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## Heard Without Shouting: Promoting Civility in Citizen Engagement

Gary Petree

*Municipal Technical Advisory Service*

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# HEARD WITHOUT SHOUTING: PROMOTING CIVILITY IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Gary Petree, Training Consultant  
August 2009

THE UNIVERSITY of TENNESSEE   
MUNICIPAL TECHNICAL ADVISORY SERVICE

*In cooperation with the Tennessee Municipal League*



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Gary Petree, Training Consultant

August 2009

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# HEARD WITHOUT SHOUTING: PROMOTING CIVILITY IN CITIZEN ENGAGEMENT

Gary Petree, Training Consultant

Why do people shout? Is shouting simply a symptom of rudeness or incivility? I suspect the most common reason is that the people shouting believe the act of shouting gives them the only hope that what they have to say will be heard.

A friend walks toward a potentially dangerous situation near a noisy construction zone. Using a conversational tone of voice, your warning may not be heard above the din of the environment. So, you turn up the volume and shout. Maybe you shout more than once. Maybe you get others to help you shout. You do what you can to give your warning message its best chance to be heard.

Fans in the stands shout during a ballgame. They shout at players hoping their team will hear their encouragement or that the concentration of the opposing team will be shaken. They shout at the coaching staff hoping to communicate “better” ideas about how to gain an advantage. Or, they shout at referees hoping the insults cause them to start making calls that give their team an edge. Fans know that because of the noisy environment, shouting improves the very slim odds their message will be heard.

Citizens have similarities with these examples of a friend and a fan. First, they all want to win. The friend wants to win the struggle against danger. The citizen perceives peril lurking in the pending decision before council. Both may feel the need to shout their warning. The fan wants his team to win the game. The citizen wants his neighborhoods, schools, libraries, local economy, community values, and public safety to prevail against the many forces that threaten to erode the chances for

community survival and prosperity. So, depending on whether they perceive a trend toward winning or losing, each may shout to communicate either support or displeasure. In all these examples, personal stakes are high, so the stakeholders shout with great passion and emotion. And, because each environment is filled with competition that threatens to overwhelm the chances of their message being heard, the shouting is often delivered with adrenaline-filled urgency and even frustration.

A fan who habitually goes to the stadium may become disgruntled and decide to stay home to watch the game on television or listen to it on radio. Ironically, at home, fans may behave the same way they would at the stadium — shouting at players, coaches and referees. Aside from the collective cheer when things go right or the collective groans and moans when things go wrong, the reality of the situation for fans at home is the same as it is for fans in the stands. None of the players, coaches or referees is any more likely to hear messages sent from fans in the stands as they are to hear messages sent from fans in the living room. Nevertheless, fans everywhere yell and scream — hoping it will increase the likelihood that their message will somehow be heard by some person in a way that will do someone somewhere some good.

Like the disgruntled fan, a citizen may stay at home to yell and scream at the news broadcasts on television or radio, still hoping to be heard. Eventually, like the disgruntled sports fan shredding the sports section of the newspaper, the disgruntled citizen resigns himself to the simple cynical pleasure of using the first section of the newspaper



to line the bottom of the birdcage or house train the puppy. Just as fans can lose their enthusiasm and hope of being an important part of a winning team, so, too, citizens lose their enthusiasm and hope of being part of an inclusive governance process. And so, the dream of living in a democracy begins to erode into nothing more than an illusion.

While we have many communities in Tennessee where the local governance process functions reasonably well, just as in any other state, we have instances when the process appears dysfunctional. Citizens begin angrily communicating their displeasure and, in frustration, perhaps eventually disengage from the governance process. Of course, some shouting may occur along the way. As a Public Policy Institute, our primary objective is to promote deliberative dialogue as an alternative, sustaining or improving civic engagement as a form of communication in the local governance process.

Our first year as a Public Policy Institute involved more visioning than anything else. We discovered the potential benefits of incorporating deliberative dialogue into our public service mission and identified opportunities for planting and nurturing the practice of deliberation in Tennessee communities. We adopted a two-pronged, long-term strategy of modeling the practice of deliberative dialogue whenever possible and training moderators to promote deliberative dialogue in their areas of interest. Essentially, our strategy involves the University of Tennessee Municipal Technical Advisory Service (UT MTAS) serving as a conduit rather than a focal point for using deliberative dialogue as a form of civic engagement.

