Focus on Communities
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 untried. 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 our 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
Looking Back/Looking Ahead at Communities
David Mathews

A Need for Human Logic in Education
Bob Cornett

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

Developing Civic Practices in South African Communities
Teddy Nemeroff

Community Change and Action Research: The Unrealized Potential of Cooperative Extension
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What’s Changed? Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?
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Self-Organizing and Community Politics
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Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do?
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Public Work vs. Organizational Mission
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Studies of a Role for Communities in the Face of Catastrophe
Paloma Dallas

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
Looking Back/ Looking Ahead
at Communities

By David Mathews

As is the custom, this issue of Connections reports on our review of past research and solicits help with new studies. The focus of this year’s review is democracy as seen from the perspective of communities. In these reviews, we always ask people not directly involved in our research to participate, and we benefited greatly from hearing about communities along the Gulf Coast that had been devastated, first by Hurricane Katrina and later by its aftereffects.

On the Gulf, the value of community isn’t abstract or subject to debate; it is palpable. A community there—and in our research—is a place characterized by the work citizens do with other citizens to create a valued and prosperous way of life for themselves and future generations. People care about places like Mobile, Biloxi, and New Orleans, as well as the smaller towns around them: Bayou La Batre (home of the fictional Bubba Gump Shrimp Company), Pass Christian, and Grand Isle. The people who live there want to have a hand in shaping the future of their communities, and after Katrina, they tried to come together as communities to do that. If they didn’t act, they knew that their future would be determined by others—outside planners or developers—or by their own inertia.

We chose these communities as a point of reference in order to challenge ourselves with the question of what the totality of our research on democracy has to offer them. Kettering isn’t a grantmaker and isn’t organized to provide technical assistance, so the answer to the challenge couldn’t be providing funds or services. Our research isn’t of the how-to sort either; we study experiments in strengthening self-rule. Insights from the research have to be adapted to local conditions by those who know the places best, and needless to say, these people aren’t at the foundation. So the challenge we gave ourselves was demanding. To respond, we had to revisit all that we have found in past studies of communities to identify what was missing or incomplete.

Our Research to Date

In saying that the foundation needs to say more to communities, we aren’t repudiating what we have said before. The foundation has done a great deal of research on communities and has
made its findings widely available. Our 2002 report on what we have learned, *For Communities to Work*, is probably our most-read publication. And we continue to draw on our earlier studies and have recalled them in this year’s review.

**Rediscovering Community:** When Kettering started its research on communities, they were out of favor in national politics. From Birmingham to Boston, they had developed an unsavory reputation for bigotry and corruption, primarily because of resistance to school integration. So, as George Frederickson, a leading public administration scholar observed, the emphasis turned to building large systems, and we forgot much of what we knew about maintaining communities. Kettering began to move into this vacuum because understanding how democracy works in the United States requires understanding the role that communities play. Our most enduring finding is that communities are never perfect, but they count. They and their citizenry are key to improving everything from education and economic development to health care and race relations. Citizens on the Gulf understood that when they came together as communities to restore their communities.

**Leadership:** Given the foundation’s focus on citizens in democracy, the role they should play in their communities was an unavoidable issue in our research. Little was written about the rank-and-file citizenry, however; the emphasis was on a select group of leaders. So the foundation studied the community leadership programs that were becoming popular and, in the process, became aware of the difference between positional leaders (those with legal and fiscal authority) and the people others turn to when a problem has to be solved. We didn’t have a name for these problem solvers; they come from all walks of life and all sections of their communities. They are only marginally helpful because the problems aren’t technical. Different sources. And technical solutions are only marginally helpful because the problems aren’t technical.

**Civil Society:** The importance of these uncredentialed problem solvers who come from the rank-and-file citizenry became clearer when we began to see that communities had more than individual leaders of whatever type; they had societies made up of all kinds of citizens interacting with other citizens (civil societies). These societies formed as people related to one another in various community activities from celebrations to collective problem solving. Our recognition of this concept of the citizenry dates back to a 1987 board meeting with scholars and community activists in Cuernavaca, Mexico. Later, Robert Putnam’s research on the importance of the social capital that is generated by citizens engaging citizens was a big boost for us. We looked for the sources of social capital that were political in that they had a direct impact on collective action. Because the foundation’s research is on democracy, we naturally concentrated on the role of civil societies in self-government.

