

BEYOND  
**POLITICS**  
AS USUAL

Paths for Engaging  
College Students  
in Politics

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FROM THE COLLEGE CONTEXT

**Reengaging Students in Our Democracy:  
Lessons from the CSU Center for  
Public Deliberation and Its Student  
Associate Program**

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THIS COLLECTION OF ESSAYS focuses on concerns about the disengagement of college students from conventional politics. My own career and the development of the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation (CPD), which I founded in 2006 and continue to direct, are very much intertwined with these broader concerns. Indeed, the CPD was essentially created to counteract them in important ways (both for me personally and for the students with whom I hoped to connect). This essay tells the story of the CPD and its Student Associate Program within the broader context of questions about political engagement and efficacy among college students. I make the argument that two key shifts are critical for reigniting not only student engagement in politics but in democracy in general. One shift is the change in focus from national to local politics, and the other is the shift from an adversarial approach to a more deliberative mind-set in addressing public problems. I believe—and have experienced how—these two shifts can reinvigorate both students and communities after taking the classes described below.

**Background**

As a graduate student, my research focused on presidential politics, particularly on how presidents engaged difficult issues that we have now come to identify as “wicked problems” (Carcasson 2016;

Rittel and Webber 1973). I was a rhetorical critic, a commentator. My early research had essentially one overriding theme: our national political system did a very poor job of addressing wicked problems. As a young scholar, I was faced with the realization that my work would be rather depressing and unfulfilling for the next 40 years if I remained on my initial trajectory. Indeed, I was feeling what many students feel these days. I wanted to make a difference in my world, but the systems set up to make a difference seemed corrupt, counterproductive, and far beyond my abilities to change.

My own political background and my research led me to the realization that neither side of the political spectrum had it right, and an adversarial two-party system was woefully ill-equipped to address the wicked problems we faced. The classical notions of judgment and wisdom that were a key part of my early rhetorical education were somehow completely absent from political talk and theory as it was practiced, and I began looking for ways to bring it back. I understood that, in order to function well, democracy required much different styles of communication than those we were getting and I quickly realized that my role as a rhetorical critic and an academic would not be sufficient to effect any significant changes.

The initial nudge that began the transformation of my work was connected to President Bill Clinton's Race Initiative at the beginning of his second term in 1997. I researched the Race Initiative—a “national conversation on race”—through my rhetorical critic lens (Carcasson and Rice 1999) and, in doing so, I was exposed to materials developed for the initiative that introduced communities to dialogue and deliberation processes. As I explored the materials, I quickly came to realize that the tools of facilitated dialogue and deliberation—which to that point I had not encountered in my field of communication studies—seemed much more relevant to elevating the quality of public discourse than debate, argumentation, or rhetorical analysis, the tools my teaching and research had focused on up to that point. I began to use National Issues Forums (NIF) material in my debate classroom, with significant success.

As I neared the end of my graduate work and began looking at different tenure-track job possibilities, the description of a teaching job in the Department of Communication Studies at Colorado State included mention of developing a program to engage students in local politics. When I arrived at CSU in 2003, a primary responsibility of my job was to take over the department's Rhetoric and Argumentation class, which had always been focused on debate. It was one of four required classes for all communication studies majors. I taught it, as such, the first year, but was frustrated again by the limits of the debate focus. Students would research an issue all semester long and put on two debates. Each student was required to argue the affirmative for one debate and the negative for the other. I couldn't help but realize, however, that by the end of the semester, the students were often frustrated by the very issue they had studied so diligently. Primarily, the class seemed to teach them that you can easily cherry-pick evidence to make any case, and the best debaters, rather than the best argument, tended to win. By the end of each semester, students seemed more discouraged with politics and engagement than ever. The prevailing attitude seemed to be, “Why bother?”

