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Viewpoint

More Deliberation, Not Debate

By Jeffrey Kennedy & Simon Pek

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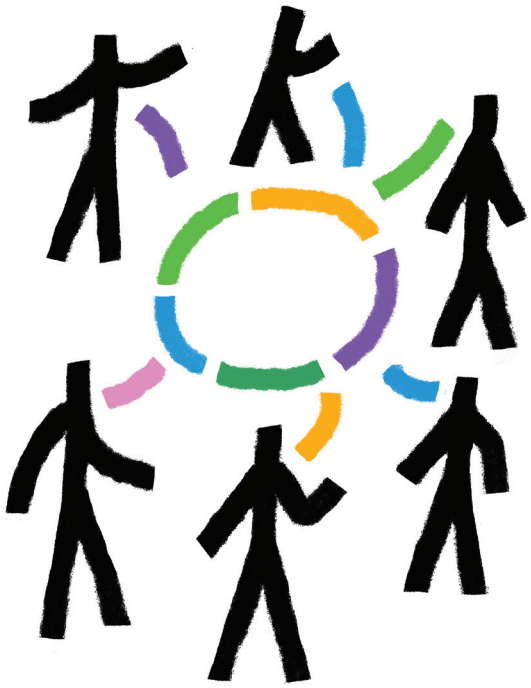

More Deliberation, Not Debate

Deliberation should supplant debate as the ideal that universities adopt for addressing the most pressing political and social issues.

BY JEFFREY KENNEDY & SIMON PEK

University campuses across North America are increasingly polarized places—both for university communities themselves and for the public at large. In the last year, protests over the Gaza war have led to accusations of hate speech, disciplinary actions, police interventions, violent attacks on protesters, congressional hearings, and even the resignations of college presidents.

Before these latest controversies, universities were embroiled in conflict over their approaches to the COVID-19 pandemic, and clashes over programs promoting diversity, equity, and inclusion are ongoing. Across various topics, polling in the United States reveals serious partisanship among university student bodies, while confidence in higher education itself is increasingly dividing the public along political lines.

While the proper scope of debate is often disagreed upon, the ideal of debate as the means of addressing valid disagreement in the university generally goes unquestioned. But does debate merit its privileged status on campus?

Even in its more reasoned forms, debate involves opposing parties working to defeat their opponent and win the argument. Debates rarely involve participants stopping to reflect about the other's views, being willing to revise their thinking, admitting mistakes, or building off the other side's insights. Consider the countless YouTube clips of debates with titles proclaiming that one party "obliterates," "destroys," "eviscerates," or "owns" their opponent.

To be sure, debate, like protest, can play a crucial role in public discourse. But amid division and decreasing confidence in higher education, universities need more *deliberation*, not more debate. Like debate, deliberation involves the reasoned exchange of views, but not aimed at simply winning the argument. Instead, it seeks to better understand the issues and options, weigh potential trade-offs between possibilities, establish common ground, and ultimately formulate the most justifiable path forward. Rather than persistence and rhetorical flair, deliberation demands humility, a willingness to listen, and recognition of a shared stake in the issue.

Cultivating deliberative engagement and the capacities to support it is vital for universities. If they cannot find ways to diminish polarization and foster more productive dialogue, they risk losing their legitimacy in the eyes of students, staff, alumni, and the public. Deliberation also holds a key to universities' educational and civic missions. The humble, informed, and critical nature of deliberative interactions affords space to learn about issues and consider a variety of perspectives on them shared by participants. Likewise, deliberation holds the potential to instill the kinds of dispositions that democracy needs out of the citizens and future leaders that universities produce.

UNIVERSITY INNOVATIONS

Despite the orthodoxy of debate, universities today are witnessing the emergence of deliberative initiatives both inside and outside the classroom. Whether for internal decision-making, pedagogical purposes, or the facilitation of community dialogue, these initiatives are testing the potential of deliberative approaches to support the kind of education and engagement that democracy needs.

One promising recent example has been the use of deliberative "mini-publics." A representative cross-section of the university community or student body is selected through a lottery to learn about an issue, hear from experts, deliberate with support from independent facilitators, and decide how to move forward. While the main idea is to arrive at a collective answer to a potentially divisive question, the process can also serve as a transformative and educational civic experience for participants and a model of norms or discourse for those witnessing it.

For instance, the students' union at the London School of Economics (UK) used a student mini-public as the central process for reforming the union's democratic structures. Queen Mary University of London's School of Law (UK) employed one to solicit student input on teaching during the pandemic. Similar approaches have been successfully employed at the University of Victoria (Canada), Swinburne University of Technology (Australia), and the Université Paris-Est Créteil (France), while a cross-university mini-public of legal academics in Australia was organized to develop shared standards for promoting Indigenous cultural competency within law schools.

