

Accomack County World Cafe

“A Conversation about the Future of Accomack County”

Tuesday January 26, 2010
Eastern Shore Community College, Melfa, VA

MEETING REPORT

“If you want a future that’s distinct from the past, you have to be with people who you aren’t used to being with and have conversations that you’re not used to having.”

- Peter Block, author of *Community: The Structure of Belonging*



What was the Accomack County World Café?

The Accomack County World Café was a meeting of over 200 Accomack County stakeholders that used a World Café meeting design created by Juanita Brown and David Isaacs as outlined in their book *The World Café: Shaping Our Futures Through Conversations That Matter*. The intent of the meeting was to bring the Accomack County community together to begin the process of establishing a vision for its future. Often efforts to address problems in the county disintegrate into pointing fingers and taking sides. Processes like World Café focus in on common ground themes so stakeholders work from the same place to take action and move toward a vision rather than try to solve problems.

The hope, after holding the World Café, is that the county begin planning a Future Search. Future Search is a two and a half day conference that will use the themes and issues that emerge from the World Café to create an in depth common ground agenda and plan of action.

Why a World Café for Accomack County?

First, it has been shown that bringing together the whole community allows for the “possibility of a future different than the past”. While it doesn’t bring every community member literally together, a World Café focuses on bringing representatives of all parts of a community together. From there, the meeting is set up on talking, sharing ideas and opinions, and identifying common ground concepts. The event and outcomes often serve as a springboard to more indepth visioning and action planning.

According to Peter Block, the author of a book entitled *Community: The Structure of Belonging*, a major element of building a plan for the future requires “broadening the conversation and getting people into a room who aren’t used to showing up”. This accomplishes a few things including opening the door to interactions among diverse groups of people, providing space to share important ideas and create bonds, and building the groundwork for the development of a future vision owned by all. For communities struggling with challenging issues, hosting a large scale community conversation can be seen as overwhelming. But this model offers relief to those whose job it is to “solve

problems” as it provides a new way to approach old issues. A whole community visioning meeting allows the group to, as Block puts it, focus on what can be created, rather than what problems can be solved.

“No future is created by simply solving problems” Block explains.” You have to tap into people's longing, imagination, and possibility, to organize around something larger. Nothing new gets created by better problem solving or by focusing on low-hanging fruit," he continues.

Peter Block also points out that most of the conversations that we're used to tend to emphasize short-term results. "No matter how sophisticated we are as a learning organization, if our conversations are limited to measurable outcomes, we are simply getting better at a system, not creating a new future.”

Who Planned the Accomack County World Café?

The Accomack World Café was planned by 14 dedicated community members representing different segments of the county. The planning committee members included:

Bill Allen, Barbara Boggs, Bob Conklin, Carter Davis, Rev. Greg Duncan, Bel Holden, Mary Hollandsworth, Barbara Johnson, Kay Lewis, Steve Miner, Charlie Russell, Bill Sterling, Karen Terwilliger, Cathy Tignor

Jennifer Hicks, Principal of Positive Force Consulting in Chestertown, MD guided the committee through the planning process. And with the help of her associate Michael Hardesty, of Washington College’s Center for the Environment and Society and graphic documenter Thomas Briggs, Ms. Hicks lead the January 26th World Café event.

Committee members met three times for two hours at a time to determine:

- Who should be invited to this conversation so it would allow the broadest possible spectrum of citizens to have a voice about their hopes for the future of Accomack County.
- What questions should be asked at a World Café that would allow the participants to offer the most insight about the future of Accomack County
- Where to hold the World Café, how it will be set up, and what food/drinks will be served
- Possible funders who could bring in funding opportunities for this activity
- Roles the committee will play during the World Café event
- How to use the results of the Accomack County World Café

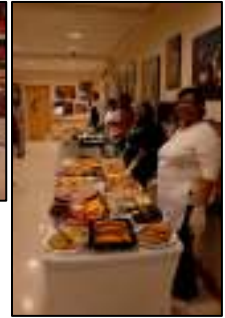
The committee members were responsible for directly inviting community members using the media, e-mail, phone, and mail. The planning committee members were committed not to specific agenda outcomes but rather a successful event in which many are involved.

What Happened at the Accomack County World Café?



