



A Report on the National Issues Forum Workshop

For

Association of College Unions International

Region 4 Conference

At Pennsylvania State University

On

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By

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at Montgomery College

By

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Introduction

On June 10 and 11, 2002, the Center was invited to make a presentation to the Maryland Community College Activities Directors Association (MCCADA) to explain the value and benefit to them and their students of issues forums and deliberative dialogue. Jim Walters swerved as liaison between the Center and MCCADA to prepare for the presentation and the subsequent forum workshops held at Pennsylvania State University (PSU). Following this presentation, the Center was invited to convene issues forum workshops to demonstrate the value of deliberative dialogue to college professionals and student leaders from the Region 4 cluster of Association of College Unions International (ACUI.)¹

The conference was held November 16, 2002, in State College, Pennsylvania on the campus of Pennsylvania State University. Five National Issues Forum topics were chosen for this workshop: “Racial And Ethnic Tensions: What Should We Do?”, “Terrorism: What Should We Do Now?”, “Violent Kids: Can We Change the Trend?”, “From Welfare to Work: Who Should We Help and How?” and “Protecting Our Rights: What Goes on the Internet?” The site of the forum workshops was the HUB-Robeson Center on PSU’s campus.

Representing the Center and Montgomery College were Nathan Starr, Robert Walker, James Walters and Gayle Starr. Additionally, we recruited two veteran moderators from the region, Staci Molnar-Maine of the University of Pennsylvania, and Dave Dillon of State College, Pennsylvania. The moderators met the evening prior to the forum workshops and again the morning before the workshops commenced.

Both the Center and ACUI operate on limited budgets and it was necessary to inexpensively create and provide materials. Issue books for all participants would have been too costly therefore, ACUI purchased a limited quantity of the books. These were supplemented by the Center providing issue maps and summaries that were used in placemat format. Additionally, the Center provided photocopies of documents on deliberation and democracy to the participants. The Center provided (and retrieved) starter videotapes on each of the issue topics.

Framework for Deliberation

We were allotted a two-hour time frame in which to conduct the workshops and explain the values of this kind of work to their organizations and institutions. Given the truncated time frame (forums are usually three-four hours in length), we decided to conduct forum workshops instead of full forums to demonstrate how deliberative dialogue. This would enable the participants to learn how to work through difficult issues and talk about the value of deliberation in their own communities and schools. This was the first National Issues Forum experience for all of the participants.

The Hub-Robeson Hall facilities at Penn State were excellent. The building is relatively new or recently renovated with large airy, open spaces and many areas for people to meet, relax and converse and study with others. The forums were held in four first floor rooms with two other rooms on the third floor. The rooms were spacious allowing for groups to form in circles making it easy for people to talk directly to one another. The acoustics in the first floor rooms allowed

¹ ACUI’s Region 4 includes Maryland, Northern Virginia, West Virginia and Pennsylvania. At this conference, Baltimore City Community College and Prince George’s Community College had very large delegations. The conference drew from a large number of colleges and universities.

people to easily hear one another without sound carrying over into the other adjoining rooms. The third floor rooms were bright and airy.

Overview of the Forums

The five forum workshop groups ranged in size from ten to thirty participants each. Participants included student leaders from the Region 4 institutions as well as faculty, staff and administrators from those schools. The population was multi-ethnic (including many international students) and varied in age. The schools included community colleges and four-year college and universities.

All moderators reported the forms they led were characterized by civil conversations on very difficult issues. Participants were new to deliberative dialogue but quickly grasped the process and fully engaged in the conversations.

Several of the forum workshops generated such excitement that after the workshops were concluded participants continued their discussions in the hallways.

Conclusions/Recommendations

The forum workshops were very well received by both students and faculty/staff/administrators for the represented institutions. Requests for follow-up training to several schools have already been made to the Center.

This was an excellent opportunity to begin developing a network with the represented schools and crafting a democracy network over the Region 4 area and especially within the state of Maryland. Given the interest in following up with forums with at least one institution, this may mark a new beginning for the Center.

The distributed materials were well done. In the future, to save on resources, the center is likely to continue to duplicate issue maps/summaries for distribution at other forums. Issues books for all participants will be ordered only if the host institution can purchase them.