



## Engaging Stakeholders in Deliberation for Organizational Design

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### Abstract:

Deliberation involves applying knowledge, synthesizing ideas, weighing different options and reflection by stakeholders who negotiate a decision that leads to implementation. While we know about many of the cognitive processes involved in deliberation, we know little about how stakeholders become involved in deliberation in real-world, non-binding contexts. This study investigates the processes of building up a Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) certificate program for undergraduate students at a private university. We analyzed 334 messages from 57 stakeholders' email exchanges, meetings, and interview transcripts to reveal the stakeholder-seeking process and outreach strategies. Results showed that deliberation started from a small group of active stakeholders who accounted for most of the work and outreach. Our findings reveal that an effective stakeholder involvement strategy is the key for the outcome of deliberation to factor in implementation in the observed case. We also consider the types of learning required by individuals and the group in deliberation.

### Deliberation in the classroom

Deliberation entails exploring diverse perspectives, challenging assumptions, and reaching consensus through open discussion. This process aims to facilitate idea exchange and alignment among participants toward common goals (Locke, 2019; Paul, 2017). Civic education scholars have argued that students should have chances to bolster their civic engagement experience (Levine, 2008) including practicing democratic deliberation where learners utilize their experiences collaboratively to find solutions to the challenging issues impacting their lives and communities (Levine, 2000; Munoz & Wrigley, 2012). People need to learn how to do deliberation to be effective civic actors (Levine, 2022). Practicing deliberation in the classroom prepares students to make collaborative decisions and adopt broader perspectives. However, the transition from the classroom to real-world settings reveals the absence of prearranged environments conducive to deliberation. In the real-world scenarios, citizens often confront situations where they must initiate deliberative processes from scratch, and the essence of implementation emerges in those unscripted scenarios. Thus, it is essential for civic education to provide students with the necessary knowledge and abilities to engage as activists, extending beyond mere participation in discussion to adopt the competence of initiating and sustaining deliberation at both individual and group levels.

### Deliberation in the real world

Political scientist Robert Dahn (1989) proposed *mini-publics*, such as citizens' assemblies, as a process for engaging citizens in dealing with public issues. In mini-publics, people are randomly selected as the representatives of a bigger population. They work together to deliberate and learn from one another to make collective decisions for public good. Mini-public participants hold equal rights. Every participant has an equal chance of being selected to represent the broader population. Mini-publics thus promote deliberation and representation better than existing political decision-making processes. Unfortunately, mini-publics often fail to have political impact in practice. For instance, in 2019 the Scottish government initiated a mini-public, with 104 participants to deliberate the nation's future amidst Brexit challenges. Despite positive feedback on its execution, concerns linger about the feasibility of recommendations and their impact on government policies. The outcome of mini-publics failed to result in policy changes. Studying how mini-publics work looks promising from the normative perspective, but it needs a clear set of rules and structures for the process to result in policy changes, especially when mini-publics are frequently used for giving advice (Setala, 2021).

### Binding and non-binding contexts

In a *binding* context, the decisions made during deliberation must be carried out, in the way a jury's decision in a court of law is enforced after the trial, their verdict settles the case. The jury's decision is accepted as binding ahead of the deliberation, which with certainty leads to implementation. Other examples of binding decisions include company staff executing the deliberative decisions of a board meeting, or city staff performing the resolutions from city council members' deliberation. The outcome of deliberation in each case is accepted as binding before the processes of deliberation begins. Conversely, in a non-binding context, decision makers are



not obligated to follow through with the decisions made by the deliberators. Here, the outcomes of deliberation serve only as advice and the decision makers are not required to implement the collective decision. For example, the decisions made by Chicago community policing groups asking patrol officers to perform various tasks may not be implemented because the officers are not obligated to perform the tasks. In another case, when community management committees make deliberative decisions without considering implementation, their decisions may not be implemented well or may not be possible to implement at all (Fung & Wright, 2003).

### The linkage problem

For deliberation to be effective, people must discuss issues collaboratively and come up with a plan that leads to actual changes in a community. However, deliberation often does not lead to change. This disconnect between the deliberative outcomes and implementation is referred to as the *linkage problem* (Mansbridge et al, 2010). Much of the research on deliberation in democracy is based on mini-publics. In non-binding contexts, mini-publics often make proposals that decision makers do not implement; that is to say, there is insufficient linkage between the decision and implementation.

