

Engaging Lesser Heard Voices: Six Paradoxes of Civic Engagement

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RESEARCH SETTING AND METHODS

Project Focus

Identifying strengths, weaknesses, and underlying paradoxes associated with six common civic engagement tools.

Setting

The Civic Engagement Project for Children and Families:

A foundation funded experiment in 8 California counties aimed at promoting:

- *inclusive participation from lesser-heard voices;*
- *civic dialogue to support children's issues;*
- *policy effectiveness.*

Methods

- Observations of 148 public meetings
- 340 semi-structured interviews
- Fieldwork occurred between 1999-2002

ADVISORY COMMITTEES

Groups formed to provide advice to a decision-making body.

Strength

Potentially have substantial influence over decisions.

Weakness

Typically elicit participation from recognized experts at the expense of lesser-heard voices.

Paradox

Formal advisory structures have more power, but are less likely to invite the participation of lesser-heard voices. Less formal advisory structures are more likely to welcome newcomers, but have less power.

OUTREACH WORKERS

Individuals hired to build relationships with particular segments of the community — ethnic, class, neighborhood, or special interest.

Strength

Effective at overcoming language and cultural barriers.

Weakness

Successful connection with the community often comes at the expense of influence with decision makers.

Paradox

Outreach workers are caught between community culture and bureaucratic culture. Few are comfortable in both worlds and thus able to build bridges between the public and decision makers.

COMMUNITY CONVERSATIONS

Facilitated public discussions on community issues.

Strength

A non-threatening space for hearing people out, airing concerns, sharing information, and building new relationships.

Weakness

Efforts to make meetings non-threatening often preclude serious and substantive discussions with clear links to public decisions.

Paradox

Convening homogeneous groups or “hearing everyone out” makes newcomers feel comfortable, but at the expense of richer public deliberation that works through conflict and educates public opinion.

COMMUNITY CAPACITY BUILDING

Developing local leaders and organizations whose assets can help achieve intended outcomes.

Strength

Intensive and sustained focus on selected individuals can develop powerful citizen leaders, and have a snowball effect on others.

Weakness

Directly engages only a small number of individuals with few short-term payoffs.

Paradox

Requires a long-term commitment, but the lack of short-term payoffs makes it less likely that local government or private funders will make this commitment.

MINI-GRANTS

Providing small grants to non-traditional recipients, such as parent groups, or neighborhood organizations.

Strengths

Community groups can complement the service delivery activities of existing agencies, or pursue innovative approaches.

Weakness

Difficult to implement given existing contracting regulations and other bureaucratic requirements.

Paradox

Mini-grant programs that overcome bureaucratic obstacles divert staff energy and public attention away from larger arenas of power and decision-making.

PROGRAM DESIGN WORKGROUPS

Involving citizens directly in the design process for public programs.

Strength

Highly deliberative and gives citizens real power over major public expenditures.

Weakness

Places high demands on staff, who must recruit, motivate, train, and manage citizen participants, within bureaucratic constraints.



Paradox

The rich get richer—this tool is most likely to be used in political cultures that already value citizen input and/or have large resources to devote to citizen engagement.

OVERALL FINDINGS

- Effective strategies exist for engaging lesser-heard voices in public discussions.
- Implementing these strategies requires managing difficult tradeoffs.
- Simply engaging lesser-heard voices does not necessarily lead to citizen power over decisions.
- It pays to be conversant in multiple tools for civic engagement, to maximize their respective strengths.
- Local political culture plays a pivotal role in supporting or constraining civic engagement efforts.

A working paper (#5) describing this research in more detail and can be downloaded from the Working Papers Section of the CCP publications link at: <http://www.ccp.ucdavis.edu>