During this second year, woeful realities of our national economy presented an unexpected challenge to our goals. We had to postpone and reschedule a moderator training session that we had planned for November 2008. Another event this spring that was to include an opportunity to model deliberative dialogue was cancelled. Some agencies

that expressed interest in collaborating with us in our efforts to promote deliberative dialogue had to shift their focus in light of their own unexpected challenges. And, perhaps more significantly, surviving the economic downturn became the most important issue at every level, forcing elected officials, public administrators, and citizens to rearrange their priorities.

Despite challenges, we managed to make significant progress in our second year, primarily because of people representing three very important sources of partnership and collaboration — the Jimmy Naifeh Center for Effective Leadership (recently named for public servant Jimmy Naifeh and designated as a new agency at the UT Institute for Public Service), the Howard Baker Center for Public Policy, and a growing number of individuals interested in providing public service as deliberative dialogue moderators.

### **MODELING DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE**

Our most important opportunity to model the practice of deliberative dialogue came in the form of support from our parent organization, the Institute for Public Service. In November 2008, the leadership team of the Naifeh Center for Effective Leadership modified the agenda for its Local Government Leadership Program (LGLP) to allow time for a deliberative dialogue forum. LGLP is a leader development program designed and offered for the benefit of elected and appointed officials serving in local governments of cities and counties in Tennessee. This platform gave us the opportunity to start our second year research effort to answer three questions: (1) what value do locally appointed and elected officials perceive in deliberative dialogue after they have had a chance to experience it, (2) do they see potential for using the practice in their communities, and (3) are they willing to invest resources in developing local capacity to apply the practice as a way to promote civic engagement involving issues of local importance?



True to form, the LGLP participant group included representatives from city and county governments throughout the state of Tennessee, with 21 participating in the deliberative dialogue forum. This was the first national issues forum for all but one of the participants. After experiencing deliberative dialogue at LGLP, 80 percent indicated that participating in the forum caused them to consider aspects of the issue for the first time.

We used the National Issues Forum Institute topic “What is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools?” to engage them in dialogue. This topic proved especially useful as all participants had some connection to it. And, while levels of involvement and responsibility for governance of public schools vary from one community to another, the whole group demonstrated a sincere passion for and belief in the urgent need for public policy decisions and actions related to the future of our public schools. The topic worked very well as a tool to effectively engage the participants in the process; however, responses to the questionnaires completed by participants immediately after the forum indicated that more than one-third of the participants never moved beyond the issues of the topic to the point of recognizing and evaluating the practice of deliberation as a way to promote civic engagement.

We crafted a follow-up questionnaire and mailed a copy (return envelope included with postage) to each participant approximately 10 weeks after the event. As the opportunity to experience a forum is often only the planting of a seed, we wanted to create an opportunity to encourage recall and reflection on the deliberative dialogue experience. A copy of the questionnaire is at Appendix A.

The response rate for the group was 43 percent. The response rate for elected officials in the group was 54 percent, although the response rate for participants other than elected officials was only 22 percent.

Responses to the questionnaire revealed the following:

- Even though three months had passed, most respondents recalled and recorded a specific thought or observation related to the topic of the deliberative dialogue forum.
- While all indicated uncertainty about what to expect before attending the deliberative dialogue session, they had not anticipated an opportunity to express their own views about the topic.
- Each respondent indicated they found benefit in the practice of deliberative dialogue.
- The one benefit cited most often by respondents was “gaining an understanding of how deliberative dialogue can serve as a means to engage the public.”

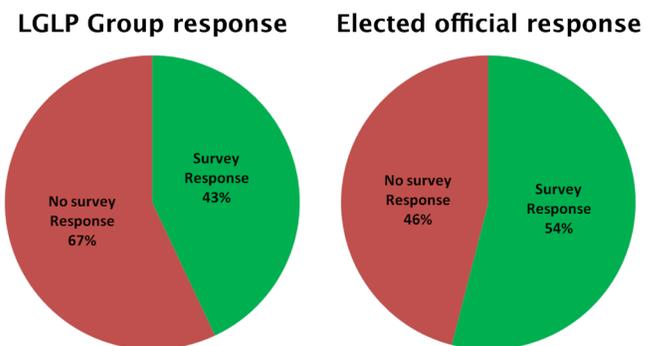


Figure 1. November 2008 LGLP attendee response rates to deliberative dialogue survey.

Our follow-up questions also provided an opportunity for us to provoke thoughts about using deliberative dialogue to promote civic engagement in the local community.

- Half of the respondents indicated that deliberative dialogue could be used to help with a current topic of local interest.
- More than half said they know someone in their community who might be willing to learn how to serve as a deliberative dialogue forum moderator.



