PAFC Cited in Prestigious National Journal

By Myles Crane

On the 250th anniversary of our country's founding, the current edition of the National Civics Review includes an article "Building Community Capacity in Toxic Times: The Critical Role of Bridging Institutions." The scholarly piece is co-authored by Professor Martin Carcasson, Director CSU' Center for Public Deliberation (CPD) and Willow E.. Paul, a PhD student in Communication Studies at CSU.

Referencing PAFC, Dr. Carcasson writes:

" One of the best CPD (Center for Public Deliberation) stories is connected to the **Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities** (PAFC), a 501(c)3 that was created out of a collaborative project the CPD was involved in starting in 2009. Sparked by the impending expansion of the Fort Collins Senior Center and clear demographic trends that revealed our population over 65 was going to more than double in the coming years, we started a series of conversations addressing the question, "What sort of community do we want to have for our older residents?"

Conversations sparked significant interest, but after a year, when there were calls to move to action, there wasn't an organization well-situated to take the ball and run with it. Some of the key players involved, with the assistance of a planning grant from the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, decided to create a new organization, and the PAFC was born and continues to function well. The PAFC is a bridging advocacy group because it is passionate about an issue but is open-minded and collaborative about how best to address that issue. It inherently works to bring people together across perspectives (generationally, politically, and across public/private/non-profit sectors).

With this mindset, the PAFC is well situated to avoid motivated reasoning and tap into more creative and innovative ways of thinking that humans are clearly capable of undertaking."

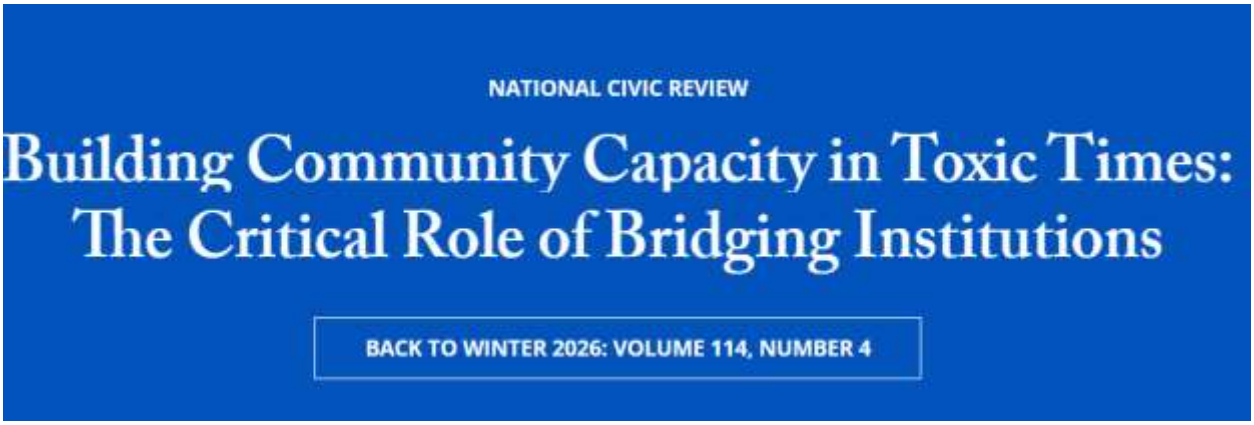
In current times of deep societal polarization, this article characterizes PAFC as a bridging advocacy group to "activate leaders as collaborators working on common problems, rather than adversaries pitted against each other with pre-determined solutions. Bridging advocacy groups are well situated to avoid the pitfalls currently dominating public discourse, such as polarization, misinformation, and the reliance on simple narratives, and instead tap into human creativity and the wisdom of multiple perspectives. With the extended time and focus these groups spark, they can be equipped with both the process skills and the topic expertise to support robust and productive deliberative conversations, greatly elevating their community's ability to address the issue well."

