

Teaching the Art of Public Deliberation—National Issues Forums in the Classroom¹

Daniel W. O'Connell, *Palm Beach Community College*
Robert H. McKenzie, *New College, University of Alabama*

Democracy requires a deliberating citizenry, and college is the best place to teach the practice of public deliberation. From this perspective we will describe how you can teach this democratic practice in your political science classroom.

In a traditional political science class, students are taught to participate in the political process by voting, joining interest groups, and protesting. According to focus group discussions with students on ten college campuses, many students are now rejecting these forms of participation (Harwood Group, 1993). The good news is that students are able to envision alternative forms of participation which require that they learn how to understand issues, hold political discussions, and make decisions with others. Political science faculty have a particular responsibility for enabling students to acquire these deliberative skills.

In order to further the skill of public deliberation, the Kettering Foundation and the Public Agenda Foundation, both nonpartisan research foundations, created the National Issues Forums (NIF) program. Each year since 1981, Kettering and Public Agenda have prepared issue books on three major issues of national concern. These issue books have two critical characteristics: They present issues in public rather than expert or ideological terms, and they encourage people to make tough choices rather than just discuss issues.

The issue books come in several editions—regular, abridged, and, for certain issues, a special college edition. The regular edition of the “Juvenile Crime” issue book has 24 pages, which includes a discussion about forums, a description of the issue, the pros and cons of three choices to address the issue, a summary of the choices, a list of additional readings, and pre- and

post-forum ballots. There are Teacher Guides available for most of the issues books. Short videocassettes are also available as forum or classroom starter tapes.

Teachers who want to use NIF will find many training opportunities and numerous other print, audio, and video materials. One to three day public policy institutes and NIF workshops are held throughout the United States each year. These institutes and workshops provide opportunities to participate in a community or classroom forum, network with other NIF users, and receive the NIF resource materials. For information about the NIF, there is a national hotline: 1-800-433-7834.

There are many ways you can use the NIF process on campus. Forums or study circles can be held in many settings, including residence halls, regular courses, honors programs, faculty development workshops, freshman orientation programs, public forums on local community and campus issues, and alumni, adult, and continuing education programs.

The two examples of the successful use of the NIF process and NIF materials in the classroom that follow are for political science courses at a community college and for an interdisciplinary social science course at a university.

NIF in the Community College

Dan O'Connell has been using the NIF process and materials² in all of his “Introduction to Political Science” and “American National Government” classes for the last five years. The current NIF Issue Books are usually adopted as supplements to the textbook for each course. The Teacher's Guide is used to prepare for moderating the class discussion, and the starter

videocassettes are useful to reinforce the issue choices and consequences.

The NIF process materials are featured in the public policy section of the courses. It takes at least a week to go through a study circle or class forum. Questions on the process of public deliberation and the specific issue studied are included on examinations. A graded written assignment is given after the class deliberation; in most cases this is a letter to the president or other appropriate public official.

The NIF process has proven successful in stimulating student participation and discussion. Some issues and books are more popular than others. Students preferred *Boundaries of Free Speech* to *The \$4 Trillion Debt*. A newly designed honors course, entitled “The Art of Public Deliberation and Community Building,” will use all three current issue books (*Immigration*, *Juvenile Violence*, and *Contested Values in Schools*) as well as a new book, *Public Politics* by Bob McKenzie (1994).

NIF in the University

Bob McKenzie teaches interdisciplinary social sciences courses, not political science courses. But since the focus of each course is politics in its broad sense, his course using NIF can be adapted for use by political science teachers.

This course, which is a required general education course, is a seminar of approximately 20 students that prepares them for a specific disciplinary course, such as political science. The course is about politics conceived as all that we do or fail to do in living together effectively. The overall goal is to awaken and build in students the

lifelong habits of civic participation and public effectiveness.