In non-binding contexts, the linkage problem may occur in part because deliberators neglect or do not have an effective way to acquire decision makers' perspectives, do not take stakeholders' interests and goals into consideration, or neglect issues of power. The products of deliberation may not be persuasive to decision makers, who are thus less likely to abide by deliberative outputs. In a non-binding context, decision makers and stakeholders are typically distinct groups, with decision makers considering deliberative outcomes as suggestions rather than mandates. In such situations, decision makers may not feel obligated to act upon the proposals generated through deliberation. This discrepancy between deliberative outcomes and implementation exacerbates the linkage problem, as decision makers may even undermine implementation especially when decisions are non-binding ahead of deliberation (Mansbridge, et al, 2010). To solve the linkage problem, deliberation must incorporate stakeholders' perspectives, goals, and power, but it is unclear how.

We study one case of deliberation that achieved the implementation goal in a non-binding context. We are interested in studying this successful case to understand how participants advance their proposal forward on their own. Additionally, because there was no precedent in this context, where a certificate program was approved by multiple organizations (in this case, schools), there were no established rules or regulations for the participants to follow. They must start the process from scratch and figure things out as they go. Therefore, we study this case for the purpose of uncovering some of the essential features of this successful effort, with an aim toward beginning to understand how these essential features contributed to the success. The hope is that understanding how this worked will better help us to design successful real-world deliberative efforts in the future and allow civic education to better teach how deliberation can improve communities in practice.

### Data and methods

The case we studied is the process of a group of faculty members working together to modify a proposal for a cross-school Human-Computer Interaction (HCI) certificate program. The dataset consists of interview transcripts, emails, meeting transcripts, field notes and memos. We use emails as the primary data source, because these emails are where faculty members were trying to come to a consensus to get stakeholders' support for the proposal (N=334, organized in 104 threads). We considered the correspondence to be a crucial aspect of deliberation since these emails are written discourses with the intention to share intelligence and negotiate for trade-offs. These features align with typical features observed in deliberative processes. Hence, we termed these correspondences "deliberative email." Additionally, it is noteworthy that the stakeholders worked on the proposal during the pandemic: there were no in-person meetings during the data collection period. One faculty member wrote memos (N=31) reflecting on the deliberation process after deliberative emails were exchanged. These memos were a good way to contextualize the content of the emails and zoom meetings. Interviews (N=6) are audio recordings of faculty reflecting on the proposal design process and the events described in the email exchange. Meetings (N=4) mainly reflected the discussion on what and how to sketch the initial proposal. The outcome of the above discussion threads was to get the HCI certificate approved by the engineering school, communication school, and education school in a large private university. When viewed together, these data sources capture how faculty members and students worked together to build an HCI certificate program and ultimately get the proposal approved.

We want to focus on the stakeholder seeking strategies in the deliberation processes and how deliberators successfully got the proposal approved by their organizations (in this case, two curriculum committees of the three schools). To get a clear view of the process of proposing a certificate program and the strategies the deliberators adopted to get it approved, it is important to capture the timeline when stakeholders engaged in the deliberation, who were involved, and how they were recruited. We therefore conducted 3 analyses to help us get a better

understanding of the deliberation process. In analyses 1 & 2 we want to know when stakeholders were involved and who they were. We calculated the number of stakeholders and marked their names when they first appeared in the email exchange. Then we computed network centrality metrics using an open source platform Cytoscape (Version 3.10.0) to identify the active stakeholders. We stipulated stakeholders as nodes, thus creating a network of stakeholder recruitment (Figure 2). Lastly, we qualitatively coded the content of email messages to map out the issues and obstacles in the deliberation.

### Finding 1: Stakeholder Recruitment Timeline

To decode the stakeholder recruitment strategies, we first ask: who were the stakeholders and when did they get involved in this process? An analysis on accumulated stakeholders gives us a broad view of the stakeholders participating in the discussion of the HCI certificate program. The analysis started from listing all deliberative emails exchanged from day one until the certificate was approved on day 413. Each time that a participant appeared for the first time, we added them to the list of users active at that point. By calculating the non-repeated email recipients, we found that there were 57 stakeholders interacting in the email exchange. We further identified—from the date of the first email sent and the first email received by each stakeholder, together with the date information in the emails—a preliminary understanding of the number of accumulated stakeholders engaged in the email correspondence as shown in figure 1.