I adapted the curriculum, changing the name of the class to Public Argumentation, and bringing in more deliberative theory and tools of dialogue and deliberation. We kept some of the debate assignments, believing that good debate still certainly has its purpose (Bsumek 2009), but now the students are required to develop an NIF-style discussion guide on their issue by the end of the semester. Their perspective therefore shifts from advocacy to analysis, which requires them to research and frame the issue with the goal of helping others have a better conversation and make better decisions about the issue. Rather than cherry-picking and framing the issue strategically (and often manipulatively) to win an argument, their focus is on elevating the discourse. In particular, working from a framework that encompasses the wicked problems and deliberative inquiry (Carcasson and Sprain 2016), their job is to

uncover underlying values, identify key tensions, and creatively consider the role of multiple stakeholders—rather than focusing primarily on policy solutions as they had before. The changes brought a new energy to the class, and at the end of the semester, students truly seemed to feel they really knew something about the issue. They were not being asked to solve an unsolvable problem but rather to frame a wicked problem well. Their role seemed to me to be a useful metaphor for the role experts should play in a democratic society: not to solve our problems through research and debate but rather to lay out the tough choices the public has on an important issue.

The next step was creation of the Center for Public Deliberation, designed to serve as an impartial resource to the northern Colorado area, providing capacity for deliberative engagement as a public service. The CPD works closely with the school district, city and county governments, and local nonprofits to spark authentic conversations and collaborative action about local issues. The initial idea was to take the skills and tools from the Public Argumentation class—building analytical skills, researching issues, and developing discussion guides to help people understand the issue more deliberatively—and apply them to the local community. What was missing was the skill set needed to support actual live public deliberation, so I developed the CPD Student Associate Program. Undergraduates in the program are trained as facilitators and then help run CPD events in the community. Students take a three-hour facilitation class their first semester and return for at least a second semester, when they take practicum hours and continue to assist with projects.

The CPD quickly expanded beyond my expectations, primarily because we seemed to fill a void in the community. A few cold calls to key local institutions, like the school district and the League of Women Voters, led to significant projects in the community. Each project tended to lead to another, as the community recognized the value of deliberative conversations. In the fall of 2016, the CPD will celebrate its 10-year anniversary. During that time, more than 300 students have participated in the Student Associate Program, hosting

events that have attracted roughly 25,000 attendees. Based on conversations with students and graduates of the Student Associate Program, as well as on extended evaluations they complete at the end of each semester, it is clear that the program puts them on a path similar to the one I had traveled. They often enter the program disconnected or discouraged about politics and leave with a newfound faith in democracy when supported by good process.

### The Dual Shifts Critical to Reengaging Students

I indulged in an extended narrative about my own path and the development of the CPD primarily to highlight the two critical shifts that occurred in my work, which I now believe are precisely the shifts that are necessary to reengage college students, specifically, and citizens, generally, in our democratic system. The first shift is from a national focus to a local one. While this comes with significant trade-offs, I nonetheless feel it is imperative. The second shift is to a deliberative perspective, which I believe is essential to 21st-century thinking.

*From National to Local.* If we want college students to reengage in our political system, I argue that it will have to occur at the local level, primarily because it will provide them with a sense of efficacy and purpose. Simply put, national politics is a mess, and expecting students to engage in national politics and emerge with a sense of accomplishment and or any other positive feelings is expecting a miracle. There may be some short-term success—such as the thrill of helping elect a president—but ultimately that thrill will wear off, often painfully. Overall, I see five key problems with national politics that make it a significantly problematic arena for engaged citizenship.

The first problem is the concept far too many students—and other citizens—hold that national politics is something that happens in Washington, DC, or the White House. This view creates a spectator mentality that leaves students—and others—simply too *detached*. The second problem is that our national political system is *too polarized and adversarial*, and the forces that make it so are deeply entrenched. This is another reason against relying on the thrill of elections or the

voting process to connect to students. Elections often exhibit the worst forms of political communication: strategy, manipulation, and spectacle. Not exactly what we want students to be enthralled with and certainly not the skill sets we want them to cultivate.

The third problem is the complex role of money in national politics. The amount of money from corporations and other special interests has reached a point that makes its influence on decision making in national politics clearly problematic. While money will still play a role at the local level, that role will rarely be as strong or complicated. In order to engage in political activities, students must believe that decisions are not being unduly influenced by those who have the biggest wallets. The fourth problem is the influence of parties and partisanship. At the national level, politics are chiefly framed by Democrat versus Republican, which is severely limited and problematic. The two-party system often creates a zero-sum game, sparking poor communication and adverse incentives. Similar to the impact of money, party politics often have a negative impact on decision making. Finally, the fifth problem involves the role of the media. Unfortunately, our national media thrive on conflict and drama, too often highlighting what draws viewers and clicks rather than what better serves the community. The narrowcasting and politicization of our media has unfortunately made those problems even worse.

