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THE POWER OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION

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One of the most valuable skills that is needed today to counteract the growing polarization that we see and experience in our society is a willingness of people to come together to share their views and listen to the opinions of others. This process is critical in finding common ground, a place where they can stand together and work toward a solution.

The process for doing this should start in the classroom at levels as early as elementary school and extending to graduate school. As students experience this process of resolving differences and finding solutions, the skill to use this process often and effectively becomes ingrained in their system. Then, as they assume positions of responsibility in their organizations and communities, they can make a significant difference in modifying the nature of the society in which we live.

The [Kettering Foundation](#) and the [National Issues Forums Institute](#) have been working in partnership for nearly 40 years to develop the process and the materials to make this possible. Kettering has focused its research on the question of “What does it take to make democracy work as it should?”. The answer is civic engagement, creating the willingness of citizens to vote and to work to find solutions to the challenges that confront them. But, to achieve this objective, citizens must understand an issue and how it might affect them, to have a voice and to hear what others have to say, and to see a way to work together.

Kettering, therefore, began to do research about major issues facing the nation and to prepare a non-partisan analysis that describes the issue and at least three options as to how the issue might be confronted. NIFI was then formed to publish the information in an issue guide and to work with groups around the nation—civic organizations, libraries, churches, etc.—to bring people together in face-to-face discussions to provide their input. The process that was developed and employed in the forums is called public deliberation because each participant has the opportunity to share their views, discussing the issue and evaluating each option before reaching a conclusion. The process is facilitated by a trained, non-partisan moderator who works to achieve a civil exchange.

Once teachers learned about these materials and the process used, they saw the value of involving their students. They embraced this initiative because they believed and learned that the practice of public deliberation enabled their students to develop their critical thinking skills, improve their communication abilities, and create a willingness to collaborate with others who may have different views and personal characteristics. Today the issue guides and the process

of public deliberation are used extensively in higher education, including at the graduate level. Likewise, teachers at all levels of middle school and high school have found the process valuable and highly valued by their students. Classes as early as the fifth grade have made effective use of this approach and current research is being conducted to see how this might be implemented at the kindergarten level.

Access to the issue guides and other materials, such as a starter video to begin a forum, are described and available on the NIFI website (www.nifi.org). Additionally, because of the growing demand to have one's voice heard, NIFI has developed an online platform called Common Ground for Action to engage a wider range of participants in forums. Information about this alternative is also available on the NIFI website.

The Center for Public Deliberation at Colorado State University has been active in using this process for many years, introducing it to students in the classroom. Additionally, students have often been involved in the naming and framing of an issue that confronts the campus, local community, or state. They then have been trained to moderate the forums to get citizen input. Further information about the work at CSU can be obtained at mcarcas@colostate.edu.