**Figure 1**  
Number of Accumulated Stakeholders

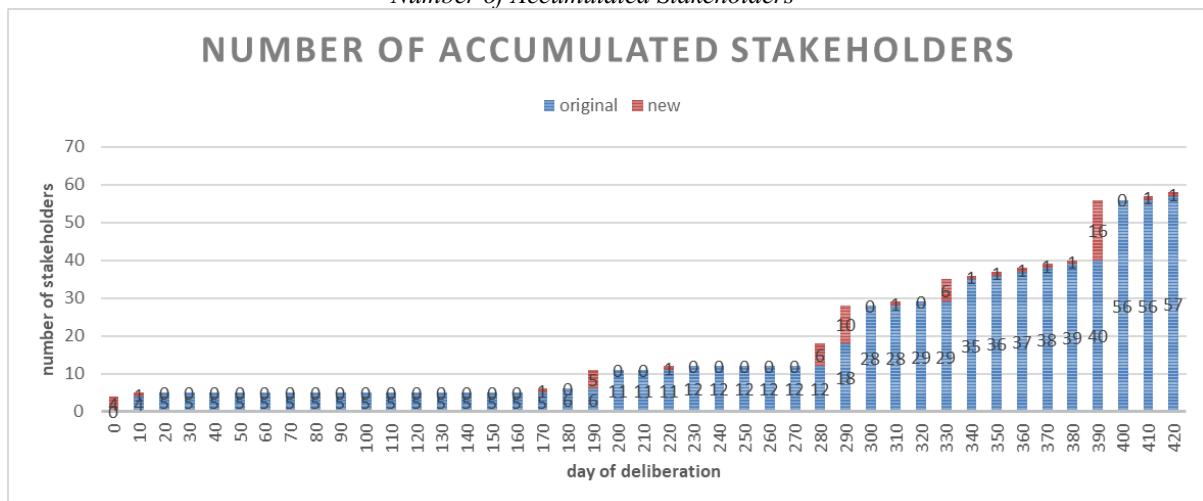


Figure 1 shows a small number of stakeholders ( $n=4$ ) were involved in the email exchange from day 1 and increased to 57 stakeholders. We identify these 4 stakeholders as the “initiate team”. During the process of developing proposals, introducing, inviting comments, modifying and finalizing the proposal, faculty and staff of four schools were involved in the process. Faculty of two curriculum committees with a total number of 150, as well as staff represented by committee heads eventually voted on the proposal. This shows that deliberation began with a small group of people and ended with broader participation. Note that there are many other ways that patterns of recruitment and participation could unfold. For example, we could imagine a pattern nearly opposite to the one shown in Figure 1. In that case, a large number of participants might get together to brainstorm, and then a smaller number would further deliberate on the recommendations of the larger group. Or we could imagine something like a bell-shaped curve, where a few participants begin the process, then solicit input somewhere in the middle. The common pattern considered in much political science research is a variation of the first sort; it solicits input from a large number of participants early in the process.

The stakeholder engagement process here diverges from the normative deliberation processes developed in political science. In the case of mini-publics, for example, the principle of recruitment is to sample the population so that the participants serve as demographically representative of the broader population. For this reason, mini-publics tend to recruit participants by sending public invitations early in the process. Thus, the number of participants does not increase over time. The gradual accumulation of stakeholders that we observed might have important benefits for the learning of individual participants and the group. For example, it might be



beneficial for the team to not be overwhelmed with the need to immediately learn and understand a wide variety of positions.

The key question here is whether this pattern of stakeholder recruitment was important for the success of the overall effort. On the one hand, it might have had important benefits for the learning of individual participants and the group. As previously noted, it might be beneficial for the team to not be overwhelmed with the need to immediately learn and understand a wide variety of positions. On the other hand, if participant recruitment is not done carefully, we could imagine that participants added later in the process might have added important new ideas that would have disrupted the process and should have been considered earlier.