The article provides substantive analysis of other various group types including bonding, building, blocking and breaking models.

A central premise of the article is to "develop innovative alternative ways of engaging and bringing people together" for purposes of a revitalized democracy. This is clearly consistent with the mission of the National Civics League "to advance civic engagement to create equitable thriving communities."

Thank you Dr. Martin Carcasson for including PAFC's work in your published article and for all your contributions to PAFC.

Below is the article in its entirety.



By Martín Carcasson and Willow Paul

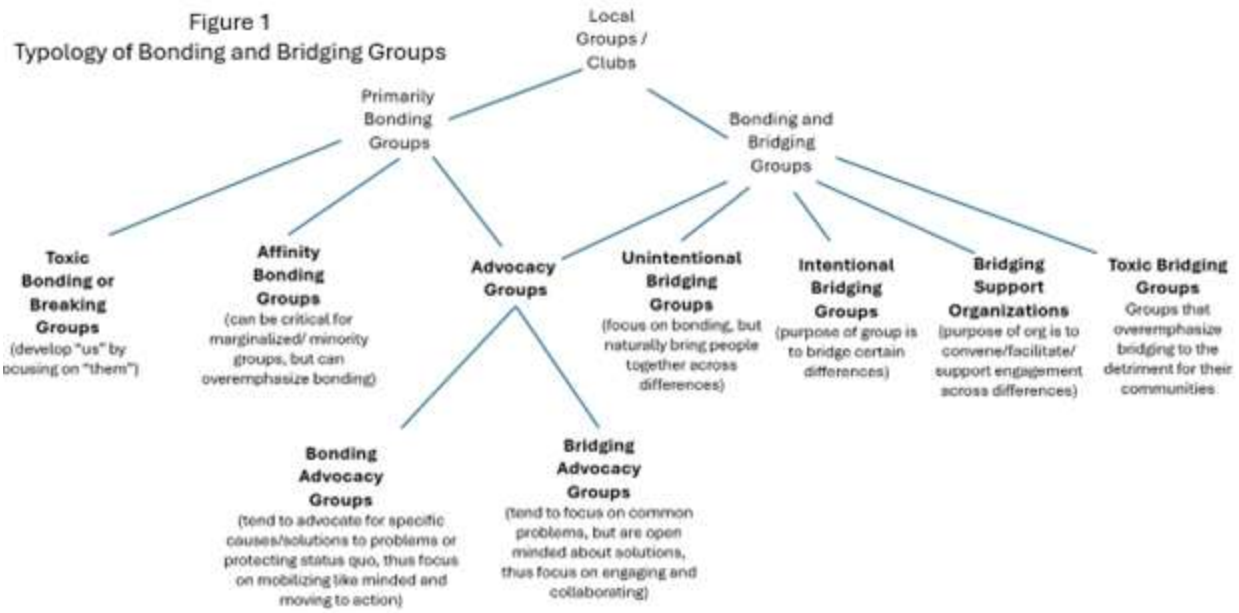
In our current political environment, overwhelmed with toxic polarization, information disorder, and conflict profiteers, the forces that divide us have grown significantly in recent decades. The forces that bring us together, on the other hand, have either diminished or, in some cases, flipped their impact, becoming divisive (such as sports, national media, and foreign affairs). Since divisiveness tends to foster more divisiveness, creating a vicious cycle, focusing on simply lowering the temperature is likely ineffective. We need to develop innovative alternative ways of engaging and bringing people together that meet our current challenges. By considering growing insights from social psychology with practitioner knowledge and experience in conflict

management, dialogue and deliberation, and collaborative problem-solving, we can elevate engagement and provide a viable path forward for a revitalized democracy.