Past and ongoing research reveals the potential of this kind of initiative. Mini-publics have proven to foster inclusive and civil dialogue oriented toward the common good. Participants have reported

experiencing a range of benefits, including increased knowledge, critical thinking, deliberative capacities like listening, a heightened sense of collective identity, and confidence and readiness to participate in other activities with a reflective disposition. Early data on the London School of Economics initiative, collected by us in an ongoing collaborative research project, suggests that subsequent approaches taken by the officials involved in its organization may also have been more deliberative and that the resulting reforms were themselves intended to foster more student deliberation.

Another crucial development takes a more direct approach by cultivating deliberative capacities and dispositions in the classroom. As an emerging educational practice and philosophy, deliberative pedagogy embraces deliberation as a teaching method that facilitates in-depth learning on chosen topics and fosters important civic skills such as listening, problem-solving, and the ability to construct reasoned arguments. Deliberative teaching has been used in a variety of subjects, including political science, communications, sciences, engineering, and women's studies. It has involved semester-long approaches or activities covering a smaller number of sessions and can occur with or without special resources, facilitators, or experts.

For example, Wabash College in Indiana has integrated deliberative activities into undergraduate biology and chemistry courses. In grappling with climate change and energy policy across several classes, students are provided information on different approaches, along with their advantages and trade-offs, and are supported in their deliberations by trained student and faculty facilitators. Research on in-class deliberative approaches suggests a variety of potential benefits, including knowledge gains, the scrutiny and refinement of previously held opinions, more participatory and collaborative dispositions, and an increased likelihood of participating in civic initiatives on and off campus.

Teaching can also support deliberation in the wider university and beyond. Classes that involve learning *about* deliberation can subsequently leverage that knowledge to support dialogue within the wider public. For example, education students at Spelman College, a historically Black women's college in Atlanta, trained in class to serve as facilitators for community-based deliberative forums, where ordinary citizens learn about and discuss issues of public concern. This included a practice run in which students facilitated such a forum within their college community about racial inequality in education. Engaged in this way, students can connect their own learning to community insight and gain skills in facilitating deliberative approaches. At the same time, their learning supports deliberation outside the university.

DISPLACING DEBATE

Deliberation has enormous potential to address issues productively, enrich students' education, and rejuvenate universities' democratic roles. But its current footprint in higher education is small. For example, while nearly 750 deliberative mini-publics have been used in the public sphere, only a handful of university examples exist. And while not discounting their wider impacts, the number of direct participants in any given mini-public is limited. The London School of Economics example involved a panel of 24 students, while the more open invitational approach of the Parisian Convention Citoyenne Étudiante included almost 450.

To realize deliberation's promise, universities must make these and other deliberative initiatives more common and more central to their intellectual, educational, and political culture. Institutions should seek out and cultivate these kinds of projects through funding, infrastructure, recognition, and other resources. Given the significance of deliberative approaches to their educational and civic missions, investments in them must be focused and sustained. Universities should, for example, have trained staff to support deliberative pedagogy and decision-making, and university offices like student affairs should have mandates to facilitate these kinds of initiatives. This can be built into existing teaching and community relation roles and training, with added funding from philanthropic donors and external grants.

Colorado State University's Center for Public Deliberation—a hub specifically dedicated to supporting deliberative approaches and capacity-building within Northern Colorado—offers inspiration. Through integrated classes and practicums, the center trains students of different majors to serve as facilitators and develop fair, rigorous materials to inform local community decision-making. As such, it institutionalizes deliberative pedagogy at the university, with built-in mandate and capacity to serve the larger community.

But universities can do more than establish initiatives for deliberation. They must themselves become deliberative spaces, including in the way they are governed. Rather than top-down management or self-interested competition, this requires an ongoing commitment to decision-making driven by inclusive, good-faith dialogue, scrutiny, and listening.

Universities must stop elevating debate as the pinnacle of educational excellence and democratic engagement. Instead, deliberation should become just as recognizable a term, just as encouraged in standard classroom practice, and called for just as frequently as debate has been in university life. One might even imagine a future in which student debate clubs are replaced by deliberation clubs. Though the deliberative YouTube titles might not be as catchy, the future of universities, their legitimacy, and the democracy they seek to support may all depend on it. ◼

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JEFFREY KENNEDY is an assistant professor at McGill University's Faculty of Law.

SIMON PEK is associate professor of business and society at the Gustavson School of Business, University of Victoria.