**HOW CAN WE IMPROVE OUR UNIVERSITIES?**

**RESULTS OF A PARTICIPATORY EXERCISE AT THE AMERICAN CENTER IN MOSCOW**

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A demonstration of group facilitation at a meeting at the

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In democratic countries, knowledge of how to combine

is the mother of all other forms of knowledge;

on its progress depends that of all the others.

-- Alexis de Tocqueville

**INTRODUCTION**

On April 24, 2012, in a meeting at the American Center in Moscow, Stuart Umpleby conducted a participatory planning exercise. The purpose of the exercise was to demonstrate group facilitation methods as a method of grassroots problem-solving. Twenty-one people participated.

The exercise used a series of questions drawn from the method of Appreciative Inquiry (Cooperrider and Whitney, 2005). There are several advantages to Appreciative Inquiry as a method of facilitation:

1. The focus is on the future (how to move forward) rather than the past (what went wrong).
2. Problems are not addressed explicitly, because people become defensive and do not want to be blamed for what went wrong. Problems are dealt with implicitly by the gap between what is succeeding and what the objectives are.
3. Sharing successes energizes and motivates the group. Also, sharing successes enables people to learn from each other.
4. A key claim is that “the answers are in the room.” Successful practices are not widely known if group discussions focus on problems rather than successes. Focusing on successes, and why they were successful, enables people to make use of readily available knowledge.

To discuss each question we used the Consensus Workshop method, developed by the Institute of Cultural Affairs (Stanfield, 2003). The Consensus Workshop method entails five steps:

1. Context – explain the purpose of the activity and the method to be used.
2. Brainstorm – participants write their ideas on half page sheets of paper.
3. Cluster – put similar ideas from participants together on a “sticky wall.”
4. Name – identify the key idea in each cluster.
5. Resolve – ask if anything has been left out.

The Workshop Method has several important features.

1. An advantage of having people write down their ideas and then post them is that more people get their ideas into the conversation. Just asking people to speak up leads to some people dominating the conversation.
2. All ideas are accepted and put on the board, though clarification can be asked for.
3. In most public conversations the leader speaks and the audience listens. In facilitation the leader asks questions and the audience provides answers. One purpose of the conversation is for the members of the group to learn what they themselves are thinking.

The participants considered several possible focus questions and chose the fifth.

1. How can we attract the best employees to our university?
2. How can we improve the quality of education in universities?
3. Is there a link between faculty research and quality of education?
4. What are the features of a modern university?
5. How can we improve our universities?

# RESULTS OF THE EXERCISE

1. **What is already working in higher education in Russia?**

*Top level faculty*

USSR’s legacy of good teachers

Long history of intellectual achievement

Strong natural science faculties

Good connection between universities and lower level schools

Inviting great professors

Highly motivated teachers

*Many options for students*

Exchange programs (study abroad for a while)

Equal employment opportunity

Opportunity to go to USA

Opportunities for communicating/ networking

Opportunity to become socially and internationally integrated

*New opportunities for self-education, mostly due to new technology*

Using new technologies

Good computer systems

*High prestige of higher education*

Fewer jobs in higher education due to fewer college age students

Social status of teachers is lower now than 20 years ago

*More research opportunities*

Demand in the past was mainly from the defense complex

More sources of funds for research

*Highly motivated students*

Right choice of subjects at secondary school and university

*Relatively cheap dormitories for students*

Appropriate accommodations

*In recent years, more resources could be found by faculty due to more flexible policies regarding additional employment*

Professors can teach at more than one university

*Location near metro station for some universities (SUM and MSU, for example)*

*Internal individual exams*

1. **What is our vision of the future?**

*All universities give a high quality education*

More inspiring atmosphere inside institutions

More positive mood of professors

Improved teacher motivation

*Good information infrastructure*

New equipment

Build Skolkovo technology and make it widely available

Better equipped laboratories

*Inform students about opportunities*

More exchange programs for students and professors

More free exchange programs for studying

More extracurricular activities

*Total reforming of the mission*

Focus on research and independent study

More focus on research methods, how to study

*Curriculum evolution*

More collaboration between humanities and natural sciences

More graduate schools

*Well-paid jobs for professors and graduates*

Attract best students into careers as teachers

Motivate students to plan careers and life in Russia

*Decrease of corruption*

Transparency in the bureaucracy

Nationwide standardized professional exams (for licenses)

*Integration into the international higher education system*

More international students

*Education closer to practice*

More opportunities for practice in addition to theories

1. **If we achieve our vision of the future, how will we benefit?**

*Good education will develop self-respect in Russian society*

Increased respect to individual person

People will be happier

Russians will be proud and rich

Russian professors could teach all over the world and get high salaries

Professors enjoy their time at universities as much as students enjoy learning from them

Students actually want to go to universities to study and work hard there

Get rid of educational demagoguery (useless information)

Better adaptation to meet coming challenges

*Better quality of life*

High level of life

Further development in economics

Additional income to the Russian budget

Transformation of the economy

Economic growth

Higher living standards

*Excellent specialists to develop Russian science and industry*

A skillful generation

Find cure for many diseases

Highly qualified employers due to excellent education

*People get good jobs according to their academic degree*

People get more intellectual knowledge

More educated people will be able to get jobs abroad

*Building up the integrity of the university both for itself and for the world society*

Effective and prestigious education

Russian diplomas will be accepted in the world

1. **What actions are needed to move toward our vision?**

*Special attention to school education*

Increase respect in society for educated people

Finance all students for studying

More diversity programs

Give to students the opportunity for internship in a global company

*More investment in higher education*

Establish endowment programs

Charge tuition

Invest in education

*Participative university management*

Certification of teachers and universities

Find project manager

*Root out corruption*

Competition without corruption

*Force politicians to perform real actions*

We need a parliament elected by the people

*Stimulate faculty motivation*

Professors should change their tone during lectures from boring to positive and entertaining

An intellectual and educational revolution

Open our eyes

Charge Aurora (A joke. The shot of this big warship was the signal for starting the assault on Zimny Palace and the October (socialist) revolution in Russia in 1917. See <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Russian_cruiser_Aurora> and <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/October_Revolution>)

Wake up Lenin (A joke, too, meaning the desire to return to soviet justice and equity for all. This idea is wide spread in Russia, especially in rural regions and among older people, who are less successful in a market economy. Lenin’s body is still not buried in the ground and lies in Red Square in Moscow, because of communist public resistance and public protests. <http://en.wikipedia.org/wiki/Lenin's_Mausoleum>)

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