A Year’s Review from the Perspective of Citizens

Introducing the

READERS’ FORUM

See page 33
What You Need to Know about Connections

With this issue of Connections, the Kettering Foundation introduces three significant initiatives for the newsletter.

The first is a decision to change Connections from a biannual publication to an annual. This new schedule corresponds with Kettering’s review cycle, which goes like this: each year, Kettering focuses its research through a particular point of view, or, as we say at the foundation, lens. The foundation’s research has three fundamental foci: citizens, communities, and democratic institutions. This reflects Kettering’s hypothesis that democracy requires the following:

• citizens who can make sound decisions about their future;
• communities of citizens acting together to address common problems;
• institutions that are legitimate in the eyes of citizens and that support a democratic society.

By publishing Connections once a year, it will serve as a record of the foundation’s research focus over the previous 12 months. Therefore, as you’ll find throughout the following pages, this issue of Connections reflects the foundation’s research over the last year—through the lens of citizens.

The second initiative is the addition of a new section, the “Readers’ Forum.” As its name implies, the new section features reactions and comments by Connections readers, who were invited to review drafts of many of the articles that appear in this newsletter. With the help of our colleagues Connie Crockett and Alice Diebel, we interviewed 13 people from around the country about how their experiences relate to these articles. This feedback is organized into three articles related to the foundation’s hypothesis about democracy, as noted above. The “Forum” is described in more detail on page 33.

To make the new section a true “Readers’ Forum,” the foundation has devised a new way for readers to react to—and even to read—Connections. This is the third initiative: the creation of a new discussion area on the foundation’s Web site, www.kettering.org. On the Web site you’ll find a new section devoted to this issue of Connections and comment areas where readers can participate in a forum around the ideas expressed in the articles published in this issue.

The addition of both the print and online “Readers’ Forum” is an attempt to help readers better connect to Connections—and the Kettering Foundation. But remember: the online forum will only be as good as you our readers make it.

—Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek
4 Politics from the Perspective of Citizens
David Mathews

Citizens and Local Politics:
Transforming Community

7 The Paradox of Place in American Federalism
Lara Rusch

10 International Democracy
Kenneth A. Brown

Citizens and Bureaucratic Systems:
Gaining Influence

12 Public Administrators and Citizens:
Solving Community Problems Together
Alice Diebel

16 Public Agencies and Citizen Engagement:
Getting Beyond the Customer-Service Model
Phillip Lurie

18 The Persistence of Power:
Changing the System When the System Won’t Listen
Kenneth A. Brown

Citizens and Local Boards:
Opening Doors

19 Citizen Boards: When Local Isn’t Enough
Paloma Dallas

23 Public Engagement
in Five Colorado School Communities
Alice Diebel

Citizens and Collective Action:
Demonstrating Results

25 Democracy’s Challenge:
Reclaiming the Public’s Role
John Doble with Janay Cody

28 Deliberation and Public Action
Elena Fagotto, Archon Fung, and Libby Kingseed

30 Sources of Deliberation
Edited by Libby Kingseed

What Others Are Saying

31 Who Cares About the State of Democracy . . . and What Is It They Care About?
Edith Manosevitch

33 Readers’ Forum: Your Connection
Bob Mihalek and Deborah Witte

34 What Citizens Can Do . . . and Can’t
Deborah Witte

35 Local Boards and Citizens:
A Mixed Relationship
Bob Mihalek

37 Putting the Public Back into Public Administration
Deborah Witte and Bob Mihalek

Books Worth Reading

40 The Next Form of Democracy:
and Why Politics Will Never Be the Same
By Matt Leighninger,
reviewed by Harry C. Boyte

41 Local People: The Struggle for Civil Rights in Mississippi
By John Dittmer,
reviewed by Caitlin Bortolotto

42 Profit with Honor:
The New Stage of Market Capitalism
By Daniel Yankelovich,
reviewed by Matthew Johnson
Many deliberative democrats envision a world in which deliberation is a greater part of our everyday political and social lives; they suppose a world in which deliberation is widely, even universally, practiced. While previous research focused on the character of deliberation itself, this article focuses on the impact of intentionally designed and structured public discussions that are initiated and organized largely by civic entrepreneurs who are committed to the notion that public deliberation can improve the quality of public life and public decisions. We suppose that deliberative practices will yield more sustained effects when they are incorporated into—and thus when they transform—the communicative and decision-making routines of organizations, institutions, and the communities of which they are a part. We call this notion of incorporation “embedded deliberation.”

Different types of actions can be prompted by participating in deliberative forums. Deliberation may provide personal enrichment and even transformation. In general, public forums are an occasion to introduce the public to a more deliberative analysis of policy issues, so they can be exposed to a variety of opinions and grasp the complexity of certain topics. Deliberative events should increase participants’ civic-mindedness.

Deliberation may also influence decision makers to change public policies or improve service delivery. Sometimes being exposed to public deliberation can be an eye-opening experience for elected officials or other policymakers. They may learn that there are needs they have overlooked or get new ideas to solve old problems and improve service delivery. In many cases, elected or other government officials are purposely invited to deliberative forums because they have the authority to address issues discussed at these forums. Therefore, involving them is the first step to promote action and change. In addition, if decision makers are present in public forums, they are more likely to be held accountable by other participants, thus creating additional incentives for following up on possible recommendations.

Those who decide to strategically convene deliberative events are prepared to use forums as an opportunity to gather community input and to generate action and change. They promote deliberation as a process to deal with locally relevant issues where traditional meetings have failed. Public deliberation that addresses topics that are deemed urgent by the community are more likely to draw high participation and engagement. In an era when people have limited time and endless options for how to spend it, deliberation needs to be relevant if citizens are to participate, let alone engage in follow up. In some cases, deliberative forums do generate hunger for more deliberation and follow-up work, but they rarely translate into collective mobilization or organizing unless someone emerges to take charge of organizing.

In those instances when follow-up actions do occur, they are generally taken by civic organizations or public institutions whose members were engaged in the deliberative forums. In Clarksburg, West Virginia, for example (see “Sources of Deliberation,” page 30), there was significant follow-up after a forum on underage drinking because the event had been carefully planned to include all the actors who were already working on the problem. The forum was an opportunity to bring these actors together and form a coalition to address underage drinking in a more systematic way. In this case, public deliberation enabled coordination, which led to planning follow-up actions.

Another significant effort based on deliberative practices are the Connecticut Community Conversations (see “Sources of Deliberation”), which are designed to promote coordination of action even prior...
In an era in which people have limited time and endless options for how to spend it, deliberation needs to be relevant if citizens are to participate, let alone engage in follow up.
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to "the problems behind the problems."

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Seven major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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