A Note from the Editor

As regular readers of Connections know, the Kettering Foundation organizes its work into research on citizens, communities, and institutions. Each year, the foundation reviews and evaluates possibilities for new lines of research through the “lens” of one of the areas. The current focus is through the lens of community, a term which refers to the places where people develop networks of civic relationships to achieve goals vital to their individual and collective interests. In communities, people educate future generations in shared norms and essential skills, protect themselves from threats, and create the conditions that allow them to prosper economically. The interactions among the people of a place—joined in ever-changing alliances of civic associations and formal institutions—are what determine the capacity of a community to address those goals. Maintaining and building the community is a matter of maintaining and building these relationships.

Early in the current review, it became clear that behind many of the concerns about the role of citizens in politics is a critical and largely unrecognized problem: the idea of communities as arenas of collective acting is increasingly unrecognized. And it is not only that that frame of reference is missing in the formal institutions and agencies charged with serving the public interest; as recent reports by Richard Harwood show, the insight is lacking even in the community-based organizations that have historically been the entryways for citizens into public life. (See the review by Connie Crockett on p. 29.)

One symptom of the problem can be seen in the widely documented reports of people’s sense of their collective political impotence. People feel there is little chance that they, or “people like them,” can do anything to act effectively on their concerns. What is the problem? Our review recognized one well-researched part of the challenge: citizen-directed civic initiatives are often blocked by formal organizations and government agencies. But there appears to be an even more fundamental underlying problem. The thin notion of the role of public life in community leaves many such initiatives unimagined and thus untired. With that problem in mind, we identified the logical follow-up question as the overarching theme of the year’s review: how can the concept of communities as arenas for collective acting be recognized and illuminated? The question is motivated, of course, by the foundation’s primary interest in how people can more effectively marshal their civic resources in order to shape their collective future.

The following essays provide a partial record of what we are finding. They highlight the challenges faced by citizens, civic associations, and formal institutions in identifying and making practical use of the concept of communities as places of public work. They also provide a sense of the various networks of exchange through which the foundation works. The foundation conducts its research with community groups, government agencies, research organizations, and scholars through joint-learning agreements. Throughout the year, workshops bring together people working in related areas to exchange findings and make sense of what they mean. In what follows, readers will find what we hope are illuminating references to the various ways the foundation goes about its work.

Based on an understanding of research through networks of exchange, we want to encourage readers to share with us their own experiences and suggestions for others who might collaborate in the research. Authors of the essays that follow were encouraged to write with that sort of reader in mind, which suggests posing questions rather than answering them. You are encouraged to join the conversation, through the Readers’ Forum found at www.kettering.org.

—Randall Nielsen
Contents

4  Looking Back/Looking Ahead at Communities
   David Mathews

8  A Need for Human Logic in Education
   Bob Cornett

11 Taking a Look at Organic Community-Level Politics
    Derek Barker, Gina Paget, and Dorothy Battle

14 Developing Civic Practices in South African Communities
    Teddy Nemeroff

16 Community Change and Action Research: The Unrealized Potential of Cooperative Extension
    Alice Diebel

19 What’s Changed? Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?
    Patricia Moore Harbour

22 Communities as Educators: A Report on the November 2007 Public and Public Education Workshop
    Connie Crockett

25 Self-Organizing and Community Politics
    Phil Stewart

27 Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do?
    Bob McKenzie

29 Public Work vs. Organizational Mission
    Connie Crockett

31 Studies of a Role for Communities in the Face of Catastrophe
    Paloma Dallas

35 Books Worth Reading
   Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy
      By Diana C. Mutz, reviewed by Matthew Johnson
   Innovation: The Missing Dimension
      By Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore, reviewed by Randall Nielsen

Your Connection...
Engage others, exchange stories
in the Readers’ Forum on www.kettering.org
How can people organize themselves to deal with public challenges? Poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and violence are the kinds of wicked problems we all recognize, but often feel helpless to act upon. “Intermediary” community-based organizations—organizations that span the gap between formal institutions and the citizens they serve—have historically been a vehicle through which citizens can begin to address the types of challenges that can’t be solved by institutions alone. Do these boundary-spanning organizations recognize the roles they play in allowing the public to do its work? How do they understand the roles of citizens in public life? How do they practice meaningful public engagement?

The Organization-First Approach: How Intermediary Organizations Approach Civic Engagement and Communities (John A. Creighton and Richard C. Harwood); The Contagion of Inwardness (Richard C. Harwood)

By Connie Crockett

The Alabama Center for Civic Life was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) in 2005. The center was renamed the David Mathews Center for Civic Life in January 2008.

In 2007, this center was renamed the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for Arts and Humanities. It is the outreach division for the Auburn University College of Liberal Arts.