Changing our national system from the top down will be exceedingly difficult, but reimagining engagement in our cities and towns might not be. We can slowly show more and more Americans it is possible—and maybe even enjoyable—to engage across differences to address their shared problems productively. People would be exposed to alternatives that could help them realize they need not settle for the status quo of overly adversarial political engagement. In my (Martín Carcasson's) 20 years running the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation and working with local communities across the country to build local capacity for higher quality engagement, one key insight has risen to the top of the list as a critical ingredient: the development of new and the revitalization of existing bridging institutions. Fortunately, a counter-movement has begun, with hundreds of new organizations forming across the country focused on bridging divides and sparking democratic innovation and civic renewal. The **National Civic League's Healthy Democracy Ecosystem map** includes over 12,000 groups, and the **ListenFirst Project coalition page** has links to over 500 established organizations, many of which are less than a decade old. In this essay, we make the case for such organizations and introduce a typology of different types of bonding and bridging institutions to help individual communities think through how to encourage and sustain such organizations locally.

Figure 1 provides an overview of the typology of organizations we outline in this essay. The first draft was actually developed as I (Martín Carcasson) listened to eminent political scientist Robert Putnam give his ending keynote address at CSU's Democracy Summit in April of 2024. The Democracy Summit was a weeklong series of events and speakers that culminated in Professor Putnam's talk. The night before, however, really set the stage. That night, we first watched the documentary that had been created about Putnam's research. Titled *Join or Die*, the documentary took viewers through his research that led to his book, *Bowling Alone*, and the argument that

democracy thrives when people are connected locally, and communities have a strong civil society. In his work, Putnam focuses on the importance of social capital and how it is one of the most important factors tied to the quality and resilience of a community. As *Bowling Alone* argued and the film reviewed, Americans since the 1960s have been less and less likely to be involved locally, leading to numerous negative impacts such as loss of trust in government, democracy, and our fellow citizens. The message of *Join or Die* was simply stated in the title: join a club and get connected or else.



Putnam joined us after the film to take some questions, but then we shifted to a speaker who was hosted by the CSU History department. As the speaker began, with Putnam in the audience, a stark juxtaposition was quickly revealed. The speaker, Jeremi Suri, focused on his research on how the Confederate generals from the Civil War later came to be the leaders in the Ku Klux Klan and other hate groups, undermining our democratic principles. After the “join a group” message of the documentary, we were all presented with a clear message of “well, perhaps not just any group.” Putnam makes the distinction between bonding and bridging social capital in his work, but that distinction was not part of the documentary. The next morning, during his closing keynote, however, he did discuss both, prompting us to consider the different types of bonding and bridging organizations that we had collaborated with over the years.

Considering the potential for bonding groups to go too far, as revealed by Suri's talk, we also engaged john a. powell's work with the Othering and Belonging Institute and his excellent books *Belonging without Othering* and the *Power of Bridging*. His work on social capital makes a three-part distinction between **bonding, bridging, and breaking groups**. Bonding groups bring together like-minded people, whereas bridging groups connect people across differences. Breaking groups – which we label as toxic bonding groups – are exclusive groups that explicitly push away other groups who are seen as dangerous or a threat. Such groups bond by negatively tapping into the inherent human need for belonging in large part through the creation of a negative "them" that is dehumanized in service of forming a stronger "us." This awful aspect of human nature is, unfortunately, partly to blame for many of the worst things humans have done throughout history. It connects to a key aspect of human nature that has a strong positive side (the power of "us" and the powerful human propensity for cooperation beyond kin that in many ways is our superpower) and a profound negative side (the power of othering to justify atrocities). This two-sided coin, termed "tribalism" or "groupishness" in various texts, only heightens the importance of quality process and engagement, which can, in many ways, define which side of the coin is activated.

