, the students presented the pros and cons of each of the three approaches to higher education.

There was not overwhelming support for any of the three approaches rather than just the value of the process itself, through experiencing deliberative dialogue and deliberative listening. The process noted is significant as one of the core commitments of higher education (AAC&U 2008) is “taking seriously the perspective of others.”

The significance of the deliberative process may be measured through narrative or the experiences of one group. One particular group that was indicative of the principles behind the NIF process included a local and well-respected business person from the Winona community.  Known for his conservative underpinnings and his large contributions (nearly a quarter of a million annually to local grants and scholarships for students and community members), this community member began with strong support of American exceptionalism and Approach One.  It was evident of the potential generation gap experienced within the group as the local businessman began the discussion by voicing his stereotype that young people were lazy, took out too many loans, and used the money to go on vacation.  As one student shared his personal experience in joining the army (ROTC) to fund his education and his education at MCTC and transferring to WSU, without adequate financial aid and the lack of family support to co-sign loans, group members visibly recall the local businessman becoming more favorable and open to thinking about other ideas and other perspectives, with genuine respect towards the student advocating for and needing more student and financial aid.

It became clear the businessman had changed his mind after he heard the student’s personal experience and was open to seeing the other side as the group’s discussion continued.  In the end for the local businessperson, Approach II received support to train responsibility through community service.  While there was not an overall consensus regarding one approach over the other in this group and many others, this particular experience in the Winona Civic Summit: NIF Forum demonstrated a student and a businessman taking each other seriously and respecting their differences on the shared purpose of higher education.

However, the lack of uniformity in preferences or support towards one approach over the others led to the “what’s next?” or “so what?” conclusion of the Civic Summit. While the process itself was deemed valuable, the recommendations and consensus from the event was limited. In other words, as in the Deliberative Polling Project, there wasn’t a shift in attitudes towards higher education, nor was there any measurable gain in information levels. Although seemingly limited, the Civic Summit does contribute to the learning outcomes and civic capacity building of the institution and community.

In the past, the town-gown environment of public comprehensive universities, who are members of the American Association of State Colleges and Universities (AASC&U) and subsequently American Democracy Project (ADP) institutions, have led to the disconnect or the inability to forge community partnerships for the public good. As universities descend from the ivory tower and move more towards the model of civic agency and capacity building for the public good and community good, they are often not categorized as the problem solvers or the experts but rather the co-conspirators or partners and members of the same community. Members of the university community are also members of the Winona community, who face similar problems and solutions. The building of civic agency and capacity lets communities face these very public problems together with solutions that indeed serve the public good.

Learning Outcomes: The Civic Education and Civic Capacity of Students

The comparisons between the Deliberative Polling Project and the Civic Summit provide a rich experiment for the teaching and learning of students. In an effort to teach students as citizens and to build the civic capacity of students and community, both projects contribute to this end. However, an effort should also be made for sustainability. The costs of the Deliberative Polling Project in the sample collection and survey administration were resource demanding. The costs for the Civic Summit were highly reduced. The likelihood of replicating another Deliberative Polling Project is unlikely, whereas another deliberative forum has already been scheduled in the local public high school. Furthermore, Winona State University’s American Democracy Project is collaborating with the Kettering Foundation in creating a Center for Public Life where deliberative dialogue in forums such as the Civic Summit becomes the norm.

Student participation and student learning are essential to the successful Deliberative Polling Project and deliberative dialogue as in the Civic Summit. In the former the skills of sampling and survey research are stressed to the budding social scientist. Indeed the power in framing the issue and in answering correctly are learned and practiced by students through the implementation of the survey and dialogue. Less of a focus on the data collection and methods is highlighted through the Civic Summit. In the Civic Summit not only will the students continue to serve as moderators and facilitators of deliberative forums such as the Civic Summit, but they also build the civic capacity to listen and discuss various approaches and position stances towards highly complex and very public issues. These are skills they will use in their professional, personal and community lives. Too often students are taught position taking and arguing rather than listening and compromise. In building civic skills through the Civic Summit, students build the capacity to engage in their communities rather than to study them from the social science perspective. The former leads to lifelong civic agency and civic engagement.

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1. Paper prepared for presentation at the Western Political Science Annual Meetings in Las Angeles, CA, March 27-30, 2013. [↑](#footnote-ref-1)
2. The author wants to thank the George Mehaffy at the American Democracy Project and James Fishkin at the Center for Deliberative Democracy at Stanford University for their research training and assistance. Also special thanks is extended to the administration of Winona State University and the American Democracy Project Faculty Association committee which also provided support. [↑](#footnote-ref-2)
3. See author for telephone survey script. [↑](#footnote-ref-3)
4. See author for sample Briefing Document. [↑](#footnote-ref-4)
5. The decline in participation or response rate from the RDD telephone survey to deliberation day is not unique to our deliberative polling project. At the American Democracy Project annual meeting in June 2009, the other colleges and universities presented their deliberative polling projects and had similarly low participation/response rates, even when more enticing incentives and rewards were offered to participants on deliberation day. Fishkin in his NIC had only a 36% response rate. [↑](#footnote-ref-5)
6. Please see the author for the schedule/agenda of deliberation day held on April 25, 2009. [↑](#footnote-ref-6)
7. While this may address some of Merkle’s concerns on this sole question, it does not suggest significance to the overall deliberative process yielding aggregated changes in opinion in general, but more specifically in recommending policy changes. [↑](#footnote-ref-7)
8. The training for the student moderators was received from Augsburg College’s Center for Democracy and Citizenship moderator training workshop. We are very grateful for the training received and led by Harry C. Boyte, Directory of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship. The individuals trained at Augsburg College served as moderator leaders in training additional students for the Civic Summit. [↑](#footnote-ref-8)