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Interview with Eric Liu, Founder of Citizen University and Civic Collaboratory
by Lynn Barendsen

What was the inspiration behind the Civic Collaboratory? Did you have models or mentors in its formation?

The inspiration was really organic. I had for years been organizing an annual national conference – now Citizen University – and the larger the community became, the more appetite there was to sustain the engagement beyond once a year. I had a desire to build a structure for that sustained engagement.

It was Bill Gates, Sr. who initially suggested we conduct more frequent and focused gatherings the rest of the year, so that the leaders and innovators who came to the conference could stay connected.

Around the same time, in Seattle, my friend and colleague Nick Hanauer and I had created something that ended up being a bit of a prototype for the Collaboratory. It was called the Civic Innovators Club (CIC). Our goal was to get leaders and innovators from the Seattle/Puget Sound area (in and around western Washington state) together for dinners and discussions once every few months. We were trying to build a community that would be a constituency for more civic ambition in our city and state.This was in some ways a nice dry run for what would become the Civic Collaboratory.

So I took the prompt by Bill Sr. and the model of the CIC and that led me and my team to design what would become the Civic Collaboratory, a leadership network dedicated to building a movement of strong citizenship in America. Bill Sr. and Justice Sandra Day O'Connor actually helped kick off the first meeting of the Collaboratory, at the Gates Foundation offices in July 2011.

Were there previous entities that you had in mind when you began the Civic Collaboratory? What did you learn from other examples, both positive as well as negative?

The process was primarily organic. The format of the Rotating Credit Club [explanation needed?] just grew out of my having been exposed to comparable formats in immigrant communities – small business people, who pool capital and invest in one another. I was never part of one but

knew of such mutual aid circles and that was one really good example.

There were lots of influences but I don't know that I thought of them consciously. I was influenced by a group of friends who 20 years ago were part of the founding of a nonprofit called Do Something. Do Something was focused on getting young people to do community service and civic action. That organization was always really creative about convening people across different sectors. Getting people who wouldn't otherwise know or play with each other to do so. And by the way, Do Something is now part of the Collaboratory.

Then also, I learned a lot during the 18-20 months I was researching and writing *Guiding Lights* and *Imagination First.* Spent all those months traveling around the country, meeting people across different domains, figuring out what the common threads are, how I might connect them, learn from one another. And always I had the instinct to create platforms to make the whole greater than the sum of the parts.

Any negative models, or negative examples? Processes you didn't want to emulate?

Two examples: one from government, one from my time in business. When I was in Washington, not long after the Columbine shootings, I was working for President Clinton, and we tried to start a national campaign against youth violence. Intentions were good, various sectors were involved, there was lots of interest and a lot of desire to participate. A freestanding, external, nonprofit organization was formed. There were good people running it, but I learned it could be challenging to take a top-down route to building a national movement. We had plenty of convening power, star power, but because it was top down and didn't draw enough from grass roots and where people were. It didn't get enough traction. And people were initially participating because they were excited to connect to and impress the White House. This put participants more in the mode of positioning themselves, rather than considering how they might work together. That's negative and distorts the process.

So at the Collaboratory we gather people who already have a presence at the grassroots, and we build in structures and incentives for them to help each other. *This* is the reason to be there, rather than to angle to impress one another or anyone else.

The business example: when I first came to Seattle I worked at RealNetworks, founded and run by brilliant entrepreneur, staffed with fun,

smart people. But the company suffered and our efforts to collaborate internally and externally suffered mainly because the organization had a founder and CEO who was smarter than everyone else and the way the company culture developed, all roads led to him and had to pass through him. Even though others were willing and happy to collaborate – the culture meant that there was always going to be a bottleneck. If the frame and culture is such that no collaboration is official until the CEO blesses it – it won't work.

What are your specific goals for this work in the short term (6 mo – 1 year)? In the long term (5 – 10 years)?

In the short term: create a strong and durable leadership network that can help foster a culture of strong engaged citizenship in the US. People have invested in the Collaboratory – not just time or expense, but they've taken ownership, wanting to participate and wanting to host. I feel like the flywheel is starting to turn, but not yet turning at peak speed, and want to get it humming so that the culture is humming. So that it has energy on its own.

In the long term: Our goal ultimately is a culture, from popular culture to a culture of schooling and learning or of business or of political life, where there's a higher emphasis and premium on the ethics and acts of great citizenship.

I see us as the germ of a movement about citizenship – in religious terms, a movement of spirit as well as of project. Movements like this have to be authentic but also require catalytic leadership, across sectors, across lines of division.

We're going deeper, too. One aim in the coming year: every time we get together as a group, we'll be meeting with other leaders from the host city. The idea is to both deepen, for national leaders to connect with people in that particular city; but also for people of the city to be able to engage on a national scale. But also in a Johnny Appleseed way, seed the same kind of intentional movement and leadership that we can do on a local level.

How do you measure your success?

How do you measure culture change? The artist in me thinks of it as a *feel* thing more than a *metrics* thing. Success will be things you can feel and see. One measure will be the quality and quantity of the interrelationships,

collaborations, partnerships that arise just within our community. Externally, I measure it in the extent to which in all of these domains of public life (education, pop culture, politics, business) there is both more talk and more action around great citizenship, and what it means.

