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## **A Response to Moore et al.'s "Cowboys Coming Together: Campus-Based Dialogues on Race and Racial Equity"**

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I am pleased to have the opportunity to read and engage with Moore et al.'s study of the deliberative process taking place at Oklahoma State University. The authors provide a range of valuable points for scholar-practitioners to learn from and reflect on. The article does an excellent job of demonstrating how fostering and studying deliberative practices is labor-intensive and requires creative alliances between and among administration, faculty, staff, and students. At a time when higher education faces several crises (Blumenstyk, 2014; Murakami, 2020), the study raises important questions about how to develop models for deliberative work in higher education that are beneficial and sustainable. Toward this end, I briefly explore two concepts that might be helpful as scholar-practitioners in higher education seek to strengthen deliberative capacity on their campuses and better fulfill the public mission of colleges and universities.

### **Deliberation as a Way of Acting**

One approach that might be helpful is to rethink the understanding of deliberation as a practice that precedes action, and instead reframe it as an action in and of itself. Early in their article, Moore et al. argue that "what is missing from the deliberative approach, as it has typically been employed as a civic engagement tool, is a specific push to act toward change based on new shared understandings." Later, in the section titled "Challenges to Expanding Dialogue to Change," they follow up on this, noting that "the core team has . . . hosted three rounds of dialogues, but we have yet to witness the completion of an action item recommended by one of the groups." The desire for clear measurable projects to emerge from the deliberations is understandable. Yet, I suggest that even though this did not happen, it may still be that the deliberations were quite successful, and the distinction between deliberation and action toward change may not be as stark as the authors conceive it to be.

The work of French sociologist Pierre Bourdieu can be useful in considering how scholar-practitioners understand deliberation as action. Bourdieu developed two ideas that can be helpful on this point. The first is the concept of *habitus*, which he characterized as "systems of durable, transposable dispositions, structured structures predisposed to function as structuring structures" embodied as "principles which generate and organize practices and representations" (Bourdieu, 1990, p. 53). He argued that the things individuals do (i.e., practices) structure the *habitus*—in essence, they shape and structure who we are. In this light, we can understand deliberation not as a process that precedes action, but as an action in and of itself that shapes the *habitus*—the structures that structure who we are and how we operate in the world.

Secondly, Bourdieu wrote about the ways that humans get a "feel for the game" in their social interactions (Bourdieu, 1977, pp. 10–13; Bourdieu, 1990, pp. 27, 66–68, 82, 103). Consider, for instance, an actual game such as basketball. Reading or thinking about the game can only take a player so far. One only learns to play well by actually playing the game, where, over time, they develop a feel for it. The work of deliberation is hardly different. Citizens and practitioners can read about deliberation and democratic practices, but ultimately the work of democracy and deliberation is a task that takes practice—getting a feel for it.

Bourdieu's concepts of *habitus* and feel for the game highlight how efforts such as Cowboys Coming Together are essential to making progress toward a more robust democratic life, and how they can be understood as important actions in and of themselves, rather than as, primarily, preparation for future actions. The act of participating in a deliberation structures the *habitus* in meaningful ways and offers citizens the experiences they need to get a feel for deliberation. Thus, while there were not any "action items" that came out of the deliberations discussed by Moore et al., I argue that the process of engaging a range of students, faculty, and

staff in a deliberative process is no less an action than the two mentioned in the article: adding the "CCT dialogue to the list of professional development opportunities recognized by OSU Human Resources" and the development of a series of podcasts. Of course, this is not meant to imply that any one action or type of action—deliberation or otherwise—is sufficient to create the changes needed, but rather that we sell deliberation short when we conceptualize it as preceding or separate from action.

### **Toward Everyday Deliberation**

In addition to Bourdieu's work, scholar-practitioners might also consider how deliberative efforts such as Cowboys Coming Together can play a role in strengthening deliberation in everyday political talk (Conover & Searing, 2005; Gastil, 2005; Lee & Mason-Imbody, 2013; Mansbridge, 1999; Mathews, 2014, pp. 79–80). As conceived in the literature, deliberation in everyday political talk refers to deliberation that takes place outside formal contexts (e.g., forums) and instead over "backyard fences, during coffee breaks, and at the grocery store" (Mathews, 2014, p. 80). Given the challenges that most higher education institutions face around identifying resources and institutional support for programing, higher education professionals might consider how deliberation that takes place in structured events, such as Cowboys Coming Together, could be understood as a catalytic effort that is not necessarily designed to result in more programing. Rather, structured deliberation can be understood as an important part of shifting everyday talk in a more deliberative direction. There is evidence that participating in face-to-face deliberation strengthens deliberative beliefs, skills, and habits, and is, as Burkhalter et al. (2002) argued, self-reinforcing. That is, the more people take part in deliberation, the more likely they are to be "motivated to deliberate when choosing among a range of modes of political communication" (Burkhalter et al., 2002, p. 418).

In an age when researchers track, and funders often fund, what can be most easily measured (Muller, 2018; Yankelovich, 1972), it can sometimes be difficult to attend to the subtler impacts of our work. While discrete actions that emerge from deliberation will remain important, it is also essential to consider the impact of deliberative efforts that are more difficult to observe, such as the way that deliberative interaction itself can transform the self, relationships, and the environment in which it occurs. Projects such as Cowboys Coming Together are essential not only because they result in action items, but because they shift the way participants operate in the world and with each other. I look forward to seeing how this project develops over time, and I thank the authors for sharing their thoughtful and meaningful work in this issue of the *eJournal of Public Affairs*.

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