11. Description of Agenda Setting Process and Political Issues Conventions

The civic action activities we incorporate into our courses begin with the agenda setting process. The development of a unique agenda every term provides students with ownership in the activity. From the basis of the class agenda many more options are available depending on the level of commitment that faculty and students want to pursue.

The Agenda Setting Process in Detail:

The first step in the Agenda Setting Model is to develop an issues agenda with your students. We recommend using the agenda building process to develop the students list, because it fosters student engagement with the curriculum and has them thinking about political issues inter personally.

This process has students answer a series of questions to cultivate thinking, group discussion, and debate. (Depending on the time commitment, the specific student level and type of class the list can be modified as deemed appropriate.)

Below are some of the standard questions used successfully in a typical introductory course to help begin the agenda setting activities. Students are asked to explore the following question individually and in small groups. Questions are designed to move student thinking from personal concerns to concerns of the nation and sometimes larger issues of humanity.

1. Where would you like to be in 5-10 years?
2. Where would you like to see your community in 5-10 years?

3. What are the issues that your class or school sees as most important?

4. How can we gain support for our agenda?

5. What types of community/governmental response would resolve these issues?

6. What kind of education is needed in order to better understand the issues?

By exploring answers to these questions, students are able to begin generating a list of issues that concern them. These issues have ranged from local issues to national and international issues.

The easiest way to facilitate the agenda setting process is to have students form small groups (e.g. 3-5 students) to discuss these questions. The group should come to some consensus with anywhere from 1-3 issues on their group agenda. That means they decide which three issues are most important to them and prepare to defend those issues with their classmates. The class then comes together and presents the list of issues to the facilitator. Each group reports their list of issues by having a student selected reporter write the list on the chalk/white board. After a master list is compiled, the debate and discussion begin at the class level (while often continuing at the group level). The facilitator allows students time to debate the issues and discuss why they should or should not be placed on the class agenda.

An independent person can facilitate the agenda building activity within the classroom. Past practice indicates that an independent person can allow for a greater degree of student openness in the process. This can be done by swapping classes with a fellow instructor doing the agenda building activities or by having students select a fellow student or students to play the facilitator role. In many cases the time and the nature of the process only allow the course instructor to

facilitate the agenda building process – in these cases we recommend that the instructor provide space to the class in discussing and negotiating their agenda by leaving the classroom for periods of time.

Depending on the time spent on the agenda setting process, students can spend time between the small group and class agenda researching the issue(s) they are championing – thus providing them with a stronger foundation for articulating their concerns with their classmates. This can be formal through assignments that included summarizing the data about the concern and/or informal where students use personal or heuristic examples to articulate (make their demand) their concern.

It is vital to note that during this agenda building process the importance of *limiting the political agenda* be discussed as an important factor for having the students' top concerns addressed and hopefully resolved. If the student have a list of 10 or 20 issues, it becomes easy for none of their issues to gain any momentum in the political process. This can be best described by the relationship between attention span and time. When a large list of concerns is brought forward, it then becomes happen chance if one or any of these issues will gain the attention to become highlighted on the political or legislative agenda. If the agenda is limited, then students can use their power in numbers to make a strong political statement about their concern(s). Ideally, having a single political issue that has the consensus of all the students can provide the student with the best opportunity to have success in influencing the political and legislative agendas. However, the classroom is a microcosm of society, and students usually often do not find singular consensus. Yet, the lesson of limiting the agenda is critical for understanding why in a

democracy their needs may or may not be met.

Stage for Developing Consensus Agenda	Ideal Number of Issues
Small Group of 1-5 students	1-3 Issues
Class Agenda (approximately 30 students)	1-5 Issues
Convention Agenda (300-…)	1-7 Issues

With the individual class, the goal is often to limit their list to 1-5 issues, which provides a sense of what issue(s) are of most concern. This list can be used to stimulate further conversation. At a minimum, the list can be used by the instructor in to modifying lessons to touch upon issues of student concern. Or, the list can be used to start a service project within the school or class that will better assist the community, nation, or world. Through this deliberative process, students learn the importance of debate, discussion, compromise, conflict resolution, and empathy.

The following should occur before the final class vote:

- A discussion and examples of lobbying, coalition and consensus building, as well as logrolling

- Time for students to perform adequate research on their issue of concern; students will want to use this information to lobbying and convince fellow classmates to vote for their issue

- A discussion of limiting the agenda–in terms of the number of issues

The building of the class agenda provides the beginning steps to empower the students with the knowledge and skills to become politically engaged. Thus, a foundation is created for engaging students in the political process and counters the low political participation levels, (voting, talking about politics, and other forms of participation) among young adults.