In shifting to the local level, many of these problems are avoided or at least reduced to more manageable levels. A local focus translates into a clear attachment. Results of efforts can often be seen clearly. And while those changes may be small, they can certainly be impactful. A related advantage to engaging in local politics is a de-emphasis on “policy change” as the primary focus, and the inherent recognition that change can take many forms with multiple stakeholders. Democratic governance is a key aspect of deliberative democracy generally and is much more likely to take root locally (Boyte 2005; Carcasson and Sprain 2010). Citizens must be actors, not merely spectators, voters, or advocates. Indeed, the natural connection between local issues and a broad range of potential actions works to inherently

de-emphasize the limited view of politics as something professional politicians and elites are involved with. It helps people understand politics as community problem solving and engagement involving businesses, nonprofits, groups, individuals, and government at various levels. This broader view welcomes student engagement.

Perhaps most important, the local level is rarely as adversarial and polarized, and even when it is, the contentious issues can be treated much more realistically. Local leaders have to be pragmatic; they need to solve problems, not just win elections and improve their standings in the polls. The primary reason local politics are not as adversarial is because the common ground that people share—a thriving local community—is much more obvious. People also have to face each other much more often, making it harder to demonize and dismiss. The influence of money and party is significantly decreased at the local level; therefore decisions are more likely to be based on good reasons and deliberation rather than outside forces. Finally, local media can often—though not always—have a different focus than the national media. Indeed, local media have to compete with national media for people’s time and attention, and I would suggest that serving as a local resource for deliberative engagement can be exactly what local media may need to do in order to compete.

The primary drawback I see in a shift to the local perspective is that the scope may be too small. There are some issues that require the power of the national government or even the global community. If the national system is corrupt and beyond repair, individual communities may be too limited to address issues like climate change or the cost of health care in useful ways. It could even be true that, with some issues, helping a bad national policy work “well enough” at the local level may hamper efforts to change the broader policy. While these concerns are valid and should be kept in mind, they do not outweigh the broader mix of advantages of focusing on the local perspective. I am not advocating abandoning national politics but rather shifting the dominant focus from the White House and Congress to the local city council and community organizations. Simply put, the learning grounds for citizenship need to be reconsidered.

*Toward the Deliberative Perspective.* The second key shift is toward the deliberative perspective. I argue that the deliberative perspective can serve as a useful, overarching ideal for education, particularly at the college level. Focusing on teaching students to develop the mind-sets and skill sets for deliberative inquiry and engagement works at both the civic and the business level (the ability to address difficult problems with competing underlying values is extremely relevant to the business world), and it also responds well to some of the key deficiencies of modern education (Carcasson, in press). Most important, it provides a clear purpose for education and, as I will argue below, reinvigorated notions of citizenship and leadership.

A deliberative mind-set is one that sees a difficult issue through a wicked problem's mind-set. That means focusing on the underlying values and the inherent tensions that arise when attempting to address the problem. It is a humble perspective that sees truth as an elusive goal but one to be constantly pursued. It is comfortable with uncertainty and the unreachable ideal of a perfectly democratic community but is nonetheless devoted to continuously learning, adapting, improving, and striving to reach that ideal. It thus focuses on the cultivation of wisdom rather than just the discovery, creation, or misuse of knowledge. Supporting this perspective and tackling wicked problems well clearly require a high quality of communication across perspectives, as well as ongoing conversation and collaborative action by multiple actors. As Michael Briand wrote in *Practical Politics* (1999, 42):

Because the things human beings consider good are various and qualitatively distinct; because conflicts between such good things have no absolute, predetermined solution; and because to know what is best requires considering the views of others, we need to engage each other in the sort of exchange that will enable us to form sound personal and public judgments. This process of coming to a public judgment and choosing—together, as a public—is the essence of democratic politics.

