

“Feature Interviewee” Dr. Bernie Ronan  
for issue #6 of *The Journal for Civic Commitment*

1. Dr. Ronan, how do you feel that service learning can be enhanced by utilizing the NIF and Public Policy forums?

I think there are two paths for using public deliberation to enhance service learning. First, there is the straightforward approach: train students to moderate issues forums as a service learning activity. This is what Portland CC has been doing for several years. Students trained as moderators help to lead forums in the community, and they also help the college to convene student forums on the campus, a real community service. A second approach is to use deliberation as a way to “launch” students into service, or to aid them in reflecting on their service. For example, colleagues at Gulf Coast CC have “framed” the issue of dealing with disasters. A college that is seeking to deploy students into service in the community as CERT volunteers could start that process by engaging them in an issue forum to deliberate about the issue of disasters and how communities respond. That way when they go out into the community, they are better informed about the issue that they are trying to address through their service. On the flip side, an issue forum can be used as a reflective tool, to help students think more deeply about service they have done, by engaging them in deliberation about the issue that is at stake in their service.

2. Dr. Ronan, how do you think that these particular formats bring community colleges closer to the community?

We have been working for the past three years with the Arizona Community College Association on what we have dubbed the “Arizona Civic Leadership Initiative.” This initiative seeks to use community college campuses as venues to convene the public in deliberating about a policy issue. We have done some 85 forums at campuses across the state and brought together almost 2000 citizens to deliberate on issues ranging from the aging of the baby boomers to high school reform to tourism. We have not done any analysis yet of what impacts this initiative has had on our colleges and their relationships with their communities, but our “anecdotal” evidence is very positive in this regard. The colleges are becoming more adept at convening their publics for such events, building data bases of people to invite and learning to work with non-college partners. Certainly statewide groups now see our community colleges as an ideal place to convene the public. The Governor’s office, for example, has turned to us to help bring the public together to deliberate about aging issues. When colleges accrue this kind of “political capital,” it pays off in other ways besides just increased approval from their local community.

3. Dr. Ronan, based on the various forums in Arizona and nation-wide, have any action plans emerged from these deliberations? Can you give any examples?

In terms of action plans resulting from the forums, this is one way our work here is a bit different from the standard National Issues Forum (NIF) model. The key is how you

end the forums. The partners we have been working with have certain goals that they want to achieve by bringing the public together, and these goals are what you use to design the questions that moderators use to end the forum. We call it “beginning with the end in mind.” So when we design the “framing” of the issue and write up a discussion guide to be used in that forum, we pose questions that will enable the citizens to discover some “common ground” that can lead them to further action. For example, we are working with the state tourism industry on addressing the gap that exists between the training needs of this industry, and the programs that currently exist to provide this training. We did a cycle of focused discussions with industry reps to ask them questions about their industry, their workforce and training programs they are currently using. Now we are going back out with a second cycle of forums that will be more “NIF-like” in format, and our goal is to have local communities or organizations actually embrace doing some concrete thing to help close this training gap. The action will vary from group to group and forum to forum. So we have no particular public action in mind, we just have a bias toward getting the forum participants to take public action. It’s very important if you are going to do this type of forum that you work out with your partners who is going to be responsible for helping the participants to take that next step. And it’s usually NOT the local community college. The college is the convener and host for the forum, but these forums rely on community partners who are going to help the participants to take some public action.

4. Dr. Ronan, do you know approximately how many community college trainers there are in the US (and in AZ) who are prepared to assist community colleges create deliberative discussions? And, do you feel that there is a growing need to develop more trainers and moderators in community colleges?

We have not canvassed colleges across the country to find out how many trained moderators there are. But that’s a good activity for us to undertake through our Community College Network for Civic Life. This is a relatively recent effort, sponsored by the CCNCCE. They partnered with the Kettering Foundation, the originators and ongoing sponsors of the NIF work which they see as part of their mission to study democracy and how to improve democratic practices. And we are in our second year of working with community colleges to host moderator training sessions on their campuses. I have organized a “cadre” of folks at community colleges that have been part of the Kettering network doing NIF work in their communities, and we are working in five regions in the country to host one moderator training a year at a college that wants to offer this opportunity to their faculty, staff, students and community members. As the name implies, we are working to build a “network” of community college folks that can work together to foster greater public deliberation activities on community college campuses.

As to whether there is a “growing need” for more trained moderators at community colleges, you’re asking the wrong guy! I’m absolutely biased about this. I think this work is core mission work for community colleges. We are the ideal conveners of our communities. We are trusted, we are centrally located, and we are generally well-respected and seen as objective and unbiased. So I think that colleges ought to be in the

convening business. It generates good community relations for the college, and also helps to build up “political capital” with policymakers that can be “banked” for the day when a given college really needs the help of local, regional or state decision makers.

5. Dr. Ronan, are you seeing a growing population of moderators and trainers among students? Can you give any specific examples?

We have not made great inroads yet with students, but I am very interested in changing that. I think knowing how to moderate is a great skill for a student to acquire. It enhances your employability for sure, because it’s something that employers are always looking for – someone who can lead others in productive and results-oriented discussion of troubling issues. And it obviously makes for better citizens. I guess if I had to cite an example of a place that has done student involvement well it is at a four-year school, the University of Georgia. For years they have been training students in their honors college to learn how to moderate forums. Then these students do forums with younger students using NIF books. And as the younger students progress through the university, they are in turn trained to moderate. So it has become a regular aspect of college life at that campus that students are regularly involved in student-led deliberating about public policy issues. But it’s taken them years to do it, and there are real advantages in having a “captive” student population like you have at a four year school with dorms, etc. It’s much harder to sustain student involvement in a two year school that is a “commuter campus.”

6. Dr. Ronan, what kinds of partnerships are important when putting together a forum or public discussion?

All of our work here in Arizona has been driven by partnerships. And the key to making these partnerships work is to be clear about who does what. In fact, we have now developed something we call an “ownership matrix,” which outlines what aspects of the community forum process we will be responsible through our Center for Civic Participation, and what aspects will be done by the partner. For example, our Center will train the moderators and will help to frame this issue and prepare the discussion guide. But we look to our partners to identify who will participate in the forums, and to “convene” them, i.e. invite them and work on turnout for the event. (By the way, turnout is a big part of success in this work. People do not naturally want to take two hours out of their day and come together to deliberate on an issue, so you have to work hard at calling folks up and talking them into participating. Just sending a letter or an email usually won’t cut it.) And finally we would expect our partners to “own” the issue. In other words, they are the ones that care deeply about a particular policy issue and want something to happen as a result of the forums. So we expect them to translate that into hard work to make sure folks turnout for the forums and then a commitment to work with the participants to help them take whatever next step they want to take as a result of the forum.

7. Dr. Ronan, is there anything else that you would like to add that we have not asked you?

The only other thing I would say is that this is great work! Every forum I have been involved in has been exhilarating and enlightening. It is so exciting in this day and age of sound bites and hurly burly American life to see citizens actually taking the time to talk with each other and grapple together about thorny issues and how to resolve them. It is what America has been about, until recent years. And this work gives anyone who gets involved in it a chance to recapture some of that great American spirit of civic engagement through thoughtful discourse. So jump in, the water's fine!