# Why Collaborate? Why Involve Universities?

### By Michael Kern

Several years ago, I participated in a gathering of conservation organizations devoted to the topic of whether collaboration is a good thing. Having spent my career creating opportunities for people to collaborate on complex policy challenges, I was a little surprised to learn that this was not only an open question, there was strong sentiment that the correct answer might be "no." I wondered how the people voicing this opinion could see collaboration in a negative light (and what their marriages must be like!). Isn't it—I thought—inherently positive to seek ways to work more effectively with others on a common challenge?

As the meeting progressed, I realized that the skeptics were not thinking about collaboration in this general sense. They were using the term as shorthand for a specific set of processes in which their community was engaged, many of which had left them frustrated and cynical. I was using Webster's first definition of collaboration: "To work jointly with others or together, especially in an intellectual endeavor."[1] They were feeling pushed into processes they saw as poorly-designed and unlikely to meet their needs. But they felt they needed to participate, if for no other reason than to *prevent* agreements from being reached that they found problematic. They feared the outcome would fit Webster's second definition: "To cooperate with or willingly assist an enemy of one's country and especially an occupying force." In fact, one of them illustrated a newsletter article on a collaborative effort with a photo of the president of Nazi-occupied France!

I've thought about that gathering many times in subsequent years, especially

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since taking the helm of a university-based center that fosters collaborative public policy. I've come to the conclusion that people are correct to fear poorly-designed collaborative processes, which can indeed be frustrating and counterproductive. However, I've also become more convinced that a well-designed collaborative process is not only a good thing, but in many cases the *only* thing that can help us overcome stalemates, deadlocks and conflicts (or even better, avoid them in the first place) and address our most complex public policy challenges.

This is because successful collaborative processes result in solutions that meet the needs of all involved parties, and provide them with incentive to work toward successful implementation. The alternative is each party or coalition seeking to press its advantage to a point where it can impose its preferred solution on the others. Then a

game of "king of the hill" begins—that entity or group tries to stay "on top," while others try to knock it off and climb up themselves.

What, then, defines a well-designed collaborative process? That question has been answered more thoroughly elsewhere than I will be able to do here in 1,500 words.[2] There are a few basics that are especially worth pointing out. A well-designed collaborative process is one where the goals and objectives are clearly and concisely stated, and shared not only by the parties at the table but also those who will receive—and have the authority

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to act on—the results. Too often, in the race to resolve a conflict, we don't take the time to ensure everyone is working

toward the same end. Establishing a shared vision is also a great way to move away from yesterday's and today's conflicts toward a picture of what the future will look like if we are successful. It is amazing how much common ground exists when people discuss their view of the desired future. Where we disagree is in our preconceived ideas of the best way to get to that future.

In a well-designed process, the parties at the table include all those whose support will be needed to implement the results. Does that mean you need absolutely everyone who has an interest or stake in the outcome? While that is certainly helpful (and often desirable), it is not always possible to get everyone to come to, or stay at, the table. But if someone not at the table has the ability to prevent an agreement from being implemented, you don't have everyone you need involved.

An effective collaborative process requires that none of the parties have what they see as a preferable alternative to a collaborative solution (known in the field as a BATNA, or best alternative to a negotiated agreement). [3] All parties must be actively and creatively seeking solutions that work for themselves and others at the table. Ideally, that search is motivated by altruism, camaraderie and a sense of shared purpose. A more reliable motivation is recognition that no individual has the ability to unilaterally impose his or her preferred solution, or to implement that solution without the others' support. Participants need to be committed to the collaborative process, not participating with one eye on this process and the other on a legislative end-run, legal strategy or other alternatives.

This is one reason why I believe that it is generally not a good idea to make a collaborative process mandatory. People collaborate effectively only when they want to—or when they believe it is in their best interest to do so—not because they have to. It is also why I am not a big fan of charters or ground rules that "hedge their bets" by including majority or super majority voting as a back-up if consensus is not achieved. That back-up plan can remove the incentive for participants to truly commit to addressing each other's interests and needs, not just their own.

I am, however, a fan of charters or ground rules that provide clarity from the start about how the process will be conducted, including a clear definition of consensus. Too many groups decide they will operate by consensus without clarifying what they mean by the term. A common definition that I've seen work well is the following:

*The group reaches consensus when each member can say:*

- *I believe that others understand my point of view.*
- *I believe I understand others' point of view.*
- *Whether or not I prefer this decision, I support it because it was arrived at openly and fairly and is the best solution for us at this time.[4]*

Another vital element in a successful collaborative process is a skilled, neutral third party. By this I mean one or more practitioners who do not have a stake in the outcome, are trusted by the parties, provide expertise in collaborative process and problem solving, and have the instincts and other qualities needed to help people communicate effectively and overcome obstacles. I have seen such practitioners come from a variety of backgrounds and institutional settings, and have worked in a number of those settings myself (sole practitioner, non-profit organization, private firm,

academic). Which setting is a preferable source of assistance depends on the situation.

This is certainly true regarding academic settings. At the William D. Ruckelshaus Center, we have criteria to assess whether a potential collaborative policy project is a good fit for our organization and its mission. Perhaps the most important of these is whether there is something unique about university involvement that adds value to the project and makes a successful resolution more likely.[5] This can be for a variety of reasons. For example, universities can contribute applied research and fact finding that helps establish a common information base, addresses uncertainties, and is accepted as neutral where agency or private research may not be. Faculty, staff and affiliated practitioners may have valuable subject matter expertise, facilitation skills and relationships. Universities can

involve students, creating a culture of exploration and learning that contributes to creative solutions. Universities are a natural partner when there is a need or desire to incorporate case study or project evaluation elements.

Finally, it is often the case that universities are simply seen by the parties as an accepted and trusted convener. I've seen many occasions where individuals and groups will set skepticism aside and give a collaborative process a shot if invited to the table by a university. These situations provide universities with an outstanding opportunity to meet their community service mission, by helping parties explore new ideas, approaches and collaborative solutions.

[1] http://www.merriam-webster.com/dictionary/collaborate

[2] See for example Jim Arthur, Chris Carlson, Lee Moore, *A Practical Guide to Consensus*, Policy Consensus Initiative, 1999; or Dukes, E. Franklin, Firehock,

Karen. 2001. *Collaboration: A Guide for Environmental Advocates*. Charlottesville, Virginia: University of Virginia, The Wilderness Society and National Audubon.

[3] Roger Fisher and William Ury. *Getting to Yes: Negotiating Agreement without Giving In*. (New York: Penguin Books, 1981), 104.

[4] One of many sources for this definition is Florida Growth Management Conflict Resolution Consortium, June 1992.

[5] The Ruckelshaus Center's project criteria are available at www.ruckelshauscenter.wsu.edu. For a fuller discussion of the value of universities in collaborative governance, see *Finding Better Ways to Solve Public Problems: The Emerging Role of Universities as Neutral Forums for Collaborative Policymaking*, Policy Consensus Institute, June 2005.