**Engagement:** Citizens working together is obviously a plus for communities, but what prompts people to invest their time, energy, and resources in collective or joint efforts? Trying to answer that question has led to one of our most counterfeit hypotheses, which is that people don’t necessarily move from personal to shared concerns. They become active citizens if they are able to see connections between their individual concerns and those of others. (That is, they have to engage one another.) Citizens make these connections, we believe, when they are able to name problems in terms of the things they consider vital to their well-being, such as being safe from danger, having freedom of action, and being treated fairly. Although recognizing these shared concerns doesn’t end disagreements, people are able to see that they have similar hopes and fears. And that recognition facilitates working together.

As we surveyed the growing literature on civic engagement, we also discovered that the term had a particular meaning for many community organizations and local institutions. They are interested in engaging individual citizens in support of their institutions’ work as distinct from engaging a collective citizenry active in its own work. Both types of engagement can be useful but for different purposes.

**Wicked Problems and Public Work:** The importance of what citizens do with other citizens took on greater significance in our research when we looked at communities encountering the intractable problems that never seem to go away, problems like deep-seated poverty and racial conflict. In cities and towns along the Gulf Coast, the hurricane exposed problems of this sort. These problems are embedded in the social and economic structure, and the only chance of making headway on them is to marshal resources from all segments of a community. No one institution or group can cope with problems that originate from so many different sources. And technical solutions are only marginally helpful because the problems aren’t technical.

**Addressing wicked problems demands collective or joint action.** Citizens have work to do, which Harry Boyte and Nan Kari call “public work,” meaning work done by not just for citizens. We also learned from John McKnight and John Kretzmann to look for resources that citizens alone can bring to bear on wicked problems. These resources, which grow out of people’s experiences and talents, have been found in even the most impoverished communities. Without dismissing the seriousness of problems like poverty, we have seen what can be accomplished when communities consider the collective abilities of their citizens rather than just people’s needs.

Our most enduring finding is that communities are never perfect, but they count. They and their citizenry are key to improving everything from education and economic development to health care and race relations.
Democratic Practices: Although we knew that the names given to problems—and who got to name them—is key to engaging citizens in community life, acting together on wicked problems requires much more than citizens naming problems in their own terms. Options for what should be done have to be framed in a way that prompts the deliberations needed to produce sound decisions. And the resources required to respond to these problems have to be identified and committed. Then, collective actions have to be organized so that they are mutually reinforcing. And since no action is ever completely successful, people have to constantly learn from their efforts, hopefully becoming more innovative and effective as they do. These are all critical practices in community politics because they open doors for citizens to act, so we have called them “democratic practices.” All of these practices are called on in doing public work.

As we studied democratic practices, we had to ask whether there are sufficient opportunities for citizens to practice them. Historically, communities have been the seedbeds of democratic politics, allowing citizens to experience self-rule directly through means like civic organizations, local boards, and juries; but do they still provide these opportunities? Troubling evidence discussed in the last Connections suggests they may not. Studies report serious erosion in the civic infrastructure of our communities. Added to that, citizen boards for local organizations seem well aware of their legal and financial obligations, yet much less conscious of their democratic responsibilities, a finding that has been corroborated by recent Kettering studies done by Richard Harwood and his associates, Squaring Realities and The Organization-First Approach.

What We Are Trying to Learn More About

Of the six democratic practices identified so far, research has progressed fastest on how citizens name problems, how options for action are framed to prompt deliberation, and how sound judgment can emerge from collective decision making. Our greatest task now is to get a better understanding of how decisions are implemented; that is, how resources are recognized and committed, how actions are organized, and how a community learns from its efforts. We especially need to offer more detailed explanations of how citizens organize their actions so they are mutually reinforcing without central control. And we need better explanations of how communities get into a learning mode so they keep up the momentum when they encounter obstacles.

Here is a brief account of where we are so far in our current research and what we are trying to learn.

Making Commitments: In the past, we have recognized that deliberative decisions aren’t self-implementing. As noted earlier, citizens have to volunteer their own time and resources to carry out what has been decided; they aren’t compelled by law or contracts. We have reason to believe that when people see they share the same basic concerns, they are more likely to join forces, even if they give different weights to those concerns. And the feeling that they all have something at stake may well spur people to commit their time and resources. But we wonder whether this sense of having a stake is all that’s involved. Most everyone has heard the argument that citizens are more likely to hold back their resources and depend on others to make sacrifices. And we have heard counterarguments about the attraction of being free riders. The only conclusion we have come to so far is that we need to go deeper into the subject of commitments.

