

Adapting to Organizational Context: Mission and Goals for Public Discourse Programs

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The mission statements of public discourse centers, particularly those situated in academic institutions, often express two key commitments: improving civic communication and enhancing student learning. Take, for example, the mission of the [Public Deliberation & Dialogue](#) program at Gustavus Adolphus College:

Deeply aligned with the values of social justice, diversity, and ethics, the program engages students, faculty, the college community, and local communities in research and practice of public deliberation, dialogue, and community advocacy. A regional and campus resource, the Public Deliberation and Dialogue program equips Gustavus students to research and design communication strategies to address pressing issues and make reasoned, community-based decisions.

This vision of the center as responsive to public need and aligned with the educational mission of the academy is substantiated by research evidencing the value of engaging democratic deliberative praxis in the community and in the classroom.¹ Thus, many college administrators, community stakeholders, students, and external funders offer broad support for centers like PDD that invite and teach discursive engagement across and about different perspectives.

For center directors, however, implementing a dual commitment both to community and student learning may be complicated by numerous logistical challenges, including budget limitations, time constraints, student investment, and staffing, especially with growing demand for more and better dialogue in college classrooms and communities. How, then, should centers approach writing and adapting their goals to fit their organizational contexts and constraints? The Gustavus Public Deliberation & Dialogue program serves as one case study for how to enact and adapt priorities to meet the mission. I propose two strategic questions for identifying achievable goals for the center: what will maximize student learning and what research questions will be investigated?

Overview of the Center

The Communication Studies Department launched PDD in 2018-2019 after three years of strategic planning and development. Shifting away from its competitive speech and debate, PDD elevated the communication discipline's roots in civic discussion, which centers on building

¹ Two edited volumes that offer valuable insights into the goals, methods, and outcomes of deliberative engagement in higher education are: Timothy J. Shaffer and Nicholas V. Longo, *Creating Space for Democracy: Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education* (Stylus Publishing, 2019) and Timothy J. Shaffer, Nicholas V. Longo, Idit Manosevitch, and Maxine S. Thomas, *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*, (Michigan State University Press, 2017).

students' capacity for public service by learning to find "common agreement about how to solve a problem."²

Dialogue and deliberation are modes of communication engagement with different ends. *Dialogue* enables participants to effectively share their personal values, identities, and perspectives. In dialogue, participants listen to and learn about their commonalities and differences. Dialogues fundamentally ask, "who are you?" and "what do you value?". The goal is to understand. Through *deliberation*, community members come together to weigh their options about how to move forward on a particular concern or question their community faces. Deliberation enables participants to learn about the issue, understand diverse perspectives, prioritize, and develop plans. Asking "what do *we* value?" and "what should *we* do?", deliberation is primarily used for inclusive development of ethical policies and practices. The goal is to decide.

To fulfill its PDD mission, the Communication Studies department staffs PDD with a faculty Director (with 2 course releases per year) and student Fellows. Students earn partial course credit (usually .25 or .5) to research, design, facilitate, and assess dialogic and deliberative activities for the campus and the community. PDD Fellows and the Director meet at least once per week to study the art of facilitation, to build understanding of dialogue and deliberation development, and to test and refine models for people to talk with, about, and across differences.

In the first two years, the program director managed myriad on-campus and off-campus deliberation opportunities. The on-campus opportunities for students fed the institutional support needed to keep the center alive. Early on, the administration communicated that "number of students engaged" was its primary metric for deciding whether to continue funding the program (two course releases and a budget of about \$3,000). Although the college endorsed PDD's external engagement with the community in principle and that work aligned with the college's stated mission and values, its fiduciary commitment to PDD depended on a quantifiable measure of student learning.

Challenge and Change

The multiple goals of facilitating community-based discussions off campus and engaging students in deliberation on campus fulfilled the programmatic mission, but also was not sustainable with its existing funding and staffing. In conversation with the college administrators in year two, the program director decided to focus on direct student engagement in courses across the curriculum and curtail community-based dialogue and deliberation.³ Although dialogic initiatives external to the college were not eliminated or dismissed as unimportant, pausing them as a primary goal was a strategic choice designed to best meet the programmatic and institutional student learning outcomes.

² Michael Bartanen and Robert Littlefield, *Forensics in America: A History* (Rowman & Littlefield Publishers, 2013) 174.

³ Shortly after this decision was made, the COVID-19 pandemic halted the existing community-based deliberation and dialogue initiatives, so the decision to focus on college classroom deliberation and dialogue seemed prescient.

Three critical questions facilitated the refining of the programmatic goals:

1. Deliberation as Practice: What will maximize student learning?

For centers being developed or refined at higher learning institutions, the question of what activities will best advance student learning outcomes should be primary. What are ways that your respective center may enhance opportunities for students to engage in deliberation with each other to build their capacity to talk about, with, and across their differences?