The perspective also borrows heavily from John Dewey, in the sense that it recognizes that democracy is best conceptualized as an

ongoing conversation and a way of life (Dewey 1927; Kadlec 2007). What exactly high-quality communication is and how to build capacity for it becomes the focus of deliberative engagement.

Defining deliberative engagement is often easier when it is compared to two more dominant forms of talk and problem solving: adversarial and expert (Carcasson 2013). The adversarial model is primarily utilized by advocates who have already made up their minds about the right path and focus their communication efforts on mobilizing others to their point of view by any means necessary. Rather than focusing on the inherent tensions, it avoids or distorts them. It is the preferred model of activists, partisans, and most professional communicators. It fits our human nature well in that it prefers certainty (DiSalvo 2011) and focuses on efforts that support our point of view while dismissing others. Unfortunately, the adversarial model is a terrible antidote to wicked problems, as its simplistic “good vs. evil” or “us vs. them” framework often sparks exaggerated conflict and breeds distrust and polarization. In an adversarial system, adversaries design messages to appeal to key audiences—most often those in their own choir or “undecideds” in the middle, rarely to the “other side”—with the result that competing voices are often talking past each other.

The expert alternative focuses on the role of research and data—essentially empirical data. It can have a particularly nonrhetorical bias, assuming that facts should speak for themselves and that researchers and experts should be value neutral. The expert perspective embodies certain aspects that are clearly valuable to quality decision making, but it nonetheless falls short when focusing on wicked problems. Experts are, by definition, narrowly focused and thus not well fitted for the systemic and interconnected world of wicked problems. Wicked problems are also inherently value laden, which lends them a degree of immunity to empirically focused inquiry. In the end, the expert perspective essentially leaves out the public and misdiagnoses the complexity of wicked problems.

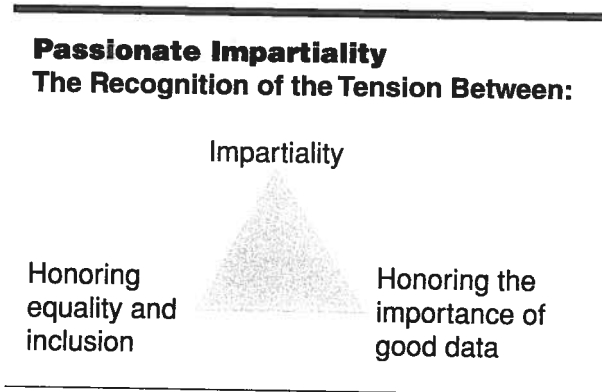
Actually, in many ways, the deliberative perspective can be understood not just as an alternative to adversarial and expert perspectives

but rather as a process-oriented perspective that works to bring out the best of both, while mitigating their most significant drawbacks. The deliberative perspective needs the passions, values, and commitments that are core aspects of the adversarial perspective, and the quality information from the expert perspective. Both supply key raw ingredients needed for the process-oriented deliberative perspective to function.

### The Ethic of Passionate Impartiality

At CPD, we have developed the concept of “passionate impartiality” to describe the ethic we hold to support deliberative engagement, transform expert and adversarial outputs, and work toward the high quality of communication our communities need.

Passionate impartiality is purposefully phrased as an oxymoron in order to highlight the paradoxical focus on being impartial with regard to outcomes while being passionately devoted to certain key process-oriented values. Impartiality is our primary responsibility and is critical to cultivating the reputation and trust that bring people together and change the conversation, but the commitments are similarly critical for changing the conversation in particular ways. As shown in the chart below, equality and inclusion make up one key set of democratic commitments deliberative practitioners hold dear—we cannot be neutral about whether voices are heard or when the powerful attempt to silence others. The second is the importance of good



information, a key epistemic commitment we must also make to support quality decision making. The epistemic commitment is a complex one that recognizes the difficulty of defining what “good information” is, but it is a necessary struggle that cannot be bypassed (and clearly a lifelong struggle that should be a primary function of our educational systems, especially in the Internet age). The tensions between these democratic and epistemic commitments essentially mirror the ongoing tension between democracy and science. The democratic commitment focuses on inclusion and open-mindedness, whereas the epistemic one focuses on quality and judgment. Quality deliberation inherently negotiates between the two. The democratic commitment primarily connects with the need for divergent thinking, whereas the epistemic commitment connects with the need for convergent thinking.