- Seventy percent of responding elected officials wrote comments on their survey response forms indicating they would be willing to promote deliberative dialogue as a means of civic engagement on topics of local interest because they perceive that it would either:
  1. Give a sense of empowerment to the community,
  2. Help improve understanding of issues in the community, or
  3. Improve the quality of information on local topics over what is commonly available through the local newspaper.

The results from this survey indicate that this group of local elected officials, albeit small, sees the potential for benefits associated with introducing the practice of deliberative dialogue in their communities. Unfortunately, our opportunity to enlarge the sample this year was lost when effects of the economy forced a decision to cancel the Annual LGLP Alumni event scheduled for spring 2009.

### **TRAINING MODERATORS**

We suspect that we also are right to blame negative effects of the economy for having to cancel the moderator training session we had scheduled for November 2008. Only four people registered for the event. Fortunately, because of collaboration from the new Howard Baker Center for Public Policy at the University of Tennessee, we were successful in rescheduling the event for April 2009. This resulted in an opportunity to train 14 new moderators in our second year.

It is noteworthy that none of the attendees came as a direct result of our effort to model deliberative dialogue at LGLP. While the collective reaction of

local government officials clearly was favorable when introduced to deliberative dialogue at LGLP, for some reason their favorable reaction in November and our follow-up in February did not result in anyone from their communities attending the moderator training offered in April. While this is more likely a reflection of the economy than anything else, we need to be sure we focus on improving the mechanics that will enable the local government official to share the vision of deliberative dialogue as a form of civic engagement when they return to talk with other leaders in their community, and that they identify community leaders who can be sent to training and who can then help promote the practice in their community.

Of course, the value of our efforts to train moderators comes from their post-training application of the practice. Many of them are ready to work within a structured framework that will enable them to become change agents by promoting the practice of deliberative dialogue within their communities and organizations. Several of them already have become independently active and shared encouraging news about their efforts to promote deliberative dialogue in their areas of interest in public service.

### **RACE RELATIONS CENTER OF EAST TENNESSEE**

The Race Relations Center organized and sponsored five two-hour sessions that brought together representatives from diverse neighborhoods in the city of Knoxville to talk about racism. They called the program Talking about RACE (Roundtables Addressing Community Equity) and used materials developed and distributed by Study Circle Resource Center in Pomfret, Connecticut.<sup>1</sup> From this series of roundtable discussions, they were able to agree

<sup>1</sup> See the spring 2008 newsletter of the Community Economic Development Network of East Tennessee at <http://cednet.us/newsletters/Spring%202008%20newsletter.pdf> June 16, 2009.



on the need to focus future community dialogues on the impact of racism on disparities in education and health services. One of the participants in our spring 2008 moderator training session introduced the deliberative dialogue practice in this program effort. Participants reported great satisfaction with the format and also expressed their confidence in using deliberative dialogue to facilitate future discussions.

### **SCHOOL MATTERS AT KNOXNEWS.COM**

Another of our first-year moderator training session participants represents the League of Women Voters in Knoxville, Tennessee. One of her primary interests is in promoting enlightened and participatory decision making in local school district matters. She currently is conducting a literature review for the Tennessee Advisory Commission on Intergovernmental Relations (TACIR) to identify best practices in promoting open communications and cooperation between local governments, school officials, and citizens to make decisions on school matters. She helps moderate dialogue on topics of local interest in an online forum made available through the local newspaper Web site: School Matters at [www.knoxnews.com](http://www.knoxnews.com).

### **CHAMBER OF COMMERCE EDUCATION AWARENESS CAMPAIGN**

Another first-year moderator is the Workforce Development Manager for the Knoxville Area Chamber Partnership. She spearheads an effort to promote community dialogue about the role of education. Through various information initiatives sponsored solely or in part by the local chamber of commerce, citizens can develop a better understanding of just how critical it is

for the community to establish and maintain a standard of excellence in the public school system. Perhaps most importantly, the initiatives provide information about a wide variety of opportunities for industries, businesses, organizations and individuals to make substantive contributions to local schools. To introduce the dialogue, the chamber developed and posted an issue video at a Web site where much of their related work and research is available at [www.knoxvillechamber.com/education](http://www.knoxvillechamber.com/education).

### **ONLINE NIFI FORUM**

One of the participants in our most recent moderator training session has volunteered for training and service as an online forum moderator in the upcoming National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI) topic of health care costs. This has potential to give us information about whether or not people in Tennessee are willing to participate in forums related to the upcoming national discussions and congressional decisions about proposals to reform health care.