### Finding 2: Identification of Active Stakeholders

We learned that the deliberation started from a group of 4 people as an initiate team, and then the number of stakeholders gradually grew to a total of 57. However, Figure 1 does not capture how the activity of the group was distributed over these stakeholders. We therefore conducted a social network analysis by using centrality indices: degree centrality and eigenvector centrality, to identify active stakeholders. Eigenvector centrality weights connections among nodes (in this study, stakeholders). We used this index to measure the influence of each stakeholder within the email exchange network. Degree centrality is a measure of the number of neighbors a node has. In this study, InDegree value is the weighted average of emails received; the OutDegree value is the weighted average of emails sent. We therefore identified the active stakeholders in terms of their network connections, number of messages sent from and received by them. Table 1 shows 3 similar stakeholder rankings for the most active participants, all suggesting that a small group of stakeholders dedicated more time and effort in deliberating for the design of the certificate program. The unequal activity of participants has important implications for what each participant will take away from the experience—what they will learn about, for example, the needs of other stakeholders. Because so much of the work is done by a small group of stakeholders, it seems likely that the learning of these individuals will be significantly greater than others.

**Table 1**

*EigenVector, InDegree and OutDegree Degree Centrality of Stakeholders Email Exchange*

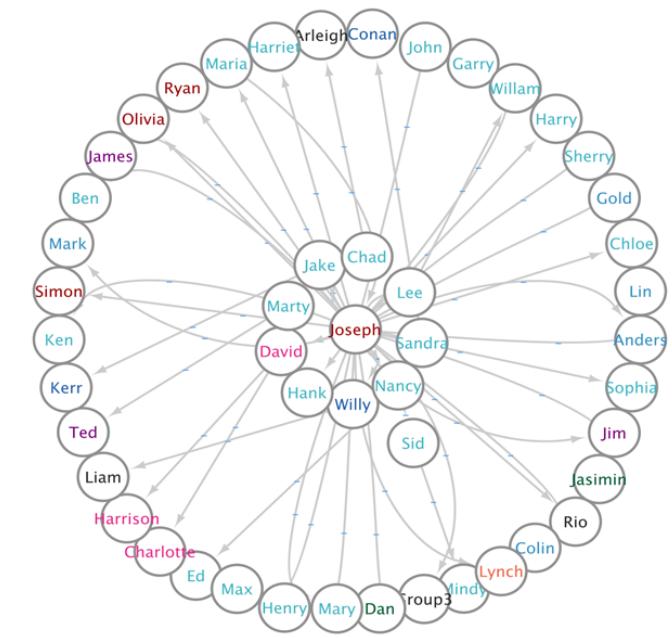
Eigenvector	Name	InDegree	Name	OutDegree	Name
0.43	Joseph	26	Joseph	47	Joseph
0.31	Marty	14	Marty	11	Marty
0.29	Nancy	13	Nancy	10	Ben
0.26	William	12	Ben	10	Jake
0.26	Ben	11	William	10	Ella
0.21	Harriet	9	Harriet	10	David
0.21	Chad	8	Sid	9	William
0.21	Jake	7	Chad	8	Nancy
0.21	Ella	6	Jake	8	Lee
0.20	David	6	Ella	7	Chad

### Finding 3: Stakeholder Outreach Strategy

To further investigate stakeholder recruitment strategies, we analyzed the initial email exchange among the stakeholders to understand which stakeholders recruited additional ones. Figure 2 is the recruitment network, showing which stakeholders were responsible for recruiting each of the other stakeholders. The inner circle shows the stakeholders who played a crucial role as primary recruiters. We coded the four schools in different colors. The organizational affiliation of each connection shows that active stakeholders recruited new stakeholders from their respective departments. The recruitment strategy employed in this study diverges significantly from strategies typically used to construct mini-publics, in which deliberators rely on outreach approaches such as sending public invitations or stratified random sampling to ensure the equality and diversity of participants (Kahane et al 2013). For example, mini-publics tend to consult heterogeneous groups to develop ideas or solutions on a specific issue; therefore, for the deliberative sample to be legitimate, it must be representative of diverse interests. In this study, we found that a few people that do most of the work to advance the implementation of the proposal, indicating the importance of having appropriate recruiting strategies to include active stakeholders who

helped move the proposal forward. Figure 2 shows that a small group of initial stakeholders served as representatives of different schools, recruiting more stakeholders from their affiliate organizations. Ultimately, those initiates needed to locate other stakeholders for implementation to succeed. Alternatively, no such “snowball recruitment” happens in mini-publics: there, each stakeholder has an equal chance of influencing one another.