Deliberative processes are designed to help communities engage these inherent tensions. Everyone has the right to an opinion, and all perspectives should certainly be heard and considered but, in the end, not all opinions are equally valid. Some arguments are better than others, and a functional deliberative system must recognize that and work toward helping people make such distinctions. Herein lies the difference between a direct democracy—in which mere popularity is most important—and deliberative democracy—in which the quality of the reasons given is most important.

### The Role of CPD Student Associates

The primary limitation of passionate impartiality is that it is rare. Very few people are both passionate about community issues and willing to play an impartial role. We are hardwired to be simple advocates, seeking out information that supports our position and striving to grow and mobilize our like-minded herds (DiSalvo 2011; McRaney 2011). In addition, few people are well equipped to engage the natural tensions between and among the democratic and epistemic commitments of passionate impartiality. This is probably why the CPD student-associate program has been such a success. Obviously these students

are not naturally impartial on all issues, but they are often newcomers to local issues on which they do not have a clear position, and, as such, are generally trusted to be impartial facilitators.

With the minimum two-semester length of the program, we have the time to build up their skill sets so they are equipped for their roles in supporting deliberative engagement and negotiating the tensions of passionate impartiality. Of course, there are many components to deliberative engagement—among them deliberative issue analysis, convening, issue naming and framing, reporting, and supporting collaborative action (Carcasson and Sprain 2016)—but the facilitation work the students do with the small groups at CPD events is likely the most important. In order to be prepared to serve as facilitators, the students are first taught the key theoretical aspects of deliberative engagement so they develop the proper mind-set for their work. They then learn the critical related skill sets. In particular, they learn how to ask questions; how to paraphrase what has been said to make it clearer to others; how to identify key underlying values and corresponding tensions between values; how to help participants “work through” those tensions; how to manage conflict; how to encourage broad participation and deal with participants who tend to dominate a conversation; how to help people take and consider alternative positions; how to help people challenge their assumptions; how to help people listen to each other; how to help them move beyond a series of individual comments to a true, interactive conversation; how to deal with questionable information or purposeful manipulation; and how to recognize strong or weak arguments (Carcasson 2013). These moderating techniques work because student facilitators are not trying to convince people of a particular point of view; rather, they are putting all their energy into fostering genuine inquiry and helping a group of people have an authentic conversation.

Much of the student training thus far is admittedly focused on the democratic side of the passionate impartiality triangle—honoring equality and inclusion. We are currently working to strengthen the epistemic side—honoring the importance of good data. Issues related

to problems of good information are primarily addressed before and after events, but we have come to realize that we must build up the facilitator’s capacity to address them during conversations as well. As they prepare for CPD events, the students are often briefed on key issues, active factual questions, and myths or persistent misinformation found in the broader discourse, as well as values and tensions that will likely arise. Students are not expected to be experts or fact checkers during a deliberative discussion—calling out a participant for misinformation may create a chilling effect, silencing other voices and undermining the impartial role of the facilitator. But there are techniques for elevating the quality of the conversation and honoring good information without crossing those lines and there are ways to flag key information concerns so that they are addressed later in the process (Carcasson 2015).

One final aspect of the Student Associate Program that warrants mentioning is that it is framed in terms of an art or a practice, not a science. Learning to be a good facilitator is a reflective practice (Schon 1983). Students can be provided guidelines and theories, but the true learning occurs through practice, observation, and reflection. As their instructor, I do not have all the right answers for what to do in specific situations. Just recently, we discovered a very useful tool to bring this point home to the students: Daniel Pink’s book *Drive: The Surprising Truth about What Motivates Us* (2009). We rely on Pink’s work to encourage the students to take more responsibility for their development as facilitators. Pink’s primary argument is that people are not necessarily motivated as much by monetary rewards as is assumed by most employers (we tend to substitute grades for compensation in our discussions, since they are the currency for students). He cited impressive evidence that providing monetary incentives is often counterproductive. Money does matter, but once we reach a threshold of fairness, other things matter much more. Pink argues that we are motivated by three things: purpose, autonomy, and mastery. We want our work to matter (purpose), we want to have control over our work and how it is done (autonomy), and we want to excel (mastery).