The typology introduced in this essay seeks to add distinctions to these three initial labels of bonding, bridging, and breaking groups, with the end goal of furthering the argument that communities need more bridging institutions (in their various forms). Initially, we identified three types of bonding groups: affinity bonding groups, advocacy groups, and toxic bonding groups. **Affinity groups** tend to bring together like-minded people around an identity or activity, seeking support or community. The clearest examples are faith institutions and diversity organizations, such as the student diversity groups on campus. These affinity groups can clearly be important to help connect people, especially when marginalized or a small minority, and give them a safer and more welcoming space to gather with similar individuals. However, recognizing them as bonding groups highlights their natural propensity to bond rather than bridge, which can prove to be problematic, particularly in overly divisive times.

Most **advocacy organizations** are also bonding groups. Advocacy organizations such as the National Rifle Association (NRA), the Sierra Club, unions, or political parties tend to bring like-minded people together. In a way, members of such groups join the organization because of the position that the organization takes on an issue or a problem. If you support gun rights, you join the NRA. If you support gay rights, you may connect with a local LGBTQ+ organization or donate to GLAAD. Members may disagree on many other issues, but they generally bond on the basic position the organization holds. This can be problematic because bonding advocacy groups may expect and reward my-side bias. They begin with a position and seek out others who agree.

Lastly, like powell's breaking groups and the groups Suri discussed in his lecture, **toxic bonding groups** are most obviously represented by hate groups that form primarily in opposition to others. We prefer the label "toxic bonding" to breaking because, instead of having a separate category, it clarifies that bonding groups can become toxic at some point. It is a matter of degree, and, as the attacks on DEI programs have shown, a matter of interpretation and a potential target for manipulation. Currently, most would agree that our political parties demonstrate another example of toxic bonding. As research **on negative partisanship** shows, many currently vote against the opposing party, meaning the primary bond may be one of hatred, fear, or contempt. Just as bonding groups tend to reward my-side bias, they also tend to fuel **affective polarization** (polarization based on social identity rather than issues, which is much more corrosive to communities).

Whereas bonding groups are more natural and represent a strong majority of groups, the goal of the typology is to spark insights regarding bridging groups. The typology uses the language of "primarily bonding" and "bonding and bridging" rather than simply bonding v. bridging because all groups, by definition, are bonding on some level. You join a group in part to be with other people with whom you share something. So some groups are primarily or even exclusively bonding, and some groups bond but also support significant levels of bridging. The typology lays out six types of bridging groups.

Unintentional bridging groups are represented by Putnam's bowling leagues. People join and bond over bowling, or scrapbooking, or yoga, but

over time, they may connect with people across differences in other ways. They all like to bowl, but may belong to different political parties, religions, or ethnic groups. Any bonding group can provide some bridging opportunities, as everyone has multiple identities that may connect or not with others. Sports fandom provides another example of unintentional bridging groups that can be powerful. When you support your local team, and they win a big game at the last second, you celebrate with whoever is next to you in the stands or the bar, regardless of their political stripes. Civic groups such as Rotary, Lions, Elks, and, as highlighted in the documentary, Dull Men's Clubs, can also often function as unintentional bridging groups. This is a key aspect of Putnam's call to join local groups. Not only do you learn key civic skills about decision-making and leadership in such groups, but you also meet people who are different from you. When people know others in different groups, simple and unfair caricatures of that group will likely fall flat. As a result, adversarial strategies designed to divide us begin to lose their power.

Stepping back from our screens and meeting together in person is important. A local group that physically meets would create ample opportunities for engagement beyond the focus of the group. Groups eat meals together, chat before and after meetings, and run into each other around town. This unintentional bridging effect is inherently weaker with online groups, which may simply involve one-way communication, or, if there is some actual gathering online, it is likely only focused on the topic at hand. Online groups may provide some bonding opportunities but clearly struggle with unintentional bridging.