When the agenda is further focused in larger school or regional conventions, students gain further understanding of the democratic process. Again, students lobby and present the research conducted on their issue in order to gain support for their issue. Once the larger coalition is formed and the agenda is set, students then take the agenda to local civic leaders and authorities. Large school or regional conventions provide another level where students must begin coalitions with the non-familiar or those who are often seen as strangers.

> *One of the most important challenges in preparing students to be engaged in American public life into the next century is to get them to explore questions concerning their place as citizens in a multicultural democracy.* (Battistoni 1997: 40)

Large school or regional conventions provides an extensive expansion to the place of ethnicity and culture in the political process. First, the convention brings together more and more students who happen to have more and more diversity – adding significantly to this aspect of moving from the familial to the less familiar. Here, students in a relatively safe environment are able to explore their concerns vis-à-vis each other and develop a consensus agenda. Though most the classes participating are multicultural, the added dimension of other classes and other schools further expounds on the diversity. At a minimum, one study found that the experience created by the convention "can make students more accepting of others who are different from them in appearance, talk, and ideas" (Smith 2003: 5).

Even as students, who become familiar working in multicultural environment in groups of 30 or

fewer, as seen with the traditional class size groups, the bringing together of classes of more non-familiar individuals, either from your own institution or from other institutions, adds significant complexity to the equation. First, students have to deal with not only the multicultural aspects of the collaboration, but the community aspect of the relationship. For instance, at certain points, students find themselves siding with their classmates over their ethnic cohorts and vice versa. This creates very interesting dynamics and challenges that students must explore on their own and in groups when developing their positions.

The Convention

The Students' Political Issues Conventions usually bring together multiple classes from different schools. Conventions have included anywhere from 300-6,000 students. The process of the convention is both a **culmination** and a **beginning** event. The convention can be a culmination, because it develops a large scale consensus on a common agenda that can be pushed by the participants individually or as a group.

The convention is a beginning, because it is usually the first phase where the students see a large group working in coalition to get their concerns addressed; it is usually the first time that political elites and other elites are introduced to their concerns; and it is the first time that formal presentations of their issue research is shared with those outside their classes.

The convention provides both the **energy** and the **focus** to the students. Students' enthusiasm is seen as they push their issue(s), and it is transformed into action for the near future. Students are expected to push issues on their agenda to those capable of directly or indirectly developing an

effective response to these needs.

Typical Convention Format - (approximately 4 hours)

<u>Opening Plenary</u>

- Welcome from host schools representative and others (brief remarks only)

- Adoption of voting rules for the Convention

- Reading of preliminary issues established by individual classes (optional)

- Time 30-45 minutes

<u>Issue Level Workshops</u> (students present research, debate, and explore issues in detail)

- Often two sessions of workshops (10-20 different concurrent issue workshops)

- Time 45 minutes each session (90 minutes total)

<u>Voting Caucuses</u> (based on classes or random)

- Small groups no more than 30 students – equally distributed vote on what issues to adopt for the final agenda

- Time 45 minutes

<u>Final Plenary</u>

- Report from each caucuses on issues that received votes and the number of votes

- Tallying of the agenda and votes

- Motions taken to adopt agenda or limit the agenda

- Vote on final agenda (majority rules)

- Elected representatives may be invited to respond to the final agenda and to take the agenda to their respective offices and push the issues among their colleagues and others
- Time 60 minutes

Conventions can and have been modified to meet various situations. Conventions can be modified to reduced or expand time depending on logistical considerations, such as room availability and other institutional criteria. For example, conventions have been limited to two hours with each of the four sessions lasting 30 minutes. Longer two-day conventions have occurred with expansion in the workshops, caucuses and additional general plenaries with outside issue experts and elected officials. Also, conventions can have different foci especially if done in the spring or summer semesters. For instance, in the Winter 2005 semester, the Michigan Student Political Issues Convention had two panels of electoral elites address the students concerns, one of state legislators, and the other of local mayors. Subsequently, during the Fall 2006 term, students at HFCC decided to focus their efforts on an agenda issue articulated during the Winter 2006 term; and they held a Community Healthcare Summit to build broad support for their concern.