

Good Neighbors

A Community Conversation to Strengthen City-College Connections and Relationships

A NH Listens Summary Report

April 14, 2015



ABOUT NH LISTENS



New Hampshire Listens is a civic engagement initiative of the Carsey School of Public Policy at the University of New Hampshire.

Our Mission:

To bring people together for engaged conversations

Our Work:

- Create engaged community conversations on local and statewide issues
- Serve as a resource and support network for new local Listens groups
- Cultivate a network of facilitators for public engagement and action

Our Principles:

- Bring people together from all walks of life
- Provide time for in-depth, informed conversations
- Respect differences as well as seek common ground
- Achieve outcomes that lead to informed community solutions

New Hampshire Listens

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EVENT HIGHLIGHTS

Event

Good Neighbors: A Community Conversation To Strengthen City-College Relations and Connections

Date

April 14, 2015

Duration

Three hours

Participants

71 Keene residents and Keene State College students, staff, and faculty

Project Team

Michele Holt-Shannon
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Location

Heberton Hall, Keene, NH

Background

On Tuesday, April 14, 2015, over 70 residents of Keene, New Hampshire, gathered to discuss their values, ideas, and aspirations regarding the relationship between the City of Keene, Keene State College (KSC), and local neighborhoods. Those attending included many who were affiliated with the College (students, faculty, staff) and residents of the City with no direct relationship to Keene State. The conversation was intended to give participants the opportunity to share their own views while listening to the views of others. The community conversation was sponsored by the College/City Commission,¹ in response to a charge from Mayor Lane and President Huot.

The results of the community conversation that took place in April are intended to be useful to the participants, the Keene City Council and Mayor, Keene State College and its leadership, and residents of Keene—especially those who live in close proximity to the College. Over about three hours, eight small groups, each with a trained facilitator, identified what is most important to them about ways to assure a strong, open, and productive relationship between the City and College. The report that follows summarizes the most frequent themes, comments, and recommendations that emerged from the conversation.

¹ The members of the College/City Commission are Cynthia Georgina, Councilor Phil Jones, Councilor Emily Hague, Dick Berry, Paula Jessup, Ted McGreer, Marcia Kayser, Rhett Lamb (Staff), Chris Hrynowski, Mike Welsh, Bart Sapeta, Dottie Morris, Caitlin Licence, Margaret Rice, and Andy Robinson (Staff).

SUMMARY FINDINGS

1. Communication—Create two-way communication strategies that emphasize a respectful communication culture with all residents and students. Ensure an emphasis that includes the positive contributions being made by the College and the vast majority of students.

2. Building Relationships—Focus on personal, close relationships between students and neighbors through mentoring, adopt-a-street, and expanded service opportunities.

3. Traditions and Celebrations—Invite residents to participate in student events, such as the New Student Convocation, and develop shared traditions that engage the College and City residents together, including through community service opportunities.

4. Alcohol and Substance Use—Recognize that abuse of alcohol and other drugs is a community issue, not just a college issue, and take proactive steps to reduce abuse.

5. Norms, Expectations—Hold high expectations for behavior on and off campus, hold violators accountable with clear consequences, focus on the first thirty days for new students, and work to build pride in KSC's service programs so that is what the College is known for.

6. Housing—Increase on-campus housing and work with landlords to create consistent and enforceable expectations for landlord accountability and tenant behavior.

The following appendices to this report are located at <http://nhlistens.org>:

Appendix A: Invitation to Participants

Appendix B: Discussion Guide

Appendix C: Small Group Notes

Appendix D: Summary of Participant Evaluations

Appendix E: How NH Listens Collects and Reports Findings

The Community Conversation

During the winter and spring of 2015, the Keene College/City Commission worked with NH Listens to design a community conversation that would focus on one of the four priorities identified by the Commission in 2014—citizenship. As stated in its working charge, the Commission was established with, “the goal of improving the quality of life for residents, students, employers, and visitors while recognizing the diverse needs of varied demographic groups, the unique characteristics of our City, and the opportunities that exist for collaboration across organizational boundaries.” In the near future, the College/City Commission will also be addressing the other priorities contained in its charge—housing and neighborhoods, infrastructure and parking, and property/tax base issues.

