

# The Deliberative Niche: The Diversity and Community Project of the New England Center for Civic Life

Civic Engagement in the First Year of College

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Franklin Pierce University is a private liberal arts institution; its undergraduate college in Rindge, New Hampshire, has approximately 1,600 students. The First-Year Seminar Deliberative Dialogue Initiative is part of the Diversity and Community Project. It was developed by the New England Center for Civic Life in 1999 to address tensions that caused racial conflicts on campus. The Project's goals are to foster an awareness of and respect for diversity and to teach students how to engage effectively in public discourse concerning potentially divisive issues. Our goal is to create an environment in which individuals who may have fundamentally different beliefs and values can engage with each other in dialogues that result in everyone having greater respect and understanding for each other and a more comprehensive understanding of the issues.

Many aspects of our program are informed by deliberative democratic theory and practices drawn from the community-based model developed by the National Issues Forums over the past 25 years. We have adapted these practices for use in the college environment. Deliberative dialogues are structured conversations designed to encourage participants to speak not only as individuals with competing interests, but as members of a community with shared concerns. The goal is to work through conflicting choices in an effort to reach some common understandings and identify actions. People are encouraged to talk about ethical issues not only in terms of facts and statistics, but to include their values, priorities, and personal experiences. Project Associates draw on an array of disciplinary and professional strengths to engage students in diversity topics (including ethnicity, gender, race, religion, sexuality, and socioeconomic class) from various perspectives. In recent years, we have addressed additional subjects ranging from terrorism to alcohol use.

Today, the Project has three interrelated components:

**First-Year Seminar Deliberative Dialogue Initiative:** This integrates deliberative practices into the *Individual and Community Seminar*, a required course for all first-year students (defined as those with fewer than 26 earned credits upon admission). (See Supplemental Material link.)

**Deliberative Forums Initiative:** Four sets of forums, each addressing a different issue, are convened each year. Each set may include up to six separate forums, which are co-moderated by a faculty member and a "Civic Scholar."

**Civic Scholar Program:** Each year up to 10 upper class students learn how to moderate forums and collaborate with the Center's faculty in the development and assessment of forums and related activities.

In a typical fall semester, we have approximately 400 forum participants. (These numbers include students who attend more than one forum.) Approximately 80% are first-year students. In the spring, the participation rate is about 150 (primarily upper-class) students drawn from various majors whose faculty have integrated aspects of the deliberative program into their courses. In addition, students, faculty, and staff from across the campus are welcome to participate.

## **Integration: Academic Life and Students' Lives**

Integrating the Project's Deliberative Dialogue Initiative into the required first-year seminar was a natural fit. The seminar is designed to help Pierce's 550 first-year students to:

- Develop critical thinking skills;
- Learn collaborative skills;
- Become actively involved in the community;
- Explore issues that challenge us to integrate our rights as individuals with community responsibilities;
- Understand the evolution of concepts such as free choice, beliefs, values, independence, and autonomy in the context of community standards.

Because the seminar integrates deliberative dialogue with the academic study of diversity topics, students engage in experiential civic education grounded in public discourse and ethical decision-making. One of the Project's strengths is the way in which its strong curricular integration is linked with co- and extra-curricular content and activities, which builds bridges between students' academic experiences and their lives outside of the classroom.

Faculty who integrate deliberation into the seminar do so to different degrees. Most include one or more of the following:

- Ground rules for deliberation in class discussions;
- One in-class forum;
- Student participation in one or more public forums; and
- Reading assignments that explore diversity, discourse, and ethical-decision making.

In addition, some students learn how to moderate forums, develop their own discussion briefs, or work together on a civic engagement project. (See Supplemental Materials Syllabi, Discussion Guides; Deliberative Dialogue Assignments; and Deliberation, Dialogue, and Debate Role-Plays.)

In *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, the Association of American Colleges and Universities (AAC&U) urges that institutions of higher education foster learning-centered environments in which the increasingly diverse student population can acquire the knowledge and skills needed to “meet the emerging challenges in the workplace, in a diverse democracy, and in an interconnected world.”<sup>1</sup> Five of the eleven “Organizing Educational Principles” the report endorses are characteristic of deliberative pedagogical approaches in that they:

- Value collaborative work;
- Link critical thinking to real-live problems, often involving contested values;
- Interpret education as an informed probing of ideas and values;
- Develop creativity by valuing personal experiences; and
- Celebrate practical knowledge.

