Chapter 35

Encouraging Public Involvement in Public Policymaking Through University–Government Collaboration

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ABSTRACT

New methods of involving large numbers of citizens in public decision-making using information and communications technologies have spurred academic and professional interest. This chapter will describe the case of the Citizen Panel, a public-involvement project in which a municipal government and university combined their capacities to create a significant new opportunity for public involvement in public policymaking. Technology was used to broaden access to participation in, and awareness of, the Citizen Panel. Technology application included development of a video version of the information resources used by the Citizen Panel, posting key information on the website, hosting a Facebook group discussion, and live broadcast of panel sessions by Web streaming. The Citizen Panel provided a “proof of concept” for the subsequent establishment of the Centre for Public Involvement, which is a partnership between the municipal government and the university. The Centre for Public Involvement’s purpose will be to engage in research and development in support of improved public-involvement practices and processes.

HISTORY AND CONTEXT

The Citizen Panel was a new approach to citizen involvement in Canada. The budgets for social housing in the city of Toronto and for family services in the city of nearby Guelph are decided, in part, through public deliberation. Neither city has taken the broad approach to budget priorities represented by the Citizen Panel project, in which large-scale budget priorities were considered. Outside of Canada, the city of Porto Alegre in Brazil provides an example of public participa-
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In civic budgeting that has been successfully operating since 1989 (Lerner, 2006). The purposes of similar citizen-involvement events for policymaking include developing budgets, designing rural and urban landscapes, making policy recommendations, posing public questions to politicians, and taking voluntary action (Levine, Fung, & Gastil, 2005). Success has been identified based on the following factors: realistic expectations of influence (e.g., government involved); inclusive, representative process; informal, substantive, conscientious discussion with the aim of reaching “common ground,” not consensus; and neutral professional staff (Levine, Fung, & Gastil, 2005).

This case study of the Citizen Panel demonstrates how a university and municipal government collaborated on a deliberative democracy pilot project by engaging a diverse group of citizens on an important issue of public policy.

Edmonton is a city with a metropolitan population of about 780,000. It is the capital and seat of government in the Western Canadian province of Alberta. The population of Alberta is about 3.7 million. The Alberta context in Western Canada has historically provided a fertile reception for deliberative democracy, and the Faculty of Extension at the University of Alberta in Canada has been associated with the concept and practices of public deliberation since the time of E.A. Corbett (Corbett, 1957).

The Edmonton Citizen Panel pilot project was a response to an inquiry by a member of city council (an elected representative), who asked the city’s administration to provide a report on participatory democracy. The report would describe the concept of participatory democracy, explain how participatory democracy relates to the objectives of the city’s public involvement policy, and provide details on what potential opportunities there were to engage in participatory democracy. A report prepared by a team representing the university and the city was presented for information to city council. Several months later, the Citizen Panel pilot project was proposed to and approved by city council. The Citizen Panel was organized collaboratively by the City of Edmonton and the University of Alberta, bringing together women and men of diverse ages, incomes, cultural backgrounds, and experience to learn about and discuss their city’s budget priorities. It met for six Saturday sessions, beginning in February 2009, continuing throughout all of the Saturdays in March, and concluding on 25 April 2009. It was constituted by approximately 50 citizens selected to represent the city’s ages and incomes, chosen through telephone invitation from a list created by random selection within selected demographic dimensions. The goal of the Citizen Panel was to gather informed citizen opinion for city council to consider seriously as input into the 2010-2011 budget process. The Panel was not limited or constrained to consider any part of the annual budget, which is approximately $CA1.5 billion per year. During the six full-day sessions that they met, panelists learned about the City of Edmonton’s budgeting process and the processes and strategies underpinning that process. They also learned about the City Vision and the 10-year strategic plan. Information presentations were made to panelists by senior city managers as part of the learning stage of the Panel’s deliberations. The Citizen Panel concluded its active stage of participation by presenting six recommendations to city council in July 2009.

The Use of Technology as a Catalyst in the Project

There is a tradition of using new media (for example, radio broadcasting in the 1930s and 1940s) for enhancing democratic participation (Peers, 1969). Interest in new methods of aspiring to the democratic ideal has increased in tandem with widening access to the Internet (Citizens’ Assembly 2008; Kelshaw & Gastil, 2008). Thompson (2005) states that a “new visibility” is a prominent feature of our social environment: “Since the advent of print, political rulers have found it impossible to
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