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## Counteracting Polarization: The Critical Role of Bridging Institutions

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Martin Carcasson

Since the motto “E Pluribus Unum” was chosen for the U.S. seal in 1782, the tension between unity and division in our country has been an inherent paradox we must constantly renegotiate. Currently, many have expressed concern about the extraordinary level of polarization, division, and hyper-partisanship, but too much unity can also be problematic, leading to unhealthy nationalism, stifling conformity, and the “othering” of those who don’t fit in. So for much of our history, we have vacillated back and forth between unity and division. In years past, when we ventured too far to one extreme, natural mechanisms pushed us back toward equilibrium.

In recent decades, however, the forces that divide us have been accelerating while many that traditionally brought us together have diminished. Even the common enemy of a pandemic became a source of contention and outrage. Thankfully, the worst of the current dysfunction is predominantly centered at the national level. Local communities, however, must be vigilant about avoiding a similar fate.

One of the most important tools to address polarization at the local level is the presence of bridging or mediating institutions. Americans have always been joiners, and communities thrive when a rich mix of organizations help motivate, connect, organize, and inspire people to action. The question is whether these organizations bring together like-minded people, thus potentially increasing division and strengthening notions of “us” and “them,” or whether they work to engage people across perspectives. Bridging organizations specialize in the latter.

When organizations explicitly and proactively serve a bridging function, they can have multiple, critical positive impacts on their communities. Such organizations allow individuals to build relationships with a broader range of residents developing the trust, respect, and social capital necessary to support the tough conversations required to address shared challenges.

These relationships also provide needed checks on growing misinformation, bias, and conspiracy theories as friends work as checks, filters, and sounding boards for each other, slowing the spread of questionable information. Polarization thrives in bubbles. Bridging institutions burst those bubbles by equipping their members with the skills and relationships to better engage the true complexity of issues.

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responsibility. They are more likely to tap into creative solutions cutting across perspectives and make significant positive impacts on tough issues.

Most importantly, bridging institutions can be the catalyst that builds broader community capacity. The more we work on our problems in productive ways, the easier it becomes. Our relationships deepen, our ability to avoid the pitfalls of polarization strengthen, and our resiliency as a community grows. As a community, we elevate our ongoing conversations and learn to better negotiate the tensions of democratic life.

The CSU Center for Public Deliberation (CPD), which I direct, is focused on helping our community build capacity to address shared problems well, and we clearly understand the critical role of local bridging institutions in such efforts. The Hach Center for Regional Engagement, a new initiative of the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado, clearly holds the potential to serve as a model bridging institution in our community. The Community Foundation has served in this role for years through their programs on regionalism, water, and leadership development. Their Water Literate Leaders program in particular — focused on developing a new generation of collaborative leaders that are equipped to engage the nuances around a complex and critical local issue — represents the epitome of the sort of projects our community needs to tackle our toughest problems well. The Hach Center is well poised to expand the Foundation’s work in these areas, and all of us at the CPD are excited to do what we can to support the Hach Center’s work in this role in the coming years.

*Martin Carcasson is a professor at Colorado State University’s Communication Studies department and founder and director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation.*

*This article originally appeared in the inaugural issue of the Hach Center Report, a publication of the Hach Center for Regional Engagement, the flagship program of the Community Foundation of Northern Colorado. Martin Carcasson is a professor at Colorado State University’s Communication Studies department and founder and director of the CSU Center for Public Deliberation. See the full report at [noco.foundation.org/hach-report-2020](https://noco.foundation.org/hach-report-2020)*

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