“Building Bridges” Process Synthesis | CU Diversity Summit | February 13, 2018

Who was in the room? This “Building Bridges” was held across two 75-minute sessions during the Spring 2018 CU Diversity Summit. Thirty-four people participated in some part of the session. Because the process ran across two concurrent sessions, some participants were only in attendance at one session. Over half of the participants were undergraduate students; university staff were strongly represented with several graduate students and faculty. About a third of participants were people of color, representing a more diverse group than is typical for many campus or community meetings.

What key insights did they generated as the brainstormed and deliberated about norms that would change Boulder’s culture of public participation? Participants had a chance to brainstorm in small groups approximately 125 possible norms, which they then categorized into themes provided. During this event, attendees deliberated about: diversity and inclusion, listening, and participant mindset.

Common Ground: All Voices Need to be Heard. Disagreement is part of the process.

- Inclusion: Every voice matters. All voices need to be heard.
- Accessibility: Getting as many people as possible in the conversation requires ‘meeting people where they are.’ Accessible participation begins with focused, intentional outreach in the places where people live, work, and play, rather than an expectation that community members will come to city meetings.
- Listening: Cultivating opportunities for every voice to be heard means critically evaluating how we listen to each other.
- Respect and Openness: Ensuring all voices are heard means fostering authentic, honest conversations that make space for different opinions, experiences, and views.
- Barriers to Participation: Being heard is more difficult for some people and groups. Namely, the impacts of privilege in Boulder are felt such that some people/groups experience more barriers to participating than others.
- Embracing Disagreement: For all voices to be heard, the city and community need to recognize that disagreement is necessary to the democratic process (e.g., dissent generates new ideas).

Challenges and Tensions:
Community members’ deliberations identified several tensions surrounding the development of new norms for participation in Boulder that must be grappled with moving forward.

Changing the culture of public participation in Boulder will require cultivating a willingness to sit with discomfort. To do so, important shifts are needed in both our thinking and our actions. The capacity to sit with discomfort means shifting from thinking in terms of “either/or” (i.e.,
tendency towards polarized dichotomies) (e.g., either the city builds a new fire station or they
don’t build it. Either my position is supported, or it is denied) to thinking in terms of “both/and”
(i.e., tendency towards fluid dialectics) (e.g., The city both expands pedestrian access and
improves vehicular traffic flow. Aspects of both proponents and opponents positions are
represented in policy action).

Robust participation requires a **willingness to try out (or ‘try on’) ideas and consider
implications without fear of judgement.**

A willingness to sit with discomfort and engage in disagreement without fear of judgement is
contingent on cultivating respect and the capacity for listening. However, participants
recognize how difficult this will be in practice. They conclude that “respect is not linear.” That
is to say, **respect is more complex than a set of sequential steps that can be universally applied.**
Part of the challenge comes from recognizing that a statement’s impact can be different from
the speaker’s intention. And yet, good intentions need to be assumed. Enacting respect
requires both accountability and humility.

‘**Respect is not the avoidance of disagreement.**’ At times, “respect” can be conflated with
minimizing conflict. Specifically, a culture that becomes rooted in being politically correct can
give rise to fears of ‘saying the wrong thing,’ which, in turn, can foreclose discussion. Instead,
participation processes need to allows community members to grapple with the experiences of
individuals who are different/hold differing views from themselves.

Like respect, **listening is not necessarily as straightforward** as it might sound. Listening
requires space and time for processing before responding, which is not often sufficiently
available (or practiced) in our current culture. This suggests the need to build capacity for
deep listening and dialogic interactions. And yet, whereas deep listening is an ideal to strive
for, it’s not always feasible when projects need to move forward. Moreover, time can be
limited, particularly when so many people in Boulder want to be heard.

In line with the theme of CU’s Diversity Summit, attendees focused on issues of inclusion and
accessibility. Specifically, representation of people with diverse backgrounds should be
supported and expanded (e.g., socio-economic strata, race/ethnicity, gender, age, physical
abilities). However, diversity of representation isn’t limited to cultural categories. Expanding
representation looks like bringing together a range of identities and perspectives, such as:
activists, businesses leaders, civic organization ambassadors, critics, young families,
homeless, public officials, service industry workers, and university leadership.

A significant theme emerged around **doing more to recognize power and privilege in Boulder’s
public participation.** Changing the culture of public participation means attending to
social-class disparities (e.g., capacity building around issues of privilege). Boulder needs to
grapple more fully with the reality that specific communities without power and privilege
show-up differently (if at all) than those who possess privilege and power. It is unfair to expect
individuals from the former groups to represent and speak for others, particularly if someone is expected to act as a representative because they speak well and understand the norms. Boulder further needs to be attentive to known barriers to participation, including: language, ability, knowledge, communication styles, and understanding of current participation norms. In this way, multiple formats for engagement need to be developed and utilized (for examples, see prototypes).

Community discussion centered on two key questions:
- How to speak with candor and realness while also giving voice to underrepresented groups?
- How do we prevent norms from excluding some while privileging others?

These questions surfaced more tensions and dilemmas to building a more inclusive and accessible culture of public participation in Boulder. Participants pointed out that prescriptive rules can be problematic. As an example, one table discussed how banning foul language can feel like policing, questioning: Who defines foul? They also took up the issue of ‘valuable passion,’ asking when passionate expression is necessary and contending with the ways prescriptive rules have the capacity to dilute emotion. New norms for participation have to allow for the expression of feeling and the sharing of lived experience, as well as address knowledge gaps related to performing participatory norms.

New norms for public participation need to welcome youth, remembering that young people will live tomorrow with the decisions that older generation have made today.

CU Diversity Summit participants shared a few insights specific to process design. First, the Boulder community needs to shift to finding value in the inherent synergy of idea generation from group process, rather than thinking public participation events function to express grievances. To these ends, processes need to create the decisions space necessary to grapple with tensions and trade-offs.

**What prototypes were generated?**
Although the process did not allow for the development of detailed prototypes, small groups did begin to recommend ways to ensure individuals with different communication styles have time and space to process discussion and contribute.

- Ensuring ideas are visually represented in discussion, such as by using post-it notes or white boards
- Strategies to engage quiet participants to share their ideas
  - Small group discussions
  - Written input
  - Live streaming social media