Intentional bridging groups are groups, many relatively new, that have a primary mission to bridge particular divides. In other words, they bond based on their desire to bridge. The recent uptick in such groups is likely a counter-reaction to the growing polarization and division. This uptick has motivated many to create and support groups such as Braver Angels (political bridging in communities), Bridge USA (political bridging on campuses), Interfaith America (religious bridging), and CoGenerate (intergenerational bridging). **NCL's Healthy Democracy Ecosystem Map** and the **ListenFirst Project coalition page** list numerous additional examples. Several of these organizations are national but seek to create and support local chapters, significantly facilitating the process for individuals wanting to develop such a

group in their local community. The growth of these organizations should be celebrated as they help undo false polarization and explicitly bring divided people together, providing an important foundation for future collaboration. However, many intentional bridging groups likely gather people predisposed to bridging, people who were already seeking to mend divides. If they only focus internally, their impact may be muted. Finding ways to build on the growth of these organizations by shifting them to deeper engagement opportunities will be an important task moving forward as we work to build civic capacity and community resilience.

Bridging support organizations – The purpose of bridging support organizations is to serve as conveners, catalysts, facilitators, and overall support for bridging efforts and collaborative projects in their community. Some, like the CSU Center for Public Deliberation and other similar campus-based centers or nonprofit community organizations like the Colorado Civic Canopy, are primarily focused on this role. Many other local organizations—such as libraries, community foundations, and local newsrooms or radio stations—may see supporting bridging efforts as only one aspect of their broader work. Whereas intentional bridging groups focus on helping their members bridge, bridging support organizations focus on connecting the broader community. Bridging support organizations often exhibit what I (Carcasson) have termed "**principled impartiality,"** fulfilling key functions such as:

- Serving as catalysts and conveners
- Serving as "**backbone organizations**" for local collaborative efforts
- Providing facilitators and serving as a key source for facilitation training
- Doing critical background work (fact checking, concern/perspective gathering, networking, issue framing, discussion guide development, process design, etc.)

- Building resources and relationships to strive for **external and internal inclusion**
- Providing or cultivating shared spaces for interaction and engagement ("**civic commons**" or "**third spaces**")

When communities have multiple bridging support organizations, they often work together to support a robust ecosystem that can strongly support high-quality engagement while also inoculating the community from manipulative tactics and conflict profiteers. They can provide critical process expertise to a community to bring out the best aspects of human nature and avoid triggering the worst. As mentioned before in this journal, **process matters**. Unfortunately, the engagement processes we far too often rely on locally – such as public hearings, winner-take-all elections and referenda, and one at a time at the microphone – often undermine our ability to engage well. Bridging support organizations can be a key resource to change that.

Just as bonding groups can have a toxic form, **toxic bridging groups** can also overemphasize the impulse to bridge and become blind to critical distinctions that may be necessary for quality engagement and collaboration. As captured by a saying shared in practitioner circles these days, "you don't want to build a bridge between the firefighter and the arsonist." Ideally, bridging work helps bring together good-faith actors who are dealing with exaggerated and often manufactured levels of conflict. The shift from the embellished conflict to actual conflict can be significant, making the conflict much more manageable. But not all actors are acting in good faith, and they can take advantage of the trust put in them by bridging organizations if good intentions are simply assumed. When bridging reaches toxic levels, misinformation can proliferate, injustices are ignored, and "both-sides-ism" and false equivalency can fester. Such organizations are rare, particularly locally, but warrant placement in the typology. Similar to bonding organizations, bridging organizations should be wary of their potential to drift into toxic forms. One recent response to these concerns is the development

of **the bridge, block, build model** that recognizes necessary alternatives to bridging under certain conditions. Block recognizes the need at times to reject bridging and resist harms, and building is an alternative that seeks to create new ways of engaging not necessarily focused on bringing opposing sides together.

We initially categorized all advocacy groups as bonding, but then, based on a couple of specific examples of groups we've worked with, realized that **bridging advocacy groups** are actually quite viable and promising. One of the best CPD stories is connected to the **Partnership for Age-Friendly Communities** (PAFC), a 501(c)3 that was created out of a collaborative project the CPD was involved in starting in 2009. Sparked by the impending expansion of the Fort Collins Senior Center and clear demographic trends that revealed our population over 65 was going to more than double in the coming years, we started a series of conversations addressing the question, "What sort of community do we want to have for our older residents?"