AAC&U believes that students need the skills and knowledge to live in a diverse democracy and an interconnected world. The deliberative pedagogical approaches developed by the Center meet the challenge posed by *Greater Expectations* in affirming diverse perspectives, values, and life experiences as essential components for “an education of lasting value.”<sup>2</sup>

## Assessment

Deliberative democracy is based on the premise that it is necessary to engage communities in inclusive public dialogues to equitably address ethical issues. Therefore using deliberative pedagogies to teach diversity and civic content creates a mutually reinforcing learning environment. However, it is important to note the differences between acquiring skills and mastering content to ensure both are effectively taught and accurately evaluated.

Initially, our data indicated that students were being exposed to new perspectives regarding diversity and believed attending forums about these issues was beneficial. However, too often, too many would sit quietly, silently *listening* to a handful of more vocal students. Too few became *active participants*, even after repeated forum experiences.

We identified several barriers. As newcomers, first-year students wanted to fit in. Students used terms such as “clean slate” and “fresh start” and were preoccupied with not making “mistakes,” either socially or academically. Although teaching citizenship skills through the exploration of diversity issues seemed like an ideal combination, it conflicted with students' primary concern — to find their niche in a new environment. Therefore, they were reluctant to express views about potentially divisive topics, explaining:

- “I would rather talk in front of . . . teachers any day than be in front of my peers.”
- “After you finish teaching, you go home. I live here.”
- “Whenever it's about race, I'm afraid to say anything.”

Our students helped us restructure the Project. At first students had been directed to differing locations across campus so that they *wouldn't* be with their classmates during a forum; when they began requesting in-class forums, we listened. Now, students remain with their classmates for their first forum experience, then the group is split in half for the second and any subsequent public forums, ensuring plenty of familiar faces surround them when they are first learning deliberative skills. Initially, there were as many as 50 participants per forum; now it's 18-20. More time is given to practicing communication skills. For example, students engage in role-plays in class before the forums. (See Supplemental Materials: Deliberation, Dialogue, and Debate Role Plays.) Student responses confirm that this revised model, with its emphasis on the development of skills within a supportive and familiar environment, has been effective:

- “When I approached the forum I wanted to learn all sides of my choice and learn a lot about the other choices too.”
- “I will admit that I was nervous at first, but then as we got to the first choice I began to relax. Then to my own surprise, I said something.”
- “I learned that I do have the courage and ability to speak in front of people.”
- “After participating in this forum, I feel more confident in myself.”

We now have a comprehensive assessment program. (See Supplemental Materials: Assessment Instruments.) Comparisons between pre- and post-course data show that 68% of students “feel confident sharing my thoughts in public,” up from 58% at the beginning of the semester, and there is a 33% increase in students who are “significantly” or “very significantly” interested in serving their communities. Students are more aware of the consequences that differing life experiences can have on individuals and groups, with 42% of students responding that deliberative dialogue “significantly” or “very significantly” increased their appreciation for the points of view of others.

**Supplemental Material at [franklinpierce.edu/necc/](http://franklinpierce.edu/necc/):**

Appendix A: Individual and Community Seminar Syllabi

Appendix B.1: Discussion Guide: Gender: What Difference Does It Make?

Appendix B.2: Discussion Guide: Sex, Alcohol, and a Million Decisions

Appendix C: Deliberative Dialogue Assignments

Appendix D: Deliberation, Dialogue, and Debate Role-Plays

Appendix E: Assessment Instruments

## I. Contributor's Name and Contact Information

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## II. Institutional Description

- a. Franklin Pierce University, Rindge, NH
- b. Four-year liberal arts
- c. Private
- d. Residential
- e. 1680 FTE undergraduate students;  
547 First-year students;
- f. 1444 Residential students;  
250 commuter students; 18 first-year commuter students

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1 National Panel Report, *Greater Expectations: A New Vision for Learning as a Nation Goes to College*, vii, (Washington D.C.: Association of American Colleges and Universities. 2002)

2 National Panel Report, *Greater Expectations*, iv.