The conversation in April 2015 was intended to help residents and KSC students, faculty, and staff to engage in conversations focused on the future to assure “long range planning and short and long term resolution of mutual concerns.” While the conversation took place in the wake of the disruptions that occurred at the Pumpkin Festival in October 2014, it was not intended to address or resolve the specific incidents or aftermath of that event. Rather, the community conversation was meant to address broad areas of mutual concern, with an emphasis on what it means to be a “citizen” of Keene, regardless of one’s status, length of residency, age, or affiliation with the College. The conversations were open to anyone who wanted to attend.

Focus Questions

The Keene College/City Commission and NH Listens worked collaboratively to develop a set of focus questions to guide the discussion. The framing of the community conversation reflects extensive review of prior discussions conducted by the Commission since its launch in the spring of 2014, as well as consideration of data provided by the College and City about housing, student behavior, economic impact, and related topics.² On March 10, 2015, the Commission met with NH Listens to identify the key issues to be addressed in the conversation. Important principles that emerged from that meeting included the view that the College and City do not represent two separate entities. There is one Keene community, of which the College is an integral, valuable component. In addition, the need to recognize the many contributions that students make to the larger community is critical. It was acknowledged that the connections and relationships between the College and rest of the City need to be strengthened (leading to the overall framing of the conversation).

At the beginning of the conversation, participants were first asked to discuss community values, which included the following questions:

- As a Keene resident, what do you value most about the College?
- As a KSC student or staff member, what do you value most about the City of Keene?
- What do you think are the greatest threats to those values?
- How can the City and College together take actions that support the values that are important to you?

² Materials collected by the Commission relevant to the Community Conversation can be found at www.ci.keene.nh.us/government/boards-commissions.

Participants were then asked to review data about the City and the College and respond to the questions, *What do you notice, and what is important to you regarding the information provided about the City and the College?* Information in the Discussion Guide included the economic impact of the College on the City of Keene, the location of rental housing in the City (especially in the neighborhoods surrounding the College), comments made at the December 2, 2014, City Council forum about the October Pumpkin Festival, and the College’s disciplinary responses to student behavior at the Pumpkin Festival.

After discussion of the information that was made available, participants then spent the bulk of the conversation addressing the questions focused on mutual expectations, communications, students as community members, the role of landlords and off-campus housing, the value of traditions and celebrations, and ways to ensure cultural and economic vibrancy in the community.

Key Findings

Participants at the conversation on City-College relationships expressed a range of perspectives, all of which were recorded by facilitators and are provided in Appendix C. Some of the most commonly discussed topics include the following, though even within these topics a range of perspectives was considered:

Communication: A Two-Way Street

Improved communication “on all sides” was raised by all groups. Participants discussed the value of creating two-way communication strategies and activities that are respectful of students as well as neighbors. Proactive steps to create positive relationships between students and neighbors should begin with communication outreach efforts initiated by the College (for example, keeping neighbors informed about College activities and inviting residents to College events such as the “clap-in” at the New Student Convocation) as well as by neighbors (such as creating mentoring and “adopt-a-first-year-student” programs that make students feel welcomed by the City). It was felt that focusing communications on students’ first thirty days on campus about their role as citizens in the larger community would be especially valuable.

Communication should also emphasize the positive contributions that the College makes to the overall community, what some people described as the “vitality” that the College brings to the City. It was stated that 95 percent of students make positive contributions to the community. It is the stories of these students that should be amplified in media accounts and public forums. Stories about disruptive or destructive behavior on the part of a few students should not be interpreted to represent the lives of all students. Similarly, behavior of some residents does not represent that of all residents.

Building Relationships Through Community Connections

Participants discussed the need to focus on personal, close relationships between students and neighbors through mentoring, adopt-a-street, and expanded service opportunities. Long-term relationships between students and neighbors that last over the four years that a student lives in Keene are highly desirable. These relationships can take the form of mentoring, engaging in mutual service activities, and linking community work to academic credit. The purpose of such relationships should be framed as creating values and activities that promote a sense of “one community” on the part of students and City residents.

