



Executive Summary: Campus Conversations

This report summarizes the activities of the Campus Conversations initiative during its first year of operation. On April 11th, 2006, these activities culminated with Carnegie Mellon's second campus-level deliberative poll.[®]

Our first deliberative poll took place on Saturday, November 19th. We created materials on two broad issues that had specific relevance to Carnegie Mellon students. Those issues were the diversity of the campus community and campus moral values in private and public life (with an emphasis on the problem of illegal file sharing). We gained considerable experience from this event and built upon it in preparations for our second deliberative poll.

The topic of the deliberative poll was the "Student Bill of Rights" initiative as that is being discussed at both the national and local (campus) level. Specifically, we were interested in learning what the students and faculty felt about a proposed amendment to Student's Rights Policy already in place at CMU. This amendment had been criticized and subsequently vetoed by the Student Senate due to lack of input from the campus community. Our spring event was designed to assist in the decision-making process regarding these issues.

In order to prepare for the poll, a core group of faculty and staff met weekly to develop the topics and materials used for the background documents. The University Libraries contributed staff time and resources in the reproduction of the final documents as well as the design and development of a Resource guide for participants. Additionally, the Student Senate both financed and oversaw the printing of the posters that advertised our event.

In addition to a random sample of students and faculty, we actively sought out interested participants in three ways: heads of campus organizations were contacted and asked to supply names of members who may be interested in participating, posters were created to advertise the event and raise awareness of Campus Conversations in general, and fliers were passed out outside of Doherty Hall. Participants who responded to these outreach activities comprised a "convenience sample," a sample that serves to help expand participation in Campus Conversations at Carnegie Mellon and increases our ability to make substantive findings of the results.

This event saw a marked increase in participants when compared to the fall event. Sixteen randomly sampled participants were evenly divided into two discussion groups and ten convenience sample participants were evenly divided into two groups of five. Our total number

of participants was twenty-six. While small in numbers, the demographics were stratified and the statistical data has produced meaning results.¹

General findings.

- Demographically, our sample of students and faculty was neither extremely conservative or extremely liberal. Indeed, most indicators suggested that the group was slightly left of moderate.
- In terms of viewpoints regarding the role of various constituencies having influence on educational objectives and course content, our participants generally endorsed the influence of students, faculty and administrators. In contrast, we saw little support for the role of government, business, or religious organizations. Examination of pre-poll scores vs. post-poll scores suggests that these perspectives became even stronger after participation in the poll.
- Our data suggest overwhelming opposition for the Student's Bill of Right as proposed by Carnegie Mellon's Student Senate or by Horowitz. Moreover, the vast majority of participants endorse retaining Carnegie Mellon's current Students' Rights Policy. Participation in the Deliberative Poll resulted in greater opposition to any form of modification to the current policy.

This event was a testament to the fact that we are moving in the right direction. We have begun increasing our response rates with randomly sampled participants and have begun to market our initiative to a wider audience. This semester we also developed relationships with both the Student and Faculty Senate. The Student Senate, in particular, is excited about the future of Campus Conversations and the unique way it can help them make better decisions.

The results of the April Deliberative Poll on the proposed Bill of Rights showed a marked shift toward keeping the current CMU policy as it is stated in the Word/Student Handbook and a supermajority rejection of the Horowitz's "Student Bill of Rights." On the basis of these results, the Student Senate will consider the matter settled.

Regardless of the particular results, we feel that we have demonstrated the virtues of an *informed, structured discussion* (vis a vis the deliberative polling techniques) to our campus community. The importance of this campus-citizen deliberation is especially true for those groups whose mission includes that of providing information to and gaining feedback from the campus community. Both the Student Senate and the Faculty Senate now see these kinds of deliberative events as an important element of their mission and are willing to pay for costs of these events.

Future

Fall 2006 Campus Conversations:

¹ While the random sample and convenience sample are separate (and remained separate in the small group discussions), both groups tended to shift their beliefs and perspectives in the same direction. Because of the fact that changes went in the same direction for both groups, the convenience sample and random sample can be considered together in the overall results of the Deliberative Poll.

The first, developed in conjunction with the Faculty Senate, will be on faculty course evaluations (FCE's) and will take place in September. The second, supported in part by a grant from the Center for Arts in Society, will be on public art on campus and will take place in November.

Establishing a Campus Conversations Advisory Board

- 1) Representative from the Diversity Advisory Council
- 2) Student Senate Representative
- 3) Faculty Senate Representative
- 4) Dean of Student Affairs
- 5) Representative from University Libraries
- 6) Representative from Staff Council
- 7) Representative from the Graduate Student Assembly

PICOLA software will be used in conjunction with future Campus Conversations. It will allow us to extend the deliberative process by one week to allow for more discussion and additional information. Both the synchronous and asynchronous features of PICOLA were successfully tested during April's event.

Neil Guzy is the 2006/2007 Coro Fellow in Local Democracy. Among other tasks, he will be responsible for coordinating Fall and Spring Deliberative Polls at CMU. Special thanks to Randy Weinsten, our first Fellow. Randy set the standards for all future work, both here and at the Coro Center for Civic Leadership. Thanks also to Liz Style, Program Manager at the Southwestern Pennsylvania Program for Deliberative Democracy. Liz has guided the entire program through a successful first year.