

TDI - FAQ

What is *deliberative democracy*?

Democracy is often described as a form of government that is of, by, and for the people. A democracy adheres to laws and public policies that reflect the public will. It protects civil liberties and responsible freedom. It aspires to justice and equity for all citizens. And it supports fair elections of government representatives.

Deliberative democracy is a term used originally by political scientists, and now more broadly, to describe a form of democracy that has certain characteristics:

- an educated and informed citizenry;
- vigorous participation of ordinary citizens in matters of public concern at the local, national, and global levels;
- a public process of reasoning and deliberation for decision and policy- making;
- political and social inclusion and equality;
- involvement in decision-making by those most likely to be affected by the outcome;
- public officials who are responsive to ideas generated through public discourse, and who are accountable to the public for their decisions;
- respect for free expression;
- an openness to multiple viewpoints, dissent, and criticism; and
- an understanding that when disagreements arise, citizens will continue to work to overcome differences to reach more acceptable outcomes.

Although difficult to achieve, deliberative democracy is easy to imagine: people with different perspectives and ideas come together, study and talk about public concerns, work through conflicts, weigh options, and act individually and collaboratively, with each other and public officials; to effectuate social and policy change.

How is TDI using the term *deliberative democracy*?

TDI's vision is broader than democracy as a form of government. We envision and seek to advance democracy as a set of principles and practices that guide how people interact and work together every day to improve public life and to create a more just society.

The point is that democracy is not something we *have*. It's something we *do*.

What is the role of colleges and universities in a deliberative democracy?

We know from recent research that high school students are not learning enough about civics to be actively engaged in social change and public policy making (see Peter Levine, *The Future of Democracy: Developing the Next Generation of American Citizens*, Tufts University Press, 2007). Colleges and universities need to make up for that gap in student learning. We view colleges and universities as among the best places for "citizens-in-progress" to learn the principles and practices of democracy. And, we believe colleges and universities should be leveraging and lending their knowledge to work with local communities and states in this important work.

What is the relationship between *deliberative democracy* and *democratic dialogue* and *public deliberation*? What's the difference between dialogue and daily conversations?

Quality *dialogue* and *deliberation* are critical to a deliberative democracy.

Dialogue is an interpersonal relationship-building process that involves listening and talking and that has a purpose of gaining mutual understanding that then serves as the foundation for individual, social, and/or public policy change. Organizations and initiatives that seek to improve the way we do dialogue in American public life promote dialogue as a way to: (1) change individual behavior and attitudes, and particularly to increase intercultural understanding and tolerance, (2) confront and address historic and contemporary social and economic injustice, (3) increase civility and respect (addressing the claim that “our civil society is less than civil”), (4) build community and networks, (5) change institutions such as governments and workplaces, (6) manage and capitalize on the transformative nature of conflict, and (7) change the way laws and public policies are made.

Dialogue is not to be confused with everyday conversations and is more than “just talk,” which is why we usually characterize dialogue as “democratic.” *Democratic dialogue* adheres to certain principles. It is:

- Inclusive, seeks broad participation and diverse perspectives
- Facilitated, guided by a trained, neutral individual or two
- Respectful, governed by ground rules created or approved by the groups
- Guided by a discussion guide, framing paper, choices, and other approaches
- Grounded in personal stake, stories, and perspectives
- Part of a larger, community-wide initiative
- Attentive to outcomes, process *and* relationships: personal commitment and action, improved intergroup relations, stronger communities, reasoned and more sustainable public policy decisions, political and social efficacy, a healthier democracy

The term *deliberation* often brings to mind the judicial process and the role of juries: a small group of men and women charged with the responsibility of listening to evidence, giving that evidence careful consideration, weighing choices, and making decisions, all in ways that are intentional and not hurried. In a *public deliberation*, people come together to study a community, social, or political issue, identify possible solutions (choices), consider the advantages, disadvantages, and trade-offs for each choice, and make decisions about how an issue should be addressed.

Some might argue that *dialogue* focuses on the dynamics of groups and interpersonal relationship building and *deliberation* focuses on issues and decision making. We look at it a little differently: in a public setting, democratic dialogue is the foundation for quality deliberation and sustainable decisions.

You mention ground rules for dialogue and public discourse. What are they?

Effective systems of open communication and exchange are guided by ground rules, agreements that people make about how they are going to work together. Some typical ground rules are:

- Seek first to understand, then be understood
- Listen carefully
- Share the air; be aware of how much time you talk
- Stay on topic
- If you are offended, say so, and say why
- Speak only for yourself, not for someone else
- It's ok to disagree but remember, this is a discussion, not a debate
- Avoid making assumptions, particularly about intentions, beliefs, or motives
- Respect confidentiality: what is said in this room stays in this room, unless the group agrees otherwise
- Commit to the entire process; come on time, stay until the end
- Keep working together to find common ground, don't give up

Why is advancing deliberative democracy important?

