

Dear Friends:

July 8, 2009

Welcome to Durham, to the University of New Hampshire, and to what we believe will be an informative and exciting conference.

This gathering has been organized jointly by The Democracy Imperative and the Deliberative Democracy Consortium on a wing, a prayer, and a shoestring. We felt we had to pull it off – despite the time we knew it would take, despite the drain on our organizations, despite the economy – because there does indeed seem to be “No Better Time” for talking about the challenges and opportunities facing our democracy. The strong response we have received to this conference, in the form of over-capacity registrations, confirms our decision to go forward.

Within the last year, several major trends have become dramatically apparent:

- A sea change in citizen attitudes and capacities, which has been reshaping local political and community action movements for at least a decade;
- The power of those citizen – and particularly youth – capacities as the core ingredient in national, state, and local electoral strategies;
- Growing interest on campuses – without any one obvious “hub” – in deliberative democracy as academic content, pedagogy, and as essential to strong community-university partnerships;
- The increasing use of new technologies to facilitate and accelerate these trends.

And within the field, we have seen much stronger connections between academics and practitioners working on deliberative democracy, and a greater sense that the different models and approaches we use to engage citizens are pointing toward shared goals. We are making progress – and at the same time, our work surfaces new challenges and complications even as it surmounts old ones.

There are two core questions that will guide the deliberations in this conference:

- *How do we move from diffuse democratic experiments to more comprehensive democratic systems?*
- *How do we educate and prepare citizens to be more effective participants in a just and deliberative democracy?*

These questions will surface in different ways in the learning exchange sessions, and we have structured the concluding plenary in order to illuminate the discussions that have taken place and identify key strategies for action.

Thank you for making the sacrifice of time and scarce resources to spend the next few days with us. We are honored to have you here. Please let us know how we can make this conference as rewarding for you as possible.

Welcome!

Nancy and Matt