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 untied. 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
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
Alice Diebel

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

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

Self-Organizing and Community Politics
Phil Stewart

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

Public Work vs. Organizational Mission
Connie Crockett

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
Kettering’s research has increasingly been concerned with democratic practices in the everyday life of communities. Researchers on staff and in our network have been observing the ebb and flow of ongoing decision-making and problem-solving routines in their communities. They hope to find stories of organic politics, driven by the interests, norms, and resources of the community rather than those of experts, outside organizations, and bureaucratic institutions. Our research attempts to answer the question, what kind of spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating engagement in politics occurs in communities? We also hope to learn more about how this kind of politics either stops or moves forward at particular key moments. We suspect that Kettering’s findings on democracy will be more powerful if we can find examples of democratic practices moving forward in the informal networks of communities.

We are searching for examples of organic public politics that can be distinguished from formal politics in at least three ways. First, organic political engagement is spontaneous. It emerges out of everyday concerns of citizens in communities and occurs in places that are not explicitly named as “political,” such as churches and barber shops. As we have seen in the cases of ancient cultures around the world, organic politics is incorporated into the fabric of the community. Second, it is self-organizing. It is driven by the energy, initiative, and civic skills that exist throughout a community, rather than by the techniques of expert organizations or the resources of powerful bureaucracies. Third, it is self-regulating.

By Derek Barker, Gina Paget, and Dorothy Battle
Organic politics is regulated by norms that are implicitly stated and broadly understood. This is in contrast to formal politics, which is regulated by strict rules of order imposed by trained moderators or officials. We hope to find examples that meet these criteria, in contrast to the artificiality of well-intentioned interventions of experts and elites against the natural tendencies of communities.

Organic politics may not follow a linear, or step-by-step, plan, and it may overlap with irreconcilable conflicts or feelings of powerlessness. Researchers in our workshops have struggled to identify feelings of powerlessness. Researchers in our workshops have struggled to identify tendencies of communities.

During the last two years, the focus in the village has changed from future development to an immediate crisis created by the annexation of a small farm outside the village boundaries and to a decision about investing in a new coal-fired plant for the village’s base-load energy.

Deliberative conversations about these issues have occurred at every step of the way—on the street, over the phone, on the Internet, and in self-appointed task forces, but in public meetings the discussion has rarely progressed to thoughtful consideration of our options. Commitment to work together on a problem seen as affecting everyone has developed slowly. As one person put it in an e-mail message after several community meetings, “I am concerned . . . the types of meetings we have had so far do not allow for the rigorous discussion that needs to happen to make good decisions.

I think there are several key issues that need to be addressed: affordable housing and housing diversity, green-belt protection, energy implications, commercial development in new developments. How can we deal with this situation in a way that doesn’t continue to fractionalize the community?”

A more recent effort is a hopeful sign that we are beginning to learn from all our efforts. A group of villagers, many of whom had participated in one or all of these conversations (albeit with different concerns, loyalties, and problem-solving approaches) has organized to support a process that addresses the problems as an interconnected whole rather than as separate crises. This is understood as requiring creativity and imagination by the entire village if it is to succeed.

These experiences have left me with several questions with the primary one being the following: How does the organic, spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating work of disparate groups come together in a public discourse to make a difference in the life of a community?

Dorothy Battle reports on her experiences in Cincinnati, Ohio:

I have been studying the everyday political talk of people in my community. This kind of talk is organic, or natural. There are no techniques used to guide the conversations. The conversations are prompted by shared concerns amongst a group of people who gather in a range of everyday community spaces.

I have participated in and observed politics as it is practiced in my southwest Ohio village for 20 years. In 2005, villagers were again concerned about development—if, how, and where the village should grow. I joined a small group of villagers, who held different and even conflicting ideas about growth and development.

The original small group’s participants changed over time in numbers, sometimes attracting over 60 and at others fewer than 10. Individuals with differing points of view came in and out of the conversations. However, the purpose remained consistent, i.e., to bring about a publicly accepted approach to the problems of development. We believed that it was critical to have an endorsement from the Village Council and other formal organizations if we were to engage broad participation in the process.

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A recent experience manifesting organic talk was when people in my community became concerned about matters relating to education and schooling. An individual in my community contacted me, along with several other persons, concerning a newly formed education initiative. We talked amongst ourselves, and named the issue as the lack of broad community participation in setting an agenda for education and schooling. The idea was that people in our community would be invited to determine expected outcomes for the school district and hold the school board accountable for addressing those outcomes. We contacted one of the leaders of the initiative, pointed out that without broad community participation the initiative would likely not have the systemic change the initiative claimed as its mission. We had a series of meetings with the leader and his staff to figure out ways to broaden the participation. Commit-
ment and action regarding broadening the participation are reflected in the planning of what has come to be called community engagement.

The community engagement planning has become an issue in itself as well, in regards to whether the plan in its current form, if adopted by the initiative, will actually engage the community. This situation contributes to ongoing conversations in which the issues related to broad community participation in education and schooling are talked about in informal community settings.

The virtue of my embedded participation is that I am able to listen to, as well as create meaning with, people talking in real time in community settings about politics. My role as an embedded participant in organic community politics can serve to illustrate that people in their ordinary everyday lives engage in political talk, and at the same time, my