Public issues related to education and schools are difficult to frame. A dominant tendency is to look only at schools, not overall community educational resources. Over the years, the NIF network has made use of several issue books: Regaining the Competitive Edge: Are We Up to the Job? (1990), Education: How Do We Get the Results We Want? (1992), Contested Values: Tug-of-War in the School Yard (1994), Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade? (1999), What Is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools? (2007), and Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap? (2007).

For further information on American Village, consult www.americanvillage.org.
Kettering contracted research with the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation to learn the answers. A 2-year period of conversation with and observance of 10 intermediary public and civic-spirited organizations of varying scope allowed our associates time to know that world and find out how people within it describe their relationship with the public. The time invested in the observation/discussion phase of our research together gave Kettering and Harwood staff the opportunity to interrogate what was being learned and to reframe our questions as might be necessary in light of that knowledge. Follow-up interviews with organizations commited to strengthening civic life enabled us to understand their thoughts about the role and value of public engagement and deliberation within the context and struggles of their own work.

Findings suggest that organizations of all types face a common challenge in recognizing the relevance of public engagement to their work and mission. This makes the work that the public needs to do tougher. One challenge is in the way that problems are recognized. Citizens and organizations do not look at them through the same lens. Organizations see unmet needs, while citizens see untapped capacities. The Organization-First Approach research is useful for Kettering in that it parses out some of the obstacles that even those with the best of intentions place in the way of ordinary people taking responsibility for their collective lives.

We learned that engaging the public is a secondary mission even among organizations whose committed mission is to public service. Does that come as a surprise? Consider the competitive arena of philanthropic service work. Scarce resources and overlap among thousands of intermediary organizations means that while the work may be noble, organizational survivability must take priority. Funders demand accountability in short-term funding cycles. Evaluations often favor the quantitative over the qualitative. One is reminded of the profession of nursing—still motivated by caring, too often reduced to harried list checking. The organizations interviewed for this research find themselves facing similarly tough demands. Engaging the public takes time and energy, thus organizational focus narrows inward.

Kettering wondered what would happen if these organizations looked at their relationship with the public as a dynamic rather than a static system. Could learning with the public become more the norm than educating the public? Can intermediary organizations learn to measure success by counting assets rather than making needs assessments? The Harwood Institute for Public Innovation research reveals some of the difficulties in making such shifts.

Harwood and Creighton note that despite having higher aspirations, organizational leaders feel caught in counterproductive cycles that rarely help build the capacity of the local community to organize and act. Program implementation, service delivery, and representing constituencies must always come first. The public is not served when intermediary organizations lose relevance and intention when they shorten or bypass public engagement. It’s akin to newspapers that constantly redesign the front page in an effort to connect with or please “consumers” but miss understanding why many people no longer buy their product. Strengthening the civic life of communities requires hard, painstaking work done with patience in long-term practice, but many organizations, such as the Southern Growth Policies Board and the Foundation for the Mid-South have found it to be profoundly worth the effort. The Harwood research points to a trend in the other direction.

The public is not served when mediating organizations narrow inward to a program mentality. More than ever, they need opportunities to deal with public challenges with boundary-spanning, civic-minded organizations. Harwood issues this challenge in The Contagion of Inwardness: “We must address what it means to build public will at a time when people no longer trust their leaders and traditional organizations.” Kettering is interested in meeting with leaders and organizations who are willing to try. Let us hear from you.

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To obtain a copy of either of these reports, please contact Connie Crockett via crckett@kettering.org.
HAVE YOUR SAY... Discuss the ideas explored in Connections
in Kettering’s Readers’ Forum at www.kettering.org
**NEW BOOKS AVAILABLE FROM KETTERING FOUNDATION PRESS**

**Deliberation and the Work of Higher Education: Innovations for the Classroom, the Campus, and the Community**

Edited by John R. Dedrick, Laura Grattan, and Harris Dienstfrey

This thoughtful collection of essays describes in candid and practical terms the ways that deliberation both inside and beyond the classroom can be used to support students’ development as responsible citizens... It’s hard to imagine a richer bounty.

—Anne Colby, senior scholar, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

**Reflections from the Field**

**Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey**

From the editors of the Higher Education Exchange, David W. Brown and Deborah Witte

Ten thoughtful theorists and practitioners address how higher education prepares citizens for public life, how (and why) universities engage in the larger community, and how we can rediscover the civic roots of higher education. This book of essays is a contribution to a resurgent movement bent on strengthening higher education’s democratic mission and fostering a more democratic culture throughout American society.
Read excerpts and learn more about these books and other publications at www.kettering.org.

**Findings from the Classroom**

*Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue*

By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

Harriger and McMillan’s “experiment is significant because it was informed by an acute sense of the troubles facing modern democracy. . . . Students in the experiment discovered another dimension to democracy and a new role for themselves as citizens.”

—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

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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. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

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Editor
Randall Nielsen

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

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