### **RELATED INITIATIVES**

In looking for opportunities for collaboration and partnerships, we have increased our awareness of many instances in which work is being done with the support of or in the spirit of the Kettering model of deliberative dialogue.

The Southern Growth Policies Board (SGPB) promotes discussion on topics related to economic development each year. In 2007, the topic was “Building the Next Workforce;”<sup>2</sup> in 2008, “Youth: The Real Future of the South;”<sup>3</sup> and, in 2009, “Strategies for Energy-related Economic

<sup>2</sup> *Building the Next Workforce*. A University of Tennessee Institute for Public Service and Institute of Agriculture report of results from the 2007 Tennessee Community Forums.

<sup>3</sup> *Youth: The Real Future of the South*. A University of Tennessee Institute for Public Service and Institute of Agriculture report of results from the 2008 Tennessee Community Forums.



Development.” UT Agricultural Extension agents and UT IPS consultants team up with stakeholders across the state to sponsor and engage citizens in a two-hour discussion about the value of three approaches to an open-ended question about the topic. For example, “What should your community do to strengthen and capture the vision, passion, and talents of youth, the real future of the South?” This network of people represents a valuable resource for our efforts.

Staff at the Naifeh Center for Effective Leadership introduced a new program this year: a series of public issues forums for state legislators. The format is primarily a presentation of information by a panel of subject matter experts. This new effort represents a potential opportunity for a recurring platform to provide critical information to decision makers on important public policy issues. The topics for the first year were K–12 education, local government, workforce issues, and energy and the environment. Just as these topics have been important for many years, they will continue to be important for many years to come. The staff of the Naifeh Center for Effective Leadership participated in our second-year moderator training session. They understand the value of deliberative dialogue and can help incorporate the practice in a way that will expand its value to include public policy decision makers at the state level. And in a recent development, the impact of the Naifeh Center will only increase in the wake of a statute enacted in the most recent legislative session that formally establishes it as IPS’s fifth independent agency.

The Howard Baker Center for Public Policy officially began operations in 2003 at UT and officially opened the new Baker Center facility on the Knoxville campus on October 31, 2008. The Baker Center’s mission is “to develop programs and

promote research to further the public’s knowledge of our system of governance, and also to highlight the critical importance of public service.”<sup>4</sup> The facility is prominently located on campus and already has been used to host several very successful civic engagement events, including “The Public and the Press Town Hall Meeting,” “Nuclear Energy Policy Issues,” and “Creating Civil Discourse in Public Policy.” The staff also has sponsored several civic leadership events at the new facility: “Girl Power: You Can Make a Difference,” a program for members of the Tanasi Council of Girl Scouts; a high school summer internship to provide the opportunity for students to complete projects designed to help them explore their interests in civic engagement, public service, politics, and political communications and media; and “Campaign 101: Seeking Public Office,” a forum designed to help people interested in running for local political office. And, of course, as mentioned earlier, the staff of the Baker Center collaborated with us to offer deliberative dialogue moderator training this past spring.

### WHERE ARE WE NOW?

Looking back on our short history as a Public Policy Institute, we can note some important accomplishments that will shape our success in the future. We have:

- Trained a network of 25 moderators who live and work in cities across Tennessee from Kingsport in the east to Memphis in the west;
- Identified an untapped resource of potential moderators and forum participants in those who have promoted SGPB discussions in communities throughout the state for several years;
- Gained partners and active supporters of our mission at the Naifeh Center for Effective Leadership and UT’s Howard Baker Center for Public Policy; and

<sup>4</sup> <http://bakercenter.utk.edu/main/> June 16, 2009.



- Developed a research framework that will allow us to continue to promote and study the practice of deliberative dialogue through locally elected and appointed government officials.