As a co-curricular program, Gustavus PDD seeks to complement and enhance student learning. While developing and facilitating deliberation in the community fostered our student Fellows’ ability to listen, invite diverse perspectives, and understand the nature and complexity of shared community challenges, the learning outcomes were limited in two ways:

- A) First, students would study and practice facilitation extensively only to facilitate one or two times in the community. The stakes were high, but the opportunities for students to grow and improve were fewer and farther between. Because facilitation is an art, it requires training, practice, and responsiveness. Community-based discussions simply offered fewer opportunities for them to refine their facilitation ability, confidence, and skill.
- B) Second, community-based discussions supported communities in learning to talk with each other, but only student Fellows experienced and learned from their deliberative engagement. In contrast, integrating deliberation into courses across the college means that hundreds of students had at least one experience with deliberation. With the shift in focus, in year three, our total student engagement jumped significantly:

Public Deliberation & Dialogue	2018-2019	2019-2020	2020-2021
# Student Fellows	14	17	17
# Community Members Engaged	258	245	0
# of Courses with Deliberation	16	10	21
# Gustavus Students Engaged	303	374	539

Certainly, quantitative measures of student engagement are not the only way to maximize student learning nor are they sufficient in justifying the administration’s continued financial support for the program. In the case of PDD, the metric of “# of Gustavus students engaged” proved important because of how clearly students expressed their learning in post-deliberation surveys. After only one deliberation experience, students articulate in Likert-scale and open-ended responses that they learned more about the issue discussed, they learned more about other

perspectives on the issue, and their participation in the deliberation shaped their understanding of the role of deliberation in society.

Ultimately, the shift in focus to maximize student learning elevated the principle of **deliberation as practice**. The student Fellows practice the art of facilitation more often than they did in community-based initiatives. This practice not only enhances their ability to listen and welcome different perspectives, but they also see the transferability of the skills they learn as facilitators to other contexts – from leading student organization meetings to navigating roommate/family/work conflicts. Less intensive, but as significant is the opportunity for students across campus to practice talking with their peers about critical issues. Moving forward, we are developing ways to integrate more opportunities for students to engage in multiple deliberations, but even one deliberative experience gives them practice engaging in civic discussion and advances what Martín Carcasson has termed “first order goals” of deliberation: deepening participants understanding of an issue and introducing different perspectives.⁴

2. Deliberation as Praxis: What research questions will the center investigate?

Just as any deliberation begins with a question, so too should a deliberation center. Foundational to public discourse is inquiry – asking critical questions and communicating deliberatively with others to figure out how to respond to those questions. Public discourse centers not only enable inquiry in others, but they must also engage in inquiry about the deliberative and dialogic processes they develop and facilitate. Identifying which questions the center investigates will help prioritize the center’s strategic focus and goals.

Central to the PDD mission is the learning gained from studying dialogue and deliberation, asking what communicative practices cultivate public engagement and civic leadership? The research is two-fold:

1. The PDD director collaborates with students to identify and evaluate existing conversational models developed by scholars and practitioners around the country. This research helps us determine what dialogue or deliberation format can best meet the goals of a particular community discussion. The research process is grounded in rhetorical theory, whereby students assess audience, goals, and situational constraints (e.g. time). The research leads us to one of three outcomes: a) adopt a model as is; b) adapt a model to meet situational needs; or, c) develop a new model to meet situational needs.
2. Students and faculty collaborate to study the academic, political, and social consequences of dialogue and deliberation, such as examining how deliberation teaches argument and whether it fosters a sense of civic connection among chemistry students. Building in assessments of learning outcomes immediately following facilitated conversations captures key data for institutional reports as well as contributing to broader scholarly conversations about the pedagogical functions of deliberation and dialogue.

⁴ Martín Carcasson, “Beginning with the End in Mind: A Call for Goal-Driven Deliberative Practice,” Center for Advances in Public Engagement, Public Agenda (2009) 2, 7-10.

Recognizing **deliberation as praxis** orients a center to inquiry that feeds its mission, but also grounds the engagement in conversation with other programs and centers. In the case of PDD at Gustavus, focusing on deliberation in the classroom not only maximizes student learning, but it also fosters research, providing a more expansive data set with which to explore the relationship between deliberation and civic engagement.

Conclusion

Setting programmatic goals based on advancing deliberative practice and praxis not only advances the civic mission for a public discourse center, but it also makes the center's purpose and contribution apparent to internal and external constituents. A center that can provide evidence of and research about the breadth and depth of student learning will be a center that improves its chances of sustaining institutional support and inviting financial contributions from donors and funders. For PDD, and perhaps for other centers, the (re)focus on campus and classroom engagement does not permanently forestall community-based initiatives, but it does provide the time and resources to build a firm foundation that will sustain and extend the center's reach and significance for students, faculty, and the institution.

Works Cited

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