Many participants discussed the core community values that emphasize safety, honesty, a sense of community, courtesy, and friendliness that they experience in Keene. These shared values are seen as the basis for positive relationships among residents and the College. Relationships between students and neighbors should reflect these values and strive to preserve them. One threat to these values is a sense of isolation on the part of students, when they feel they are not connected to the larger community, or when they are not aware of opportunities to participate in the life of the City. Students who come to KSC from other states might especially be at risk for feelings of isolation.

Traditions and Celebrations

Residents as well as College students and staff expressed a great deal of pride and satisfaction with Keene as a place to live, work, learn, and play. The City is seen as friendly, accessible, culturally diverse, economically healthy, rich in natural beauty, family-oriented, and committed to public service. These core values and attributes can be sustained through continuing traditions, celebrations, and rituals.

The value of such traditions and celebrations, especially those that involve both the College and the wider community, was emphasized by many participants. In light of the decision by the City Council to not license the Pumpkin Festival next year, participants discussed other forms of cultural events that can instill pride, bring people together, and become venues for safe, respectful means to celebrate what is best about Keene. As mentioned earlier, inviting residents to attend College functions that have special meaning, such as the First Year Clap-In at the New Student Convocation, was seen as a means to include neighbors in campus life. Making a tradition of community service during First Year Student Orientation was also suggested.

Essentially, participants voiced their desire to create social activities that are safer, healthier, and a source of pride compared to those activities that result in damage to neighborhood property (often related to alcohol abuse). Community service activities in which students and residents work side-by-side can also create the sense of “one community” that many spoke about. Awards for students who exhibit high levels of civic engagement and service could become part of the community’s traditions. Expecting students who live in off-campus housing to reach out to neighbors, introduce themselves, offer to assist in neighborhood clean-ups, and otherwise contribute positively to life in those neighborhoods should become part of community norms. Joint campus-community events connected to the Clarence DeMar Marathon, the Film Fest, Earth Day, the Cohen Center, the NH Dance Institute, and Taste of Keene were all mentioned as examples of opportunities to build on existing traditions and cultural resources in ways that can unify the City and College.

Alcohol and Substance Use

A common concern shared by participants, whether from the City or College, focused on the effects of alcohol and other drugs on the community. The discussions did not frame this as solely a college issue, but also as a shared challenge that reflects larger social trends. The increased use and harm of heroin was noted by several groups, in addition to continuing concerns about drinking and marijuana. These concerns are linked to a sense that the community is less safe than it used to be, especially at nighttime.

Proactive steps were recommended, including:

- efforts focused on students and bars to encourage more responsible alcohol consumption
- creating alternative social activities that are alcohol and drug free
- more substance abuse education and prevention (especially for students during their first month on campus)
- working with landlords and law enforcement to rein in the size and rowdiness of house parties
- involving students in neighborhood clean-ups after parties as well as at other times to instill a sense of pride and responsibility
- enforcement of existing laws and regulations (state laws, city ordinances, and college rules, including notification of parents when infractions occur)
- increasing Friday class schedules to reduce Thursday night partying

Norms and Expectations

Participants often raised the topic of clearly defined and communicated norms and expectations for responsible, civic behavior—what the Commission means by “citizenship.” As noted throughout this report, accountability for one’s actions is crucial to maintaining a vibrant, safe, respectful community. This begins with the communication of high expectations for behavior on and off campus and consistent efforts to hold violators accountable, with clear consequences for violating community norms. Several groups noted that the reputation of the City and the College is unfortunately influenced by a “party-school” identity associated with the College and the lack of drug law enforcement in the community. The 2014 Pumpkin Festival disturbances added to that perception.

Participants discussed both sanctions and incentives for fostering positive behaviors among all members of the community. There was agreement that there should be clear, enforceable rules regarding acceptable behavior both on and off campus, and that these expectations should be communicated emphatically to students during their first weeks at the College. Restorative justice approaches to violations of civil norms were mentioned as effective ways to address actions that harm property or people.

Coupled with a focus on rules should be opportunities to become engaged in community service, working alongside Keene residents to instill a sense of mutual pride and shared responsibility. Businesses that serve or sell alcohol, landlords who rent to students, and college officials charged with enforcing campus regulations all need to act in ways consistent with community norms and laws and be accountable to the larger community in that process.