Conversations sparked significant interest, but after a year, when there were calls to move to action, there wasn't an organization well-situated to take the ball and run with it. Some of the key players involved, with the assistance of a planning grant from the National Association of Area Agencies on Aging, decided to create a new organization, and the PAFC was born and continues to function well. The PAFC is a bridging advocacy group because it is passionate about an issue but is open-minded and collaborative about how best to address that issue. It inherently works to bring people together across perspectives (generationally, politically, and across public/private/non-profit sectors). With this mindset, the PAFC is well situated to avoid motivated reasoning and tap into more creative and innovative ways of thinking that humans are clearly capable of undertaking.

The PAFC experience is similar to that of the **Water Literate Leaders program**, a collaboration between CSU's Water Center and the Northern Colorado Community Foundation. The program is a 10-month-long cohort model that brings around 20 community members together for a full day of programming each month to learn about water issues in northern Colorado. Invited speakers inform the participants about all aspects of the issue, including water law, hydrology, and the history of how the region and the state have managed water and addressed conflict. The program builds leadership capacity and sparks well-informed collaborative action, rather than advocating for particular solutions. The program in particular works to engage across rural and urban divides, as well as residents from the more progressive Larimer County and the more conservative Weld County.

Our experience with both programs—especially in light of work on social psychology, brain science, and process design—leads us to strongly support the development of similar programs on other key issues. These programs or organizations activate leaders as collaborators working on common problems, rather than adversaries pitted against each other with pre-determined solutions. Bridging advocacy groups are well situated to avoid the pitfalls currently dominating public discourse, such as polarization, misinformation, and the reliance on simple narratives, and instead tap into human creativity and the wisdom of multiple perspectives. With the extended time and focus these groups spark, they can be equipped with both the process skills and the topic expertise to support robust and productive deliberative conversations, greatly elevating their community's ability to address the issue well.

The distinction between bonding and bridging advocacy groups is an important one that warrants deeper inspection. They should be considered along a spectrum, rather than a simple either-or. While we are clearly advocates for more bridging groups, we also recognize each has strengths

and weaknesses, and communities are well served by having both. Table 1 below lays out initial key aspects of each type.

Table 1: Distinctions between Bridging and Bonding Advocacy Groups

Bonding Advocacy Groups	Bridging Advocacy Groups
Tend to focus on particular solutions or policy choices. As a result, they can spark yes/no or us/them frames (for or against a particular policy or group)	Tend to focus on a problem but are open-ended about potential actions/solutions. Thereby, spark broader frames, allowing for both/and thinking and tapping into creativity
Communication is focused on persuasion and calls to action. Tend to focus on mobilizing like-minded and growing out from a committed core	Communication focused on dialogue, deliberation, inquiry, and collaborative problem solving (which are all very resource-heavy and time-consuming). Tend to focus on connecting across perspectives
Prefer clarity & consistency (which can lead to conformity and groupthink)	Prefer complexity & collaboration (which can lead to paralysis by analysis and procrastination)
Can certainly be necessary to effect change, particularly in the face of power that prefers the status quo	Can struggle in the face of power, and inherently work to preserve the status quo.
Susceptible to my-side bias, groupthink, and exaggerated polarization.	Susceptible to both-sidesism, false equivalence, and manipulation by bad-faith actors

When conversations are dominated by bonding advocacy groups, quality can suffer because groups on different sides are primarily appealing to their respective choirs, which can encourage weak or manipulative arguments. The marketplace of ideas can be flooded with questionable products. When groups are convinced of the veracity of their positions, they are particularly susceptible to motivated reasoning pitfalls. Even if their views are solid and well-supported, in a polarized environment, such appeals are often ineffective or could even backfire. Bridging advocacy groups, on the other hand, can work to reduce the likelihood of my-side bias, elevate the quality of information

considered and the engagement across differences, and ultimately lead to better and more sustainable decisions.