The course helps students explore and integrate ideas about themselves and society. They are able to develop a philosophy of citizenship through a better understanding of the social sciences. The course draws upon political science as well as the disciplines of human development, speech communication, history, sociology, psychology, and anthropology.

The objectives of the course are to increase students' understanding of how people

- develop their political knowledge and values
- learn and improve their learning skills
- obtain and evaluate information related to public policy issues
- make political choices in the face of ambiguity—to make political judgments

The NIF issue books and the text, *Public Politics*, which draws upon analyses of democratic theory and social science research, are assigned to the students. The reflective dimension of the course is based on eight brief homework essays and four homework reports. The essays require students to analyze their deliberative experiences in the light of the key ideas discussed in the text.

The course itself is conducted largely through deliberative discussion. The class activities begin with a discussion of what our political experiences have been, what we think politics is, and how political work is done.

The first engagement of deliberation is a forum on "*Politics for the Twenty-first Century*." This is the model for further student work in understanding the concept and practice of public talk. Next, students moderate and evaluate a forum on one of this year's NIF issues. For example, this year the first issue will be juvenile violence. The class will do exercises in issues analysis developed by Bob McKenzie for NIF training programs.

Students then are asked to look more closely at how people develop the things they value as the

deepest motivations for their behaviors. They view a videotape entitled, "What You Are Now Is Where You Were When" (Magnetic Video Library, Farmington Hill, Michigan) to prepare for the discussion about value formation and an exploration of where their views of politics, values, and political behavior originate.

The students moderate and evaluate two other issues with NIF materials. In 1995 these issues were "Immigration" and "Contested Values in Schools." In each case the class takes an even deeper look at the ideas behind the public talk

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and learn about the particular public policy issue. The class is offered for honors and nonhonors students. The honors students use the remainder of the semester to write essays on the implications for higher education of the course's ideas about deliberative democracy. These essays are used in the *New College Review*, an undergraduate journal produced by the students.

The nonhonors course takes a more experiential approach. In this section, a current concern of members of the university community is the issue for a fifth forum topic. Smaller groups are organized to refine the results of the issue analysis exercise into the basic framework of an issue book for this topic. Sources of information about public policy issues—radio, television news programs, newspapers, magazines and journals—are analyzed and compared with the information that is sharpened in deliberative forums.

The students then plan and conduct a series of smaller forums and one large campuswide forum on the

issue. Issues framed in this fashion have included unity and diversity on campus and the purposes of a college degree. The planning of the campuswide forum includes publicity, involvement of policymakers, and logistics for a public meeting.

Finally, the class evaluates its experiences in conducting forums. An analysis of the final forums and their implications for public talk and deliberation are the topic of a final examination essay. The final examination also includes an objective test on all previous reading assignments and class discussions.

These two descriptions illustrate how the art of public deliberation can be taught through using NIF materials and conducting forums in the classroom. These materials and methods are also presented as ways for political science teachers to meet their responsibility to teach civic literacy and political competence.

Notes

Editor's Note: O'Connell and McKenzie will be offering "Public Politics, the Art of Deliberation: National Issues Forums in the Classroom" among the short courses at the 1995 Annual Meeting. Look for the course description and registration materials in the Association News section of this issue of *PS*.

1. The authors invite faculty using NIF to contact them through the NIF Clearinghouse, 100 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2777 or 1-800-221-3657. They are developing a means to collect syllabi and other class uses of the NIF over the Internet.

2. National Issues Forums books include: *Energy Options*, *The Environment at Risk*, *The Poverty Puzzle*, *Criminal Violence*, *Remedies for Racial Inequality*, *The Day Care Dilemma*, *Youth at Risk*, *Education*, *The Health Care Cost Explosion*, *Coping with AIDS*, *The Battle Over Abortion*, *Boundaries of Free Speech*, *The Drug Crisis*, *The \$4 Trillion Debt*, *Regaining the Competitive Edge*, *Prescriptions for Prosperity*, and *America's Role in the World*.

