The Impact of Participating in a Public Deliberation Forum
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Project Overview
The Baylor Public Deliberation Initiative (PDI), a joint partnership between the Office of Community Engagement & Service and Spiritual Formation, was launched in fall 2014 to develop students’ civic capacity for engaging in social issues, to foster civil discourse, and to promote community problem-solving. Baylor PDI host regular deliberative forums on pressing campus, community, and national issues.

Research Questions
This assessment project examined the impact of student participation in the deliberative process itself. Our research questions were:

- What impact does attending a public deliberation forum have on students’ awareness of public issues?
- How did participants change their thinking, attitudes, mindsets as a result of the forum experience?
- After a deliberative forum, were students able to identify potential actions for themselves or others to actively engage in addressing the issue?

Methods
Data was collected through post-forum questionnaires collected from PDI forums held 2014-2017, on a range of different public issues. Every participant was asked to complete one, and a total of 151 questionnaires were turned in from all forums. Analyzed questions were:

1. Are you thinking differently about this issue now that you have participated in the forum? (Yes/No) If so, how?
2. During the forum, did you talk about aspects of the issues you hadn’t considered before? (Yes/No) If yes, please explain.
3. What, if anything, might citizens in your community do differently as a result of this forum?

A quantitative analysis was done on all these surveys to compile the numbers of participants who indicated YES to Q1 & Q2. If participants listed a potential action for Q3, they were credited as a YES response to that question to provide a quantitative measure for comparison. This data was compiled into a chart and is summarized below in the results section.

A qualitative analysis was also completed on the open comments that students provided to Q1-Q3 to identify common themes and provide insight into what students were learning or experiencing.

Results
Overall, 61.6% of participants in public deliberation forums reported being exposed to new ideas, approaches, or perspectives; 62.3% reported a change in their thoughts, attitudes, or mindsets; and 70.2% were able to identify a potential action. A summary chart is provided below, with relative percentages for each PDI forum. Forums are listed in order of date hosted from 2014-2017.

Learning Outcome: Increased awareness of range of perspectives around public issues
as measured by discussing aspects of the issue that participants had not previously considered
Exposure

Learning Outcome: Practice critical reflection as a means to clarifying one’s own beliefs, values, and behaviors
as measured by reported change in thinking, attitudes, or mindsets relating to the issue or the process
Change

Learning Outcome: Improved skills relating to judgment, wisdom, and group decision-making
as measured by the ability to identify potential actions for themselves or others in addressing the issue
Action

Impact of Participation in a PDI Forum

Being exposed to new aspects, ideas, and perspectives
Major themes that emerged from participant comments were:
- exposure to new potential approaches they had not considered
- a new understanding of the trade-offs or consequences to a particular approach
- a new understanding of how an issue or approach may affect others,
- new possibilities for potential action

“I heard the opposition from the eyes of a minority. Their fear is something I hadn’t considered, but I am sensitive to now.”

Thinking differently about the issue
Major themes that emerged from participant comments were:
- more developed thought/perspective on issue
- new value & appreciation of deliberative process
- changed attitudes/posture toward others
- changed attitude/posture toward self

“Hearing about the potential pitfalls of certain policies challenged some of my beliefs.”

Identifying potential actions for themselves & others
Major themes that emerged from participant comments were:
- displaying openness to listen to others
- engaging in civil discussion
- considering the effect or impacts of an approach or action.
- learning more
- engaging in advocacy or political action
- changing a personal behavior

“Engage with others of different cultures, so that I can put a name and face to all of the wicked topics I’m exploring.”

Implications & Recommendations
Implications
1. Public Deliberation Forums broaden students’ awareness of diverse perspectives & approaches.
2. Public Deliberation Forums have a humanizing effect on students connecting with others, particularly on understanding and valuing minority voices, and being open to diverse stories, cultures, and perspectives. This effect creates valuable space for mutual understanding and respect across difference as well as the opportunity to engage in tough topics respectfully and civilly. It opens the door for common ground and common collective actions, whether that involves continuing the conversation or actively working together to address issues.
3. Public Deliberation Forums contribute to a sense of self-efficacy and community efficacy by expanding the range of actions to include political and non-political, as well as personal and community level actions.
4. Public Deliberation Forums promote civic learning through issue awareness, democratic attitudes, and democratic skills. These results make a strong case for the impact that public deliberation forums have on increasing the range of perspectives around public issues and student awareness of the underlying values, benefits, and trade-offs inherent in each approach. This helps them develop the basic knowledge and comprehension of an issue to make informed and reasoned judgments around potential actions.

Recommendations
1. Connect Public Deliberation more intentionally to divisional cultural competency efforts. Public Deliberation has a valuable role to play in engaging students in diverse perspectives, providing space for students to consider minority perspectives and the impact of issues & approaches on minority individuals and communities.
2. Expand opportunities for students to participate in public deliberation forums.

For Further Information
A full report on this study can be accessed online at: http://sites.baylor.edu/baylorpdi/ or through the Office of Student Life Assessment.