To use **Daniel Kahneman's Nobel Prize-winning framing**, bonding groups likely think fast, whereas bridging groups are more equipped to think slow. Unfortunately, bridging advocacy groups are rather rare, partly because humans prefer simpler stories. As a result, banding together with like-minded activists will always be more natural. Founders of organizations are more likely to be passionate about particular solutions, rather than about process and engagement. That being said, advocacy groups can always shift to become more bridging by infusing their interactions with more deliberative concepts and deciding to engage opposing views with more humility and curiosity. Hopefully, as more bridging advocacy groups form and achieve results, a virtuous cycle will form to lower the bar for subsequent groups.

The Way Forward for Communities

The overall argument of this essay is a call for building new and expanding existing bridging organizations in our local communities. The typology inherently lays out multiple pathways for new bridging organizations to form, existing bonding organizations to shift more towards bridging, and for existing bridging organizations to be revitalized and expand their work. To conclude this essay, we provide some initial concrete examples and suggestions.

- Most political issues are dominated by national frames, which are inherently adversarial and too often incentivize low-quality communication that simply polarizes us more. Bonding advocacy groups likely play off of these simplistic frames rather than pushing back

on them. As more communities develop bridging advocacy groups focused on particular issues, it will become possible to uplift more nuanced frames and reject the national partisan framing of issues. The hopeful but sad reality is that we know how to engage complex issues across perspectives, we simply do not apply these insights in our national politics. The more people experience an alternative, the more they will demand it. Developing and supporting more bridging institutions in all our communities is a clear way forward to achieve this.

- Local organizations with physical spaces that can host gatherings are critical for bridging social capital. Libraries, museums, K-12 schools, and colleges and universities can be important aspects of a local bridging coalition simply by sharing their spaces, making it easier for people to engage in person.
- Local governments can build their own capacity in better engagement, serving as bridging support organizations themselves. They can also encourage the development and growth of additional bridging institutions. Reimagining existing boards and commissions through the lens of this typology may also yield key insights.
- Local newsrooms can play a key role in building local engagement capacity by highlighting the efforts of bridging groups, serving as bridging support organizations, and helping spark bridging advocacy groups with in-depth stories

that take a **Solutions Journalism** or **deliberative journalism perspective**.

- Community Foundations can play a significant role. Recent efforts by the National Civic League and **CFLeads** appear to be tapping into this potential. Community foundations are well-equipped to serve as bridging support organizations and to launch and support bridging advocacy groups. The NoCo Foundation in Fort Collins, for example, hosts the Water Literate Leaders program and is now considering similar programs on other issues, such as housing and civic health.
- n response to the political environment and concerns about free speech, colleges and universities in recent years have greatly expanded their capacity for bridging divides. A **recent publication by Campus Compact** captures many of the new programs, including organizations such as BridgeUSA, Presidents for Civic Preparedness, and the Constructive Dialogue Institute. Most of these efforts are currently focused on campus and on dialogue. Hopefully, as they mature, these programs will shift to work more with their local community and expand from dialogue to collaborative problem-solving. These institutions can bring valuable resources to a local ecosystem while providing their students with powerful experiences and skill sets.
- Braver Angels is a national organization that has primarily served as an intentional bridging group, focused on depolarization and bringing “reds” and “blues” together (thus relying on a national frame). They recently announced a **Citizen-Led Solutions program** to encourage their local

alliances to work together on local issues. As this initiative develops, many of the over 120+ local chapters will transform into bridging support organizations or bridging advocacy groups focused on particular issues. Similar efforts from **Better Together America** and the **Trust for Civic Life** are focused on forming local "civic hubs." These efforts represent excellent opportunities for experimentation and the development of a national community of practice, greatly expanding the number of Americans exposed to a different way of engaging.

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