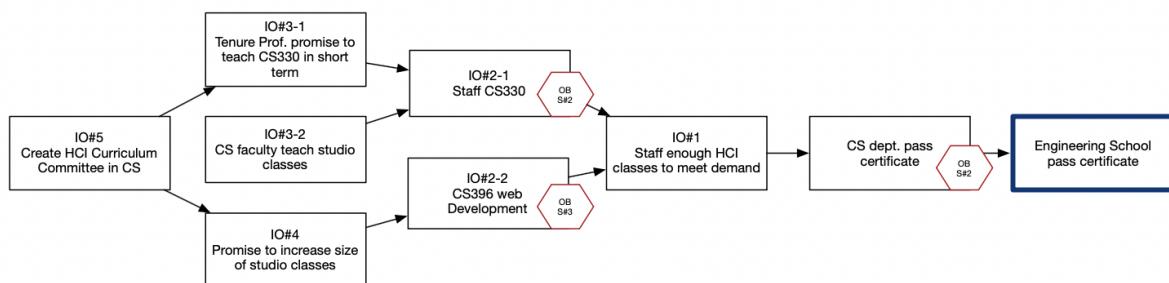
**Figure 2**  
Stakeholders Recruitment Network



#### Finding 4: Prerequisites and Negotiations to Pass the Certification

In our last analysis, we want to understand what the stakeholders deliberated about in the email exchange. Analysis 4 open coded memos and email threads to identify the different. We found that discussions were much better characterized as negotiation, as opposed to a normative deliberation – while there was broad support for the initial proposal in principle, we found representatives from all schools faced varied and sometimes conflicting obstacles that influenced their willingness to implement the proposal. For example, school representatives might try to persuade and modify proposals to win the deciders' support or had to deal with stakeholders' individual interests. Notably, the email exchanges revealed that the HCI certificate program, though it is a cross-school program, was ultimately “owned” by the Engineering school. In fact, a large part of the email exchange consisted of a discussion by engineering faculty of a single course, course 330. In these emails, stakeholders voiced conflicting support and opposition to the proposal. Thus, we want to further explore the discussions within the engineer school faculty. Figure 3 presents the prerequisites to pass the HCI certification in the Engineering School.

**Figure 3**  
Prerequisites to Pass the Certification in Engineering School



#### Deliberative Negotiation: Issues and Obstacles



Figure 3 presents results from coding and combining email threads. We adopted Dettmer's problem solving framework to identify obstacles (OBS), intermediate objectives (IO), and objectives, showing the prerequisites to passing the certification in the school of engineering. Delving into the email conversation, we learned that CS faculty saw the certificate as an opportunity to replace CS-330—a class in which over 400 students typically enroll every year. Their proposal was to retire CS-330 with a set of more interactive and focused CS studio courses that align with the faculty's interests in teaching smaller classes on special topics. However, the intention to replace CS-330 led to conflicts of interest between the faculty members and the curriculum committee heads. For example, faculty were concerned that course enrollment might grow to 500 students, leading to an unfavorable outcome for the CS faculty teaching a large class. However, if the final decision was to replace the big class with smaller ones, faculty would need to get the course numbers beforehand, which might slow down the process and delay the voting timeline. The administration head also expressed his concerns for staffing.

Because there was no clear precedent for how to pass a multi-disciplinary certificate program at their university, the initial team did not know if there is an administrative pathway and a designated group of people responsible for the HCI certificate program. They started from scratch, exploring potential stakeholders to work with. Given the uncertainty of the process, the next step for the deliberators was to discover the formal decision-making process.