## WHERE CAN WE GO FROM HERE?

1. We must take full advantage of opportunities to collaborate with other agencies.
  - Staff of the Naifeh Center for Effective Leadership plan to incorporate another moderated forum in the fall 2009 LGLP agenda. This will enable us to continue our research in promoting deliberative dialogue through locally appointed and elected government officials.
  - Our partners in IPS can sponsor new partnerships in the UT Institute for Agriculture and in our sister agency, the County Technical Assistance Service. This can allow us to grow our pool of moderators with the ability to expand our reach into all communities across the state.
  - The Baker Center gives us a high profile platform for providing the moderator training sessions, and its prestige allows the full breadth and depth of NIFI topics to be offered through the UT Knoxville campus.
  - The UT system of libraries represents an opportunity for collaboration we have not yet explored. It can provide public space to hold deliberative dialogue forums and extend the opportunity for moderator training to people across the state.<sup>5</sup>
2. We must grow and strengthen our network of trained moderators.
  - As IPS provides more opportunities for us to model the value of deliberative dialogue with local officials at LGLP events, we need to improve the likelihood they will identify and send community leaders to moderator training.
3. We must connect deliberative dialogue to state and local public policy issues.
  - We have started an electronic communication network that includes those who have completed our moderator training sessions as well as those who have expressed an interest in the training. We need to expand the potential for this mass communications effort by identifying and including all potential moderators, especially those who have been involved in past SGPB topic forums. This will enable us to assess the full capacity we have for deliberative dialogue across the state.
  - More moderator training sessions may benefit some of those who have assisted with the SGPB discussions in the past. It also may help moderators trained during our first two years to identify and recommend associates who can attend the training and then help moderate forums in their areas of interest.
  - We need to promote timely participation in NIFI forums to provide more opportunities for trained moderators to apply their skills and to begin introducing the practice of deliberative dialogue in more communities across the state.
3. We must connect deliberative dialogue to state and local public policy issues.
  - We need a coordinated effort that will enable us to frame issues and hold deliberative dialogue forums in a cycle that gives civic engagement a meaningful voice with policy makers at the state level. This would require a two-way flow of information at the IPS Public Issues Forums in January. While IPS staff and agencies would still prepare to share information with the legislators, the process may generate thoughts and concerns for the legislators that could result in one or

<sup>5</sup> For more on the concept of roles for libraries in civic engagement, see “Libraries as Civic Agents” by Taylor L. Willingham in the *Public Library Quarterly*, 2008.



more issues appropriate for developing as a topic for deliberative dialogue. Legislative committees may need to provide clarifying information before study circles are organized. Graduate students and faculty of appropriate academic departments can help with the study circles, issue framing, deliberative dialogue forums, and forum reports. See Figure 2.

- To empower a similar process in local government, we need a plan to develop a capability to offer issues framing workshops similar to those offered through the Oklahoma State University Cooperative Extension Partnership for Public Deliberation and at the College of DuPage Community Development Office.
- We need to identify and take advantage of opportunities to model the practice of deliberative dialogue in all appropriate local government training programs, e.g., Municipal Administrators Program (MAP), Tennessee Municipal League (TML) Conferences, Tennessee City Managers

Association (TCMA) Conferences, Tennessee Association of Municipal Clerks and Recorders (TAMCAR) conferences, etc. In fact, using the concept of figure 2, the spring conference season could provide opportunities to conduct study circles with local government officials when topics are pertinent, and the fall conference season could provide opportunities to conduct forums when topics are appropriate.

- We need to take full advantage of creative dynamics provided by our legislature establishing the Naifeh Center for Effective Leadership as an independent agency under the Institute for Public Service. This agency is best positioned within our organizational structure to develop our capacity for deliberative dialogue to its fullest potential within the state of Tennessee. As such, we recommend a third year renewal of this contract under the administration of the Naifeh Center with continued assistance from the MTAS training staff.