When the day of the Accomack County World Cafe arrived the Great Hall at the Workforce Development Building on the campus of the Eastern Shore Community College was transformed into a café complete with small tables with five chairs, flowers in vases, and table cloths (really sheets of paper on which participants could write). Participants were to be assigned a table randomly to ensure the likelihood of people of diverse backgrounds having conversations.

Everyone who arrived to participate in the event was warmly greeted by several of the members of the planning committee and received a meeting packet, name tag, and a table assignment. In addition they were invited to enjoy the food being served at buffet tables prepared by a local catering company.



At 6:30pm sharp the participants were asked to find their seats and the proceedings of the event began with a hardy welcome by County Administrator Steve Miner. He thanked the County Supervisors for “taking a chance on this



idea” and their willingness to approve funds to sponsor this event. He then introduced the President of Eastern Shore Community College, Linda Thomas-Glover, who also welcomed those in attendance. She expressed her appreciation that the event planners decided to choose ESCC as the location of the Accomack County World Café.

Facilitator Jennifer Hicks then offered her congratulations to the group for making the effort to be in attendance and how it demonstrated their tremendous commitment to their community. She asked the members of the World Café planning committee to stand up and be acknowledged for their hard work to make this event happen.

Ms. Hicks explained the “who”, “what”, and “why” of the event and the significance of the gathering of so many people. She described what the group would be expecting: three 20 minute conversations answering three “questions that matter” about the future of Accomack County. She explained that after each conversation everyone except a designated “table host” would be moving to another table to have the next conversation with new people. She reviewed the etiquette that is followed during a World Café and encouraged all participants to really listen to each other and for common ground themes.



Once the instructions were given and participants were ready to begin the group was provided the first question: “What is it about Accomack County that brought you here and keeps you here?” Twenty minutes later the participants switched tables and the second questions was asked: “What are the advantages and disadvantages of living and

working in Accomack County?” After round two finished the third question was posed: “How do we make Accomack County a place of prosperity?” Ms. Hicks suggested that the groups also include in the discussion: “What are your hopes and dreams for the future of Accomack County?”

After a break, the group reconvened to listen to the reports from the table hosts. Each “reporter” provided a presentation of their discussions that described the three most prominent issues and the overlying themes. The facilitators documented what was being said in the reports. Below are the ideas that were captured:



Notes Captured from Table Host Reports

Advantages of living and working in Accomack County

Family
 Quality of life
 Affordability
 Maritime opportunities
 Rural life → no pollution, no noise pollution
 Small town life
 Has a long rich history
 People
 Landscape
 Sense of community
 “The people keep us here”
 Speed of life is slow
 Personable
 Near water
 Appealing lifestyle
 Growth is moderate and supports small town life
 Climate
 Traditions
 Community spirit

The stars and seeing the horizon – no where like it!
 Accomack Co. is a good place for kids → everyone is watching out for each other
 Good recreation opportunities
 It’s a relaxing place
 Need some growth – to keep young people here
 Want Accomack to be a place for people to come and live but needs to grow sustainably
 Low taxes
 Natural resources → hunting/fishing
 Love
 Simpler way of life
 Community
 Long history
 Low crime
 Spirituality
 Taxes
 “On the right path”

Disadvantages of living and working in Accomack County?

Lack of jobs, small agriculture, lack of tech, nothing for youth
 Gov’t obstruction
 Lack of infrastructure
 Builders helped, business helped
 Rural landscape
 Not enough opportunity to become what we want
 Safe environment
 Need jobs & commerce

Need for improved infrastructure
 Unwillingness to change → everyone wants change but no one wants to change
 Lack of resources for education
 Lots of trash
 Not enough youth
 Commuting
 Need more racial openness
 Disparity of income
 Limited healthcare services

- Declining friendliness
- Little access to natural areas
- Need more/better medical services
- Not enough appropriate types of economic dev't (medium sized) → offer tax incentives to bring in this type of ED
- Fear of increasing taxes
- Not enough workforce training
- Cycle of poverty
- Not enough local services

How do we make Accomack more prosperous?