We explicitly work to invoke all three of Pink's key motivations in the training of the student associates. We hope we convince them early in the program of the overriding purpose and importance of the work of the CPD in supporting our community through deliberative engagement. Their "job" as student associates is essentially to support the mission and purpose of the CPD. We then make it clear to them that they will have some genuine autonomy. While the processes and background materials are designed for them (sometimes with their involvement), during events when they are facilitating groups at individual tables, they are on their own. They are given the authority to adapt the process to make it work for the group with which they are engaged. Overall, we want each table to go through a similar process, but we recognize the importance of adapting to each situation and the importance of giving the students autonomy. Last, and perhaps most important, we hope to tap into each student's intrinsic motivation to excel to support his or her development as a facilitator. We want them to find joy in doing very hard work well and thus find significant value in taking the time to be reflective about their experiences and sharpening their skill sets.

### Lessons Learned

The training CPD student associates receive was intentionally designed to fill a very specific need for small-group facilitators to support deliberative engagement. Ten years after the first training workshop, however, we have come to realize, through conversations with former student associates and written reflections of their experiences, that the mind-set and skill sets the student associates gain are applicable far beyond their assigned purpose. A few of our alumni are employed as facilitators of some sort, but the vast majority are in a wide variety of other positions. Nonetheless, they report utilizing their CPD skills quite often and find significant value in serving as pseudo-facilitators in many situations. Indeed, I would now argue that the mind-set and skill sets we teach at the CPD are critical to all students (K-12 and college). In fact, they represent key democratic skills for

all citizens and particularly our leaders. Leaders must now be able to bring people together, spark high-quality communication, and support collaborative efforts. Perhaps the "impartial" aspect can be downplayed a bit—we don't all need to be facilitators—but the overarching focus on genuine inquiry and supporting good process rather than advocacy is critical.

Pink's insights clearly have applicability to broader notions of citizenship and leadership: A shift to the deliberative mind-set provides the purpose (improving our conversations in order to improve our communities); developing the skill sets and shifting to local engagement can provide the autonomy and sense of efficacy; and doing the hard work of democracy (listening, asking questions, struggling with the role of data, engaging tensions, supporting collaborative efforts) provides a never-ending challenge to master.

### Conclusion

In this essay, I make the argument that two key shifts in thinking that led ultimately to the development of the CPD represent critical shifts that may well reengage students in the hard work of democracy. Those shifts—to a local focus and toward a deliberative mind-set—bring with them the need for particular skill sets to which our educational systems should pay considerably more attention. The shifts also clearly call forth multiple tensions of their own. In particular, students should actively and vigorously engage the tension between democracy and science. Too often, students seem to pick one side or the other, or disengage altogether. Explicitly recognizing these tensions and placing them on the table helps reframe the debate and sparks much more useful conversation. Clearly the debate about politics and engagement can use reframing.

Imagine for a minute that our educational systems and our community engagement processes were rearranged to adopt a deliberative mind-set focused on identifying and engaging the inherent tensions in our most difficult problems and cultivating the skill sets to improve our collective judgment. Rather than focus on the quest for empirical



certainty, absolute solutions, detached individual perspectives, or polarized adversarial battles, students were asked to construct genuine conversations, utilizing the best knowledge they could find, to work through tough issues. Imagine if our leaders, rather than speaking from a position of certainty to mobilize people to their point of view, adopted the ethic of passionate impartiality and saw themselves primarily as convenors, facilitators, and cultivators of wisdom. Imagine if our brightest minds didn't decide to narrow their focus to ensure validity and statistical significance but embraced uncertainty and dedicated their work to the challenge of wicked problems. The psychologist Mihaly Csikszentmihalyi reminds us, "The best moments in our lives are not the passive, receptive, relaxing times. . . . The best moments usually occur if a person's body or mind is stretched to its limits in a voluntary effort to accomplish something difficult and worthwhile" (1990, 3).

Imagine if we all realized that, while incredibly difficult to do well, democracy is exceedingly worthwhile, and that more and more of us began to draw great joy from the mastery of making democracy work as well as it could.



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