

Deliberation: An Introduction

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John J. Theis and Jose Vela, Jr.
Lone Star College

The Center for Civic Engagement at Lone Star College has taken up the task of building the democratic skills of students, faculty, staff, and community members through meaningful dialogue. Working with the [National Issues Forums Institute](#) and the [Kettering Foundation](#), the Center has initiated a deliberative dialogue program that seeks to teach the skills necessary for discussing and understanding complex issues. Deliberative dialogues build on the theory that democracy requires citizens to engage in ongoing deliberation on public matters. These dialogues give citizens the opportunity to join together to deliberate, to make collaborative decisions about how to approach difficult issues, and to work toward making reasoned public judgments. The program at Lone Star College builds upon the idea that communities and discourse represent the foundations of civic renewal.

Deliberation is an essential public skill; it is the discursive process through which differences are negotiated and group decisions are made. Deliberation is always oriented toward reaching common ground or taking action—not merely practicing discussion for the sake of discussion. If one is serious about working with and through diversity, deliberation is an excellent process for negotiating and incorporating differences. In many cases, different people will view problems in very different ways, while others will disagree on whether a particular problem is a problem at all. Deliberation should be inclusive and democratic.

It is important to discuss both the purpose and guiding principles of deliberative dialogues, or democratic deliberation (Harringer, 2007). Deliberative dialogues use [“issue books,”](#) framed by the National Issues Forums Institute, to examine issues from at least three basic perspectives. The dialogues encourage active listening and an examination of those assumptions that accompany people’s opinions. By laying out a set of ground rules and then discussing each perspective

in sequence, participants are better able to perceive areas of agreement and disagreement within opposing and diverse perspectives. For each deliberative exercise, groups finish by reflecting on the themes that emerged from the dialogue and identifying next steps. A deliberation concludes with each group reporting its thoughts to the larger gathering.

At Lone Star College, the Center for Civic Engagement has used deliberation to examine issues such as immigration and political disillusionment; the purpose of higher education and the changing world of work; and proposed Texas “campus carry” legislation. Participants in these deliberative dialogues have consistently reported positive experiences, and research shows that the deliberative experience helps to shape student perceptions of politics in positive ways (cite Kettering reference; cite eJournal specific reference).

What do these deliberative dialogues look and sound like? The following video feature includes excerpts from actual conversations that help to establish a reference and framework for experimenting with deliberate dialogues in one’s own classroom, campus, and community contexts.

Video Link:



<https://www.youtube.com/watch?v=DdjHCfgPjY&feature=youtu.be>

References and Further Reading

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Author Biographies



Dr. John J. Theis is the director of the Center for Civic Engagement for the Lone Star College (LSC) System and professor of political science on the LSC-Kingwood campus. He also serves on the national council of the American Commonwealth Partnership and the steering committee of The Democracy Commitment. Involved in civic engagement work for over 20 years, Dr. Theis started the LSC-Kingwood Public Achievement program in 2010 and was one of the founders of the LSC-Kingwood Center for Civic Engagement. He was recently appointed by the chancellor to head a system-level civic engagement initiative across the six LSC campuses. Dr. Theis holds his PhD from the University of Arizona. His publications include *The Institutionalization of the American Presidency: 1924-1992*, co-authored with Lynn Ragsdale. He has received numerous awards and honors including nomination for the American Political Science Association's E. E. Schattschneider Award for Best Dissertation published in the field of American politics, Professor of the Year, Governors Award for Excellence in Teaching, Innovator of the Year, and the John and Suanne Rouche Excellence Award. Dr. Theis grew up in South Korea as the son of Methodist missionaries. He has two beautiful daughters, Samantha and Angela, and a new granddaughter, Harper.

Jose Vela, Jr. is the video production specialist at LSC-Kingwood's Media Services Department as well as a freelance videographer and editor. He holds a degree in communication with a media emphasis from Texas A&M University-Corpus Christi. Jose has worked as a director of photography/camera operator on a full-length independent film, short films, and music videos, all in collaboration with local Houston artists. He also produces instructional and documentary work at LSC-Kingwood. He is an avid cinephile and one day hopes to produce full-length documentaries and narrative films. He is happily married and resides in Kingwood, Texas.