Several groups put forward the idea of “adopt-a-street” programs for students who are living in off-campus housing and community members as a way to create shared expectations for maintaining safe, clean, strong neighborhoods. Such efforts are not simply about maintenance but about working side-by-side with neighbors and taking on leadership roles to instill pride and accountability. It was suggested that neighbors welcome students to their communities at the beginning of the school year in order to create positive and mutual relationships and communicate shared norms and expectations. The recently implemented mandatory orientation program for students living off-campus was seen as an important step in creating clear expectations for responsible behavior. In addition, when students graduate from KSC, they should be encouraged to “stay, work, and play” through employment opportunities. Knowing that such opportunities might be available will create a greater sense of responsibility and belonging throughout a student’s time in college.

A particular challenge noted by many is the increasing use of social media in ways that promote anti-social or destructive behavior. It is believed by some that use of social media can encourage behavior that damages the community as well as foster a sense of isolation. Yik Yak was especially pointed out as a challenge to maintaining civility and respect. Specific efforts to create expectations for responsible and civil use of social media were seen as important for ensuring improved community relationships.

Housing

Participants discussed the high proportion of rental housing and non-resident landlords. It was recognized that there are significant efforts to bring more students back into campus housing or to the new housing that is being constructed adjacent to campus. Participants expressed concern about the number of tenants allowed to live within apartment units, a perception of weak enforcement of fire and safety codes in rental housing, and the need to revisit the “disorderly house” ordinance.

It was also recognized that reducing student rentals in the community could open up affordable rental housing for young families, making Keene a more desirable place to live and work and helping to balance the increasingly older population of the City.

A common theme across all groups focused on the roles and responsibilities of landlords to create consistent and enforceable expectations for behavior and to be accountable to the City and College for their actions. Absentee landlords were especially cited as a concern in terms of creating housing conditions that can lead to unsightly and disorderly situations. Lack of communication among landlords, college personnel, and city officials was a concern expressed in many of the small groups.

Conclusion

The community conversation that took place on April 14, 2015, sponsored and designed by the Keene College/City Commission and supported by NH Listens, generated several overall themes that all participants believed to be important to strengthening relationships and communication between the City and College. Participants spoke about the values and traditions that make the greater Keene community, including Keene State College, a great place to live, work, learn, and play. The challenges that are part of assuring strong relationships and positive connections between City residents and College students, staff, and faculty include: 1) the need for effective and open communication channels; 2) creating supportive relationships across generations and within neighborhoods impacted by the College; 3) preserving and developing traditions that celebrate the vibrancy and cohesion of the City; 4) finding ways to assure responsible and safe use of alcohol and limiting the use of illicit drugs; 5) defining and enforcing expectations for civil, respectful behavior; and 6) accommodating the housing needs of both students and residents in affordable, attractive facilities. The community conversation demonstrated the ability of the Keene community to come together, discuss those challenges, and find common ground that can serve as the basis for future actions.

Participant Attendance and Evaluation Summary

Of the 71 participants who attended the event, 50 completed evaluations at the end. From these 50 evaluations, data indicates that there was an age range of 21 to 78 years of age, with an average age of 54 years old. About 12 percent of participants at the event were people under 30 years of age, and 12.2 percent of participants identified as students. Close to 30 percent of participants were retired. Overall the participants in the event leaned left politically, with almost half of the crowd identifying as liberal or somewhat liberal, about 38 percent identified as politically moderate, and about 13 percent as conservative or somewhat conservative. Participants were highly educated—about 69 percent of individuals held a Bachelor’s degree or higher, and over half had earned a graduate or professional degree.

Participants gave very positive reviews of the process and substance of the community conversation. Almost all those who completed the evaluation survey agreed or strongly agreed that their small group talked about the most important issues related to the topic (95.9%); everyone had an equal chance to express his/her views (89.9%); they learned new things about the topic from other members of their group (85.7%); and the conversation helped them to become better informed about the issues (83.3%). Complete results of the evaluation survey are included in Appendix D.

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