One of American democracy's greatest challenges is for citizens (and policy makers) to work together across different social backgrounds, political ideology, personal perspectives, and moral values to work through their differences, overcome conflict, and increase social and political efficacy that benefit and sustain a just society.

Starting about fifteen years ago, it became almost a cliché to label Americans "spectators" of nearly all aspects of public life. Commentators on our nation's civic health point to several concerns: citizen disengagement from politics; the adversarial nature of public policy making; a public increasingly polarized by differences; everyday acts of intolerance, incivility, and unethical behavior, and persistent patterns of social exclusion and economic disparity.

In the past few years, experiments in deliberative democracy have emerged as promising antidotes to disengagement, polarization, exclusion, and incivility. Across the country, thousands of ordinary citizens and policy makers are participating in study circles, intergroup dialogues, issue forums, public conversations, deliberative polling, and town meetings on matters of local and national concern. Organizations such as Everyday Democracy, National Issue Forums and the Kettering Foundation, Public Conversations Project, and the Taos Institute provide support for communities seeking new ways to address community needs and public issues. The results of these organized, deliberative processes include a higher level of citizen engagement in public life, public buy-in for resulting policies, new civic organizations and projects, improved interpersonal relationships, and sustainable change.

A lot is happening, but it has yet to reach the tipping point. The aim is to advance deliberative democracy as *the way we do our business* in American society. And we believe higher education should play an important role in educating and engaging young

citizens in the theory and practice of deliberative democracy. This is a different way of learning about and engaging in little ‘p’ politics and young citizens should be introduced and engaged with it while in college.

Why now?

If not now, when?

We feel a sense of **urgency**. Our nation’s issues are too complex and far-reaching – consider climate change, terrorism, and global economic disparities – and too persistent – consider poverty, crime, structural racism, and health care disparities – and too divisive – consider immigration, affirmative action, the role of religion in public life – to be managed by a political elite. These problems can only be address by an educated, informed, vigilant, and active citizenry.

We see an **opportunity**. Declines in political involvement, voter turnout, public trust in government, interest in current events, and participation in local public meetings – some of these problems seem to be turning around during this presidential election. If participation in the political process is a more positive experience, then perhaps Americans will maintain their interest after this election season ends.

We can build upon **experience**. Check out the reports on *Everyday Democracy’s* [web site](#). Read Matt Leighninger’s *The Next Form of Democracy* and *Intergroup Dialogue*, edited by David Schoem and Sylvia Hurtado. Consider the way Oregon undertook an open and deliberative process to change its health care system (described in Gutmann and Thompson’s *Why Deliberative Democracy?* on pages 17-20, which you can read at <http://press.princeton.edu/chapters/s7869.html>), and the ongoing work of *Portsmouth Listens* in New Hampshire (<http://portsmouthlistens.org/>). We know a lot more about *how* to do this work than we did even ten years ago.

Does deliberative democracy work?

Yes, it does.

We’re not naïve. We know that democracy is an attractive idea that is easier said than done. We are aware of the valid questions about whether deliberative democracy is realistic or even desirable. The foundations for truly democratic dialogue – inclusiveness, open-mindedness, informed participation, reasonableness – seem unattainable or unenforceable. True inclusiveness requires that those with power set it aside. Is it realistic to expect that level of personal integrity? A deliberative process can be time-consuming and impractical. For some issues, our pluralistic society makes it nearly impossible to find common ground. Too many conflicts, particularly those stemming from moral beliefs, are irreconcilable. These legitimate concerns call for continued study, experimentation, and discussion.

But we also believe that Americans should not settle for the alternative – disengaged communities and a distant government of and by those who happen to be the majority.

Every generation of Americans faces new challenges that provoke questions about how best to achieve a just society. The difference now is that, after years of measurable declines in civic and political participation, ordinary citizens are finding they have a voice, a say in the answers to the big questions facing society.

The other distinction is that, in a deliberative democracy, the responsibility for real change is *shared* – it is not only that elected officials consult citizens before making decisions *for* those citizens. It is that problems are considered from multiple perspectives: what can our policy makers or the government do address a problem? What can others do – others such as nonprofit organizations, citizen groups, corporations, and faith communities? And what can I do as an individual? What changes can I make in my own habits and behaviors? What is my responsibility to address these concerns, and how do I live up to that responsibility?