The NIF issue books that are directly related to students and politics are: *Politics for the Twenty-First Century: What Should Be Done on Campus?* and *People and Politics: Who Should Govern?*

The three NIF issue books for 1994-95 are: *Admission Decisions: Should Immigration Be Restricted?* *Contested Values: Tug-of-War in the School Yard*. *Kids Who Commit Crime: What Should Be Done About Juvenile Violence?*

The NIF issue books planned for 1995-96 are on: *Assessing America's Decision: Citi-*

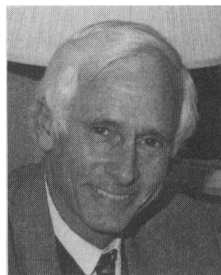
zens Guide to Foreign Policy; Family Values; Income Inequality.

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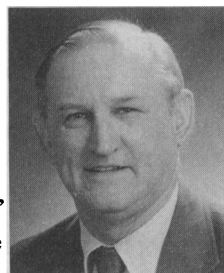
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About the Authors

Daniel W. O'Connell is a member of the Florida Bar. He teaches political science at Palm Beach Community College in Lake Worth, Florida, and is a visiting associate professor at the Kettering Foundation (1994-95).



Robert H. McKenzie is an associate professor in New College at The University of Alabama at Tuscaloosa. He teaches in the areas of civic effectiveness, public policy, and public leadership. He is author of *Public Politics*, Kendall-Hunt Publishing Co., 1994.



A Comparison of Washington Semesters at Public Colleges and Universities: Who Gets What, When and How

William D. Pederson, *Louisiana State University-Shreveport*
Norman W. Provizer, *Metropolitan State College*

There is a "revolution" in learning that is taking place in America. It is a silent revolution in academia, a movement begun in and out of Washington, D.C. that has spread over the past sixty years, nurtured by modern political scientists devoted to teaching. The Washington Semester, as this movement may be called, has brought experiential education to countless college and university students, adding a new dimension to civic and cultural education in America. The ripple of influence of this political science movement has touched Main Street and mainstream politics as evidenced by the fact that the 1980 Democratic presidential candidate was a product of this "revolution" (Navasky 1988). An unstructured network of Washington Semesters involving several hundred colleges and universities from some fifty independent programs and others affiliated with private organizations, the Washington Semester experience remains the best kept secret in innovative American civic education. The diversity of such a pervasive movement invites analysis and comparison to identify com-

monalities and differences of these programs at public institutions.

For purposes of analysis, this paper is divided into three sections: (1) a "methodological" discussion defining "Washington Semesters" and a presentation of their evolutions; (2) three case studies, chosen randomly, ranging from the South (LSU in Shreveport), to the West (Metropolitan State College) to the Midwest (University of Michigan-Dearborn), and (3) some tentative conclusions about the "Washington Semester" for less affluent public college and university students.

A "Revolution" in Civic and Cultural Education

Although some 20 million people, including several thousand college interns, visit Washington, D.C. annually, Washington programs that emphasize both civic and cultural components are a vastly unrecognized species. In part this may be because internships are now a Washington institution, popularized in the media and in the political science profession (Frantzich 1991).

Most colleges and universities offer internship programs of some kind. Unfortunately, standard reference works make no effort to distinguish whether they are (1) offered in Washington, D.C., (2) "independent study" courses which students pursue on their own, (3) independent programs or if they are affiliated with another institution. The frustration created by lack of information gave rise to a nearly decade-long effort to compile a directory of Washington programs for college and university students.¹

As this overview suggests, the very definition of a Washington Semester is imprecise. It has evolved into an amorphous program including a range of approaches from tour groups (a vacation) to traditional internships. This is doubly unfortunate, for tour groups represent pure vacation without formal education while internships are often unstructured and may represent a privilege for students who are able to buy into the Washington power market.

Washington Semesters are annual group programs for college and university students, containing both