I could measure it in quantitative terms (Google mentions, for example) – but if in 5 or 10 years, it becomes a more default setting that a young person graduating from high school expects that she or he will be spending time in meaningful national service, or that business leaders know that investing in their communities here isn't charity but responsible citizenship, or that more voters actually vote, that's more important.

If a culture is shifting – a comparable value shift – think about cultural conservatives since the 1970s, for example: do they have specific numerical measures? They have been trying for 30-40 years to shift conversation about morality and family and so forth. I don't know if they're succeeding, but they've managed to move the frame of a lot of national debates – teenage pregnancy, importance of parent engagement in the lives of children.

Part of what we're doing is about the story people tell – what constitutes admirable behavior. Individual wins can be visible – e.g. having the President start talking about citizenship, or having Starbucks think about its stores as a platform for citizenship. Larger success will be when we have established a vocabulary that offers a story that most people want to tell about themselves as individuals and members of a community. To go from vocabulary to story to practice.

What are the beliefs and values that guide you in this work?

Responsibility. Reciprocity. Participation. Inclusion. Practice. Unpacking each of them – whether it's how I was raised, or how I'm wired, but responsibility is crucial to me. Americans spend far too much time thinking about rights, not enough about responsibilities. And I think Americans are far too prone to believe that we're isolated individuals rather than part of a web of relationships. I really believe that every aspect of citizenship and self-government begins with a choice to take responsibility. That may sound conservative, but that's fine. I'm a progressive by almost every political policy measure, but any healthy society begins with shared responsibility.

Reciprocity is connected to that. We have to understand and appreciate the ways in which in a diverse large democracy, trust is everything and

doesn't' come automatically, has to be earned, built and increased. It is built by reciprocity – understanding that our fates our bound together.

Participation: I always quote Bill Gates Sr., about showing up for life. I am the son of immigrants: I'm conscious of every opportunity involving obligation to participate, to get involved, not to take for granted anything that I had the dumb luck to inherit. I had the luck to be born here, have the advantages of safety, advantages of support – that means I'm obligated to participate in the substance of that ecosystem.

Inclusion means not just to respect diverse view points but also in the sense that our diversity is only as good as what we make of it. It's paper diversity if you don't actively seek to bring people together and make something out of their difference. Active inclusion.

Practice is a very American thing. A "more perfect union" means we are never perfect, practice will be our charge forever as a country. Every generation seems to live up more to our ideals, but there are still great gaps between actual ideas and inclusion.

The meta value is true patriotism. I believe America is exceptional, but because it is we have an exceptional responsibility to keep it up, to earn it. That's the overarching value that we hold. It's not complacent – it's a consideration of all of the above, earning it.

Are there other collaborations you've been involved with that you'd like to highlight?

All my working life I've been collaborating in teams. As speechwriter for the President, there's a whole team and a very fluid collaboration between national security advisor, chief of communications, cabinet secretaries, various congressional relationships. You are sort of the central node in a vast network of things. I'm not even getting to word choice and phrasing in speeches; long before that it's all about how you resolve disputes and work with others. Many of my books have been collaborations, too. My life and training in music as a kid, I played violin and I was a pretty good soloist. But the formative part was playing in an ensemble – string quartet or symphony – and that experience is all about collaboration.

From Jená Cane, my partner in Citizen University and in life (we're just engaged) – I've learned a lot about collaboration in terms of theater. Metaphorically, it is about how teams work.

Is it important that all participants in a collaboration have the same understandings of success?

Two things that are essential for successful collaborations. One is a shared sense of purpose. The second is a shared sense of interest. Even in the evolution of the Civic Collaboratory itself (from the early meetings to the latest), we have figured out how to activate people's mutual interest. People always had a common sense of purpose. But initially, we were trying in a more top-down way to say hey, let's all gather and get behind a project that we could do together. Yes, that project would be better or more relevant for some than for others, but let's try that. It didn't get traction. It felt to some members like yet another thing to have to do, that they weren't getting funded or supported to do and that wasn't necessarily in their organization's interest to do. So: how could we open up channels of energy to share rather than make people guarded or closed? This is where we came up with the idea of the Rotating Credit Club – to make clear the mutuality of interest. The Civic Collaboratory might still get together behind a big thing but it will happen at the initiative of the members. So: restate, articulate, refine a shared statement of common purpose. And then engage every member's sense that their self interest lies in our mutual interest.

You have worked in government, non profits, professions (law) - what are some differences that you see across these domains? Are there mistakes that one might make in transferring collaborative skills from one domain to another? Are there particular problems in collaborations across sectors?

The parameters I would use to distinguish among settings and contexts are less about the type of domain – government vs business, say – and more about the structure of the environment, particularly hierarchical vs. non-hierarchical. I can think of instances across all sectors where collaboration was to be hierarchical and that fostered less collaboration and less evolution. And examples across those same domains where the structure was more fluid, less hierarchical, and collaboration was better.

Collaboration works best when it's happening in an environment that makes it feel like play. That's usually associated with less hierarchy. Play in the sense that there's creativity and joy, and where working with others feels like playing with others.