We all shares responsibility for making deliberative democracy work.

What “principles and practices” is TDI seeking to promote in student learning and/or institutional governance and decision-making?

We’re specific.

1. We seek to advance **student understanding of democracy’s guiding principles, particularly freedom, justice, and equity**. We want *all* students to graduate knowing: constitutional ideals; history and political theory of American democracy; the global context for American democracy global interdependence and problem solving, economic, issues of social and political justice, equity, and access, and the responsibilities of citizens in a free society.
2. We seek to advance **student learning in particular democratic practices** of an effective citizenry, abilities in: democratic dialogue, public reasoning and deliberation, conflict negotiation and transformation, and collaborative policy-making and social action.
3. We challenge campuses to **model democratic principles and practices** in institutional decision making and leadership.

Don’t most colleges and universities already educate for democracy?

Certainly every university president and board is “for” civic engagement, diversity, and democracy, but few organize their institutional practices in a way that would suggest that they take this mandate seriously. The term *democracy* is not in most institutional mission statements. It is not clear that existing programs affect more than a small number of students, and it is not clear that students in general are changing their attitudes toward matters of equity, justice, and civic engagement as a result of their college experiences. Nearly 90% of all college students report that they attend college “to get a better job.” More students may be involved in community service, but few are developing the passion

for or skills needed for taking on the economic, social, and political inequities that give rise to the need for community service in the first place. For example, it is unusual to find a campus that integrates the diversity and civic engagement offices. Structurally, colleges and universities rarely model exemplary democratic practices, as evidenced by their entrenched promotion and tenure systems, disciplinary silos, and hierarchical power structures.

We know that a certain amount of teaching and learning for democracy occurs in academic disciplines, interdisciplinary programs, and high impact learning structures (e.g., first year experiences, internships, senior capstones, study abroad). (For a graphic of where teaching and learning for deliberative democracy can occur on campus, see [our graphic](#). We suspect, however, that this kind of learning occurs in isolated courses that are disconnected from complementary efforts in other departments. Currently, TDI is coordinating an ambitious effort to study where democratic learning occurs, and to what end (to become involved in this exploration, go to Catalyst Papers).

Perhaps most discouraging is the fact that, despite higher education's attention to civic engagement and diversity, national patterns of socio-economic inequality, polarization based on social identity and ideology, acts of intolerance and incivility, and, more recently, environmental deterioration, persist. We are seeing more excitement over this year's presidential election, but it isn't clear that that will stick or translate into individual long-term commitment to social change or political engagement.

What does my campus need to do to educate for a more just and deliberative democracy? How would we get started?

What is called for is not necessarily an increase in the number of programs or a heavier workload for educators. Rather, colleges and universities need to examine their current programs and activities and align them with the principles and practices of democracy. What is called for is a shift in the way colleges and universities do their work.

There are lots of ways to get started, and what campuses do depends on their circumstances and what they hope to accomplish. Here are a few ideas:

1. Take an inventory of what's already being done
2. Assess student learning in democracy, intercultural competency and diversity, civil liberties and human rights, civic and social responsibility, and democratic process
3. Consider including "public reasoning" as a core competency for student learning
4. Convene dialogues and open forums on educating for democracy
5. Involve students and work with the local community on a pressing economic, social, or political issue, using a deliberative process
6. Seize upon an opportunity such as a change in administration, a gift from an alumnus, a crisis, or a current event
7. Frame a campus conversation on something of interest to students, either an on-campus issue (e.g., alcohol use, the role of athletics) or a public issue (e.g., climate change, the election)

8. Assess and change the way decisions are made on campus to adopt a more democratic, facilitative, and shared governance process
9. Organize or attend a TDI gathering
10. Host a TDI workshop on DD on campus

The staff and many members of TDI have extensive experience in guiding campuses through this process of assessment, dialogue, planning, and implementation. For more information on what TDI can do with your campus, see [What We Do](#).

We like the idea of an assessment or inventory. What kinds of things would we look for?