Organizing Public Acting: Kettering case studies show that when citizens do act, they tend to act on multiple fronts in separate, independent initiatives. Because there is seldom a coordinating agency, how can these separate initiatives become complementary and mutually supportive? One assumption is that if these initiatives move in a common direction decided upon in collective deliberation, the independent efforts should reinforce one another without having to be bureaucratically coordinated. When that happens, the whole of the enterprise could be greater than the sum of its parts, and the cost of organizing the effort less than if a coordinating agency had to be used. That is one of the benefits of collective civic action.

Recently we went a bit further in this line of research by looking at the claim that human societies have a capacity for self-organizing, perhaps similar to what we see in flocks of birds or herds of animals. There is now a literature on concepts like “autonomous development” in rural sociology and other disciplines, and scholarly inquiries into this in countries ranging from China to Russia. Here again, we need to know more in order to complete the story we share with communities on the Gulf and elsewhere.

Learning as a Community: The civic learning we identified earlier as a democratic practice has taken on greater significance in our work. The degree to which communities are able to shape their future may depend, most of all, on how effective communities are in learning from their initiatives. Communities where citizens can make a difference seem to be communities where people are constantly experimenting with new approaches to problems and learning from the way they interrogate these experiments. Rather than measuring success against fixed goals, they not only assess the effects of their actions but also reassess the value of what they set out to achieve. In other words, they reevaluate their goals. And they evaluate themselves as a community along with the results of various initiatives.

Despite the contributions civic learning can make, we have found that communities keep running into problems
they aren’t sure how to solve. In high-achieving communities, learning seems to be a norm that says, in effect, we’ll try this, and if it doesn’t work, we will learn enough from the experience to try again. The dominant evaluative practices, however, can dampen this spirit of experimentation and learning. Outside, “objective” evaluators may come in to assess impact using largely quantitative measures. Success is the goal, and the community as a whole doesn’t become a learning community. It would be wrong not to evaluate results, and quantitative measures have value; still, we haven’t found a means of assessment that could counter the negative effects of traditional evaluations and put communities into a learning mode.

We do believe, however, that the politics associated with public deliberation has the potential to foster civic learning. It occurs throughout all the democratic practices and is a component of each of them. Collective learning occurs when citizens name problems to capture their deepest concerns, when they frame issues to identify unintended consequences that would be costly, and when they deliberate (which the Greeks called “the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act”). People continue to learn when they identify unrecognized resources they can use to solve problems, when they find ways to make a variety of initiatives mutually reinforcing, as well as when they evaluate what they have accomplished.

As we study communities and citizens who want a stronger hand in determining their future, we have started to wonder whether there isn’t a less obvious but more fundamental obstacle standing in the way. We had a glimpse of what it was when we heard that the restoration of New Orleans depended primarily on a government agency rebuilding the levees, which is something citizens don’t do anymore. The problem behind the problem may be the perception that there isn’t really much that citizens can do in a global, expert, professional-dependent age. In other words, the idea that there can be a public created by its own democratic practices may not be persuasive because it runs counter to the conventional wisdom about how politics “really” works, and that is with little participation by citizens other than as voters and contributors to interest groups.

Given the power of the conventional wisdom, we have been impressed when there is evidence of what citizens can do through various forms of public work. For instance, communities are our first line of defense against natural disasters like Hurricane Katrina. The federal agencies responsible for protecting the country’s health are now working with communities on preventing a pandemic if avian flu changes into a form that can spread from human to human. Vaccines might not be available for months, so what families, schools, and local businesses do is crucial. In a recent report published in the journal *Biosecurity and Bioterrorism*, professionals acknowledge that “large numbers of people, not just those who serve in an official capacity” have to act if there is a health emergency. Neighborhoods with the civic capacity to work together are evidently more important than well-stocked pantries. We have found in our studies of public education similar testimony about what citizens can do and are eager to know whether there are other situations where public work is proving essential.

**How You Can Help**

We haven’t met the challenge we gave ourselves this year because there are questions we haven’t answered as completely as we should. Many of them have been acknowledged in this piece. We don’t expect the answers to come quickly, but we do appreciate the help we’ve received from *Connections*’ readers. Not everyone shares our particular focus or our assumptions. And findings from research are always debatable, as they certainly are within our foundation. Kettering is far from alone in trying to better understand how communities can work more democratically. Perhaps that is because the question of what citizens should and can do in their communities is caught up in the larger question of what democracy should and can be.

David Mathews is president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at dmathews@kettering.org.

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Civic Educators

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By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

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—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.”

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Editor
Randall Nielsen

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

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