

WABASH COLLEGE

Wabash Democracy & Public Discourse Initiative

Memorandum on “Value Your Voice: Redefining Indiana”

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On March 22, 2016, the Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse Initiative (WDPD) facilitated a community conversation in conjunction with the Office of the Indiana Attorney General to address issues of civic engagement and improving civic health in the Indiana communities. Attorney General Greg Zoeller and members of his staff were in attendance representing the Attorney General’s office as well as the IUPUC Chancellor representing the school. The facilitation was conducted in the Summerville Room of the Columbus Learning Center on the Indiana University Purdue University Columbus campus. The event involved several participants from the community, including IUPUC students and faculty, community stakeholders, and greater Columbus residents. All of the information conveyed within this report is derived from the notes and voting results collected by members of the WDPD initiative.

The primary deliberation goal was to inspire positive change in Indiana communities across our state by analyzing and deliberating upon weaknesses in the 2015 Civic Health Report Index. The focus of the conversation was especially geared toward the engagement of the Millennial population. Participants were given a conversation guide, which included some key statistics about Indiana’s civic health and areas that may need improvement in our state. The event began with a presentation by Dr. Sara Drury that informed the participants on the importance and purpose of the public discussion, and was followed by opening remarks from IUPUC Chancellor and Dean Larry Richards, Attorney General Zoeller, and State Representative Milo Smith.

In the deliberation stage of the event, participants considered areas of concern that they see within their communities and shared their personal experiences with civic engagement. Through this section of the deliberation, each small group, led by a facilitator, identified two main areas of concern in civic health, which were then added to the list of overall areas of concern to be voted on by all participants in the prioritization stage. The participants were instructed to vote using digital clickers for the issue they believed to be the most important area of concern for the improvement of Indiana’s civic health on a computer PowerPoint system. The specific areas of concern and correlating voting results are displayed below in Figure 1.

Figure 1

Priority Ranking of Areas of Concern

Topics generated from individual group deliberation	Vote %
Millennial Involvement	19.23%
Lack of Trust in Government	19.23%
Government Adaptation ¹	19.23%
Sense of Community	11.54%
Value of Engagement	11.54%
Groups Involved too Segmented	11.54%
State Interaction with Communities	7.69%
Volunteerism	0%

The next aspect of the deliberation dispersed groups into different tables and involved a discussion focused towards finding solutions to the three areas of concern received the highest vote totals: Millennial Involvement, Lack of Trust in Government, and Government Adaptation.

In terms of Millennial Involvement, this was clearly the most discussed topic during the event. Some solutions that were offered included creating methods of communication from governmental entities that reach young voters more effectively, continually push back on the notion that the votes and ideas of millennials matter in the public sphere, and making voting possible online to increase turnout among this generation. Some participants

were confident that if public events were marketed as more engaging instead of informative, there would be higher buy-in and attendance among themselves and their peers. Others stressed the importance of educating the youth in communities as early as possible with civics classes, field trips to government agencies, and even practice voting before they are 18 years old with mock “Kids Voting” activities.

When it came to government adaptation, some participants in this event were somewhat critical of the current Indiana government’s ability to utilize technological and social media advances to increase civic engagement. Several groups discussed creating apps that could promote events, live stream meetings, and share important public information.

The final topic of lack of trust in government brought forth less specific solutions, however was seen as absolutely vital component of improving civic health in Indiana. Participants emphasized the need for a medium of unbiased information on candidates and policies dispersed from a non-partisan source. Along with that, millennials specifically encourage independent fact-checking and heightened transparency on all levels of government to improve the deeply held belief that government is corrupt, not representative of their interests, and who’s inequities and inefficiencies are unable to be fixed.

After the conclusion of this final phase of the deliberation, the event closed with Wabash Democracy and Public Discourse, the Attorney General’s Office, and IUPUC thanking everyone for their participation, and explaining that the results of this public conversation will be published on the WDPD blog.

¹ Focused on the lack of technological and social media advances made by the government to better engage and encourage millennial citizens to participate in public and civic activities.