

Hello Friends of TDI and DDC –

We are thrilled that you are lending a hand at the **No Better Time** conference at UNH this summer. There has already been a strong response to the conference announcement, and we think that this will be a fascinating, timely, and important gathering.

We thought we should clarify our expectations about what it means to lead a “learning exchange.” First, we do indeed want these to be truly democratic and interactive discussions, rather than traditional academic panels. So while we know you all have valuable experiences and expertise to share (and we approached you for that reason!), we are hoping that you can bring that knowledge to bear *in the course of the discussion*, rather than in formal presentations followed by Q&A.

Learning exchanges will most likely be 2.5 hours. Here is one general suggestion about how to structure that time:

1. Spend some time talking as a group about how to frame your topic (What assumptions are you bringing to this? What core questions do you have? And so on),
2. Invite stories, case studies, and research findings from participants (as well as the leaders), and
3. Move the conversation from the descriptive to the strategic. Develop some proposed next steps (There are some different ways to approach this: How might people in this room work together? How might researchers and practitioners and researchers, or campuses and communities, work together? What research questions does the field need to tackle next? And so on).

Ultimately, the agenda is up to you – we just wanted to be clear about the kind of interactivity and dynamism we were hoping these discussions will achieve.

A second important clarification is that we are (unfortunately) unable to waive the registration fee for learning exchange leaders, nor can we cover travel expenses. Several months ago, we faced a decision with this conference: wait until we landed a substantial grant to fund this gathering or go ahead with a conference in which participants pay their own way. Given the state of the economy as well as other factors, we were concerned that waiting for a grant would mean postponing the conference indefinitely (and perhaps not having it at all). We also felt the time was right for this gathering (hence the conference title). We’ve worked very hard to keep costs down to a reasonable amount.

Logistically, there are several specific things we are asking learning exchange leaders to do:

1. If you need additional co-leaders, reach out to someone or let us know (most of you are already beyond this stage). In many cases, you volunteered for a session that someone else also volunteered for, and we put you together (Nancy has taken to calling us the national DD “besherts” – Yiddish matchmakers). People are still volunteering, and the teams are not quite set yet. So we suggest you wait a bit longer before moving to #2 and 3;
2. Look at and edit (if you are so inclined) the title and description that is posted at <http://www.unh.edu/democracy/conference2009/learning-exchanges.html>. Send changes to us (nancy.thomas@unh.edu and mattleighninger@earthlink.net);
3. Work together to develop goals and an agenda for your learning exchange;
4. Reach out to your networks and colleagues to invite them to your session and to the conference in general. We particularly need help approaching people in specific academic disciplines (e.g., APSA) and in other associations. Think of other people who might be interested in this topic and encourage them to come to the conference.

Last thing: We are working on how, exactly, we’re going to connect dots, design next steps, and report out what happens at the conference, and we’re open to suggestions. Give some thought to how you might record what happens in your session, and how we can use that on the final day of the conference, and beyond.

Thank you so much for joining us! Please don’t hesitate to contact us with suggestions, questions, or comments. We’re looking forward to seeing you in July – Nancy and Matt