We saw that there was a conflict between the decision makers' and implementers' goals when they negotiated on whether to keep CS-330, or to replace it with smaller courses. From the decision makers' perspectives, there were several bureaucratic steps that had to happen. In particular, it was necessary for the teaching faculty to get course numbers for the 3 new courses before they would agree to place this proposal on the meeting agenda for further discussion and voting. Nancy, one of the initiate team members, replied to this concern: "That being said, it's really hard to predict interest in HCI..., so to help ease the transition, we've decided to continue offering 330 for the next two years.... At that point, we'll have a better understanding of interest and whether we need a high enrollment HCI class like 330 going forward..." She provided a possible solution that allowed faculty to teach smaller courses and at the same time take the decision maker's concern on the staffing and course number problems into consideration.

Finding 4 shows it was crucial for stakeholders to find a way to acquire decision makers' perspectives and to stress their concern for staffing and enrollment to gain support from the decision makers. Instead of reaching a consensus on keeping or retiring CS-330, the stakeholders expressed their interests in teaching smaller courses, and proposed offering new courses. We can see that the act of incorporating stakeholders' interests is different from the mini-public deliberation, in which deliberators would look for consensus on the issues with the intention to meet the common good. What stakeholders did was to engage different needs and opinions that best comply with their needs and negotiate for a feasible proposal. This indicates that in the context of deliberation, deliberators employ a strategy of recruiting stakeholders starting from relevant personnel within their own organizations. Unlike those of mini-publics, stakeholders in this study are not randomly selected. They have specific interests and jobs that affect their role in the implementation of the HCI Certificate Program. From our email study, we learned if the decider was not involved in the deliberation, the stakeholders would have trouble defining the issues for why the proposal was not moving forward to appear on the agenda of the curriculum committee meeting. Meanwhile, if they did not recruit stakeholders throughout the deliberation process, there was no intelligence-sharing for an actionable proposal that met with both the deciders' goals and stakeholders' interests. If the inner-circle stakeholders were not recruited in the deliberation process, it would be less likely that the proposal would be implemented.

## Discussion

We have found that deliberation started from a small group and eventually engaged a broader group. Deliberators needed to know what deciders' goals are and incorporate expertise and personal interests into the proposal and negotiate for a feasible solution in the process of deliberation. Finding 1 provides a picture of the accumulated stakeholder involvement over time, based on stakeholders' email exchanges, messages they sent and received, and connections between stakeholders. The initial process of deliberation began with a small team of 4 participants. The initial team used a snowball approach to recruit new stakeholders which eventually reached a total of 57. The final proposal was then approved by an even broader group of curriculum committees. We found that this small group did most of the deliberation. Moreover, findings 2 and 3 suggest that this small group also did most of the outreach for new stakeholder involvement. With evidence shown from the engagement timeline (Figure 1), centrality ranking table (Table 1), and the inner circle of recruitment map (Figure 3), we can see that, at least in here, a process driven by this small group pushing the deliberation process toward implementation, was successful led to implementation in a non-binding context.



Thus, our findings suggest that this proposal might have moved forward because of a small group working together to make things happen. In this study, we saw that the process made space for stakeholders to express their own interests. For example, some stakeholders expressed their interest in teaching smaller, more active courses, and the small group worked to come up with a solution that met their interest. Incorporating stakeholders' self-interest placed the proposal in a stronger position, thus leading the proposal toward implementation.

Another possible reason for success in this context relates to the issue of power. In a normative deliberation, stakeholders have equal weighting on the voting, or equal power from each stakeholder. The winning proposals are supported by a majority vote. For example, in a deliberative poll, each participant has the same power to express their opinions in the small group discussion and the survey. The deliberation ends with voting for the most popular choice. To have equal power in the process of deliberation seems to be a fair design in mini-publics. However, it also increases the possibility of having the linkage problem when it comes to implementing the outcome, because the purpose of this equal-weighting design is to invite diverse opinions from participants. Having a variety of public opinions may be good in the beginning stage to develop a proposal, it may also lead to difficulties in the implementation stage for its lack of convergence on the various ideas. It is more likely there are conflicts of interests that are hard to settle in the process of deliberation, not to mention there is space to integrate decision makers' and stakeholders' goals.