Consider:

1. What do our students know about American democracy not only as a form of government but as a set of ideals unique to our nation? Do students know the necessary conditions of a strong and just democracy? How well do students understand First Amendment freedoms? What do students view as the responsibilities – beyond voting and jury duty – of everyday citizens in a democracy? How are the fundamentals of democracy taught to students outside of political science courses?
2. Where on campus do our students practice democracy? Where do they learn to organize an inclusive group and to engage in an intergroup dialogue? How are they taught to manage conflict and solve public problems? How do they learn to effectuate social change, to move dialogue to action, to challenge laws and make new policies? To what extent do students learn in their classes to frame issues, engage in respectful but candid dialogue, and reason as a group? What would “democracy across the curriculum” look like on this campus?
3. What are our students learning within their majors about their role in a diverse democracy? Where are our students interacting with and discussing public issues with people who are different from themselves? What opportunities do students have to interact with people outside of the college/university? Are they increasing or decreasing their commitment to civic life as result of their studies? In the same way that we measure learning in critical thinking and moral reasoning, what are they learning regarding public reasoning? If they are not learning the principles and practices of democracy in their majors, are they learning it elsewhere, such as in the first year experience or study abroad or senior capstones?
4. This work is usually everybody’s business and nobody’s job. Who is responsible for ensuring that students learn the principles and practices of democracy? How do we all share that responsibility, but also see to it that progress is being made?
5. What is the role of shared governance and democratic leadership on our campus? How does the institutional decision-making process reflect the democratic values

we aspire to model and teach? What ground rules – written or assumed – guide the way this institution does its business?

6. How does this campus manage conflict? Some campuses address conflicts or ongoing concerns through an open process, actively seeking diverse perspectives, encouraging assessment, weighing and testing choices, and conceptualizing reform as an ongoing process rather than a predetermined outcome. Many campuses, however, manage conflict in ways that are anything but democratic, particularly when values compete or positional authority appears to be threatened. Where does your institution fall on this spectrum?

Who joins TDI?

- Faculty members from just about every discipline and interdisciplinary program imaginable
- Administrators from academic and student affairs
- Administrators of programs such as first year experiences, core curricula, senior capstones, study abroad,
- Directors of centers and institutes
- Directors of offices of diversity and civic engagement

Basically, if you are connected to a program or office captured in our graphics on teaching and learning for DD and democratic leadership on campus, you should join.

Why should I join TDI?

- To find colleagues on other campuses who share your interest in teaching and learning for a just and deliberative democracy
- To find support for advancing democratic leadership and shared governance on your campus
- To increase your own knowledge and practice in deliberative democracy in a campus setting
- To stay informed about what's happening nationally on DD and higher education
- To play a leadership role in “moving the needle,” getting colleges and universities to play a more significant role in American democracy
- To tap into a network of people who care about what you care about

As a TDI member, what are my responsibilities?

We're free, so you don't owe us money.

What we really want from you is your interest, time and ideas. But that does not mean that you will have to neglect all your other responsibilities to join us. We support projects, but because we are a lean operation, we ask people to contribute resources to the web site, write, reach out to new members, form communities of practice, host a regional meeting, host a webinar, participate in something specific. It depends on what we are

doing. And we hope that members will propose and take the initiative on their own projects. TDI is happy to help members organize something or to co-sponsor an event or activity.

A lot of our members are quiet for a while, and then they become more active when they can – it is up to you how much time and energy you devote to the cause.

How will TDI do its business?

Our *Statement of Principles and Practices* answers this question in more detail. In terms of how we are going to operate, we plan to be as “flat” an organization as possible. We welcome and need anyone who wants to affect higher education’s role in American democracy. We seek a diverse membership. All of our publications will be open source – our purpose is to share knowledge and resources. We welcome active involvement by our members and are happy to share leadership responsibilities for TDI’s work.

We work consistently with the principles and practices we support, in ways that are respectful, inclusive, knowledgeable and informed, reasoned and deliberative, and carefully designed to effectuate change.

There are lots of other organizations out there. What is TDI’s niche?

We are the only national initiative that focuses on advancing the principles and practices of a just and deliberative democracy in college and university teaching and learning and as an institutional leadership and governance practice.

Our work complements the work of:

- exemplars in the field that work to advance democratic dialogue, public deliberation, and social and political change, such as Everyday Democracy, Public Conversations Project, National Issues Forum, the Taos Institute, Sustained Dialogue, and others,
- the Association for American Colleges and Universities (AACU), which works to advance liberal education and learning, and
- national organizations that work to advance civic engagement more broadly in higher education, organizations such as the New England Resource Center for Higher Education, the Higher Education Network for Civic Engagement and Campus Compact,
- the Deliberative Democracy Consortium (DDC), a group of scholars and practitioners who conduct research that will advance deliberative democracy in public life and in democratic governments internationally,
- the Policy Consensus Initiative, a national organization that promotes effective collaborative governance practices in state leadership,
- and centers and institutes on campuses that work nationally to advance civic education and engagement, public deliberation, intergroup dialogue, and public scholarship

For descriptions and links to these organizations, see Links in our Resources section.