<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Need to keep talent in the County Support telecommuting opportunities Create a plan for the County that includes a plan for Rt. 13 Conserve water Provide education that provides the training youth need to succeed Better job creation Developing tech sector Better transportation More educational opportunities Improve vo-tech/vocational More business/aggressively attract business Broadband Better waste and water management Maintain natural resources Create business development position Eco-tourism 	<ul style="list-style-type: none"> Manage growth Heritage tourism Emphasize spiritual-ness of the place and people Support agriculture Emphasize the natural resource assets Recruit environmentally-friendly business Expand local food production Investment in youth Use technology to increase profitability of natural resources Low impact job creation Green industry Education for trades and providers Bi-county communication Middle income jobs Build a technology sector
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Once the table host reports were completed, the meeting mural created by graphic documenter Tom Briggs was presented. It reflected the common themes heard from the conversations. In addition, Ms. Hicks provided a preliminary set of major themes from which the Board of Supervisors and community members can work to begin to address what is important for a prosperous future of Accomack County. Ms. Hicks made a few recommendations for the next steps including holding a more in-depth visioning process for the county called Future Search. Mr. Miner provided some closing words and invited the vice Chair of the Board of Supervisors, Laura Belle Gordy, to provide a few last thoughts. At 9:45pm the group adjourned.

The following pages contain the meeting packet handed out to each participant at the Accomack County World Café:

Welcome to....

A Conversation about the Future of Accomack County

Thank you for coming to this important event. This is the result of the hard work of a group of 12 - 14 community members, representing various stakeholder groups in the county, who have come together to plan this opportunity for the Accomack County community. The aim of this event is to connect diverse perspectives through meaningful conversation, while at the same time, listening for common ground ideas around the future of Accomack County.

This meeting is what is called a "World Café". You'll notice that the meeting space has a café feel to promote a sense of warmth which fosters a social and conversational atmosphere. At this event we will enjoy good food and good company, but will be working hard to speak from our hearts and listen to others. Though it is a simple process - small groups of people having conversations - World Café is a highly researched approach. The conversations that we'll have will link and build on each other as we move between groups and discover new insights into the questions or issues that are most important in your life, work, and community.

The desired outcome for this event is to begin the process for the Accomack County community to work together in this new decade to establish an achievable vision for its future. Financial and human resources are limited. Decisions makers need to know what citizens desire most in order to prioritize. Please look at the statistical measures which were handed out tonight. We have great needs and many challenges. For those who want to stay informed about this process after tonight's meeting you can check the website below for updates, pictures, and a final report with the outcomes of this event. In addition, if you provide your e-mail and/or phone number on the meeting sign-in sheet you will receive the any general communications that would be sent out regarding this process.

<http://www.co.accomack.va.us/conversation>

Thank you for helping to create the future of Accomack County

A Conversation about the Future of Accomack County

Tuesday January 26, 2010

Eastern Shore Community College

Workforce and Business Development Center

6:00pm - 9:00pm

Agenda

6:00 ~ Arrival, refreshments

6:30 ~ Welcome and meeting introduction

6:50 - 7:10 ~ Small group discussion about Question #1

7:15 - 7:35 ~ Small group discussion about Question #2

7:40 - 8:00 ~ Small group discussion about Question #3

8:00 ~ BREAK

8:15 ~ Table hosts report out & whole group conversation

8:50 ~ Final thoughts, next steps, & farewell

Conversation about the Future of Accomack County

Questions that Matter

- 1. What is it about Accomack County that brought you here and keeps you here?*
- 2. What are the advantages and disadvantages of living and working in Accomack County?*
- 3. How do we make Accomack County a place of prosperity?*

Considerations that Matter

What top three issues were most prominent in your discussions?

What was the overlying theme of your discussions?

Table Host Information

Thank you for being your table's host. The responsibilities for the host include:

- Reminding people at your table to jot down key connections, ideas, discoveries, and deeper questions as they emerge.
- Remaining at the table when others leave and welcome travelers from other tables.
- Briefly sharing key insights from the prior conversation so others can link and build using ideas from their respective tables.
- Encouraging everyone to participate.
- Reviewing the Community Conversation Etiquette with your table:

Community Conversation Etiquette

Focus on what matters

Contribute your thinking

Speak your mind and heart

Listen to understand

Link and connect ideas

Listen together for insights and deeper questions