From finding 4 we learned about prerequisites for getting the proposal approved by the engineering school, and how the group incorporated both the deciders and stakeholders' interests, deliberatively negotiated to have a feasible final proposal. We noticed that, in the process of deliberation, it is important to find a way to discover decision makers' goals and to incorporate these goals into the proposal because a single decision maker can block the proposal if their interest isn't met. Furthermore, decision makers' goals were usually aligned with the organization's goal. It may also be necessary to ensure the proposal fits with regulations or administration requirements. The intention to get approval from the deciders also serves as a ticket to get the broader committees to discuss and vote on the proposal, that is, to make the proposal appear on the agenda. Getting deciders on board, or incorporating their goals into the proposal, makes the proposal more legitimate, thus leading it toward implementation. On the other hand, we also see the incorporation of the stakeholders' self-interests from the deliberative negotiation on the CS-330 issue. What we propose from this study is not about always prioritizing deciders' goals" but rather to invite conversation from both sides of the deciders and stakeholders. In addressing the challenge of the linkage problem between deliberation and implementation, participants may find it necessary to identify decision-makers and their objectives. Stakeholders expressed their interests, advocating for their preferences and seeking solutions to the conflicts through negotiation and getting support for their proposals. This is crucial as stakeholders building varying degrees of influence, potentially affecting the inclusion of proposals on agendas or the outcomes of broader participant votes. These analyses help us to see the kinds and distribution of learning required by the team. The group acquired significant knowledge that it did not have at the start; it came to understand who the key stakeholders were, and the administrative steps required to get the proposal approved. Individuals also learned about each other, and the key steps required to pass the proposal, though this learning was likely concentrated in a small number of participants.

## Conclusion

To make deliberation more feasible, we envisioned a process during which people worked together to make collective decisions for public good. We want to consider different arguments to make better decisions (Rangoni & Vandamme, 2022) and we hope better decisions lead to better implementation. However, in practice we often see linkage problems when it comes to implementing the outcome of deliberation in the normative model. In this study, we observe deliberation within successful processes involved in developing new policies within democratic institutions, contrasting these findings with the normative model. Our exploration reveals that groups must learn about stakeholder involvement, identify issues impeding support, and develop strategies to meet stakeholder needs. Additionally, groups require adept campaigning skills, including stakeholder recruitment and iterative proposal refinement through deliberation.

If civic educators are to teach deliberation effectively, or civic action leaders are to initiate and implement proposals, we will need to deal with the linkage problems. Political sciences researchers perceived deliberation as a process of sense-making and reason-giving, but they do not explain how to make this happen (Gutmann & Thompson, 2000; Hendriks, 2009). From the review of literature, we know that mini-public deliberation ignores the perspectives of decision makers, stakeholders' self-interests, and the issue of power (Mansbridge et al, 2010). From this study, we learned from a successful case on moving a proposal toward implementation in a non-binding context. We know that in mini-public deliberations, researchers have concerns about the degree of representation. Unlike what mini-public deliberators expected, small group participation might be key for developing an



implementable proposal. Instead of reaching consensus, deliberative negotiation engages different needs and opinions to converge. Stakeholders think about what information and interests are important by being open with one another. They negotiate on how they can solve conflicts among diverse interests by reflecting and making concessions through information exchange, to forge bonds and therefore solve the problem. This is different from that of classic deliberation, in which stakeholders are encouraged to consider only the common good.

Our goal is to uncover the factors contributing to the successful implementation of deliberation. Our findings indicate that groups must acquire knowledge regarding stakeholder engagement, pinpoint obstacles hindering support, and devise strategies to address stakeholder needs. Moreover, adept campaigning skills, such as stakeholder recruitment and adaptive proposal refinement through deliberation, are important. These insights are derived from our study, and we acknowledge that their applicability to other contexts may vary. Nonetheless, exploring expert models could yield valuable insights into the elements of success.

By analyzing how deliberation works to achieve implementation in the present study, we hope the findings provide a new understanding on how to promote implementation in a non-binding context. For non-binding cases, we ask if there is a practice that allows us to get deliberation into implementation. By answering the research question from studying deliberative negotiation from a written form of sources during the pandemic, we uncover the process of deliberation of a successful case. Future research could delve deeper into the intricacies of deliberative negotiation to illustrate how stakeholders negotiate. Additionally, we aim to uncover more factors that facilitate the resolution of the linkage problem, wherein the outcomes of deliberation can be translated into effective implementation.

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