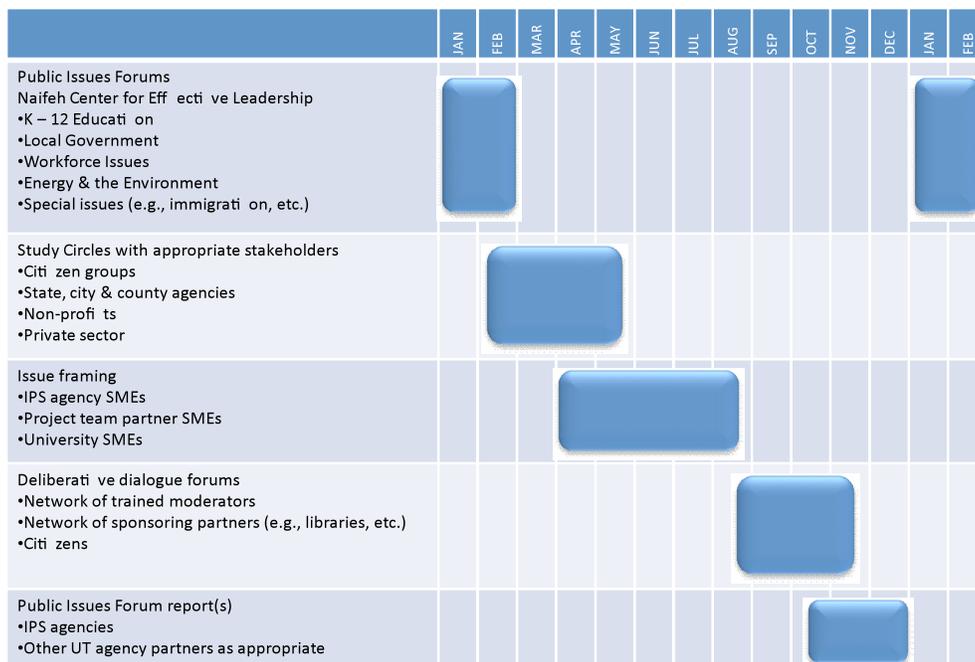


Figure 2. Proposed civic engagement calendar for state level issues.



In the three examples of a friend, a fan and a citizen, all feel that shouting improves their chance to be heard. Yet, only two of them, the friend and the fan, must shout to have a chance to be heard. The citizen shouts — over the phone, at city hall, at the council meeting, or even at the television or radio — not because he believes he can't be heard. It's because he believes government is ignoring him. And, because the stakes are high and because he wants to be part of a winning community, the citizen may shout with all the emotion, passion, urgency, and even frustration of the most diehard of sports fans. The citizen can be heard without shouting, as long as government makes a conscious decision and effort to listen.

Included in the list of old farmers' advice is the insightful adage that "words that soak into your ears are whispered, not yelled." Deliberative dialogue is a form of civic engagement that provides the opportunity for government to listen to citizens speak and be heard without shouting.



## APPENDIX A: RESEARCH SURVEY

During the opening session of the Local Government Leadership Program in November at the UT Conference Center, we held a deliberative dialogue forum using the question “What is the 21st century mission for our public schools?” Please take a few moments to answer some follow up questions about your participation in that process. A prepaid postage envelope is enclosed for your convenience in returning this questionnaire. Thank you very much for your time!

1. What is your affiliation with local government?  City  County
2. Which category best describes you?  Elected official  Public administrator/staff
3. Check all responses that indicate what you expected from the deliberative dialogue forum before it started:
  - An opportunity to hear a fellow public official give me information about the topic
  - An opportunity to hear a debate of different opinions about the topic
  - An opportunity to express my own views about the topic
  - An opportunity to hear other LGLP participants’ express their views about the topic
  - I didn’t know what to expect
4. What particular thought or observation did you gain from the deliberative dialogue forum that caused you to continue thinking about how to improve public education in your community?  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_
5. Check all responses that indicate the most significant benefit(s) you gained from participating in the forum:
  - It improved my understanding of the issues associated with public education.
  - It improved my understanding of how other people view the issues associated with public education.
  - It helped me understand how deliberative dialogue can serve as a means for public engagement.
  - It gave me an opportunity to express my views about public education in an organized process.
  - It had no significant benefit.
6. Do you see value in the practice of deliberative dialogue as a means to promote civic engagement in your community?  
 Yes  Somewhat  No
7. Do you know of a current topic of local interest that you think deserves better civic engagement to help understand the issues?  
 Yes  No

If yes, please describe the topic(s): \_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_  
\_\_\_\_\_



8. Do you know people in your community who would be willing to learn how to moderate deliberative dialogue forums and to serve as a moderator of forums in your community?

- Yes                       Maybe                       No

9. Have you attempted to use any aspect(s) of the deliberative dialogue process in your personal, public, or professional affairs since participating in the deliberative dialogue forum?

If yes, please briefly describe the topic and circumstances.

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10. As a local elected official or public administrator, would you be willing to support the use of deliberative dialogue as a means of promoting civic engagement on a particular topic of local interest?

- Yes                       No

Why or why not?

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**Demographic information (optional):**

- Where do you live?             Small town             Large city             Suburb             Rural
- Are you male or female?     Male                       Female
- How old are you?             18 – 30             31 – 45             46 – 64             65 or older
- What best describes you?     Native American     African American     Hispanic  
 White/Caucasian     Asian American  
 Other \_\_\_\_\_

Kettering Foundation sponsors the UT MTAS effort to promote local capacity for deliberative dialogue as a means for civic engagement. UT MTAS is an agency of the University of Tennessee Institute for Public Service. If you need more information about developing the capacity for deliberative dialogue in your community, contact Gary Petree at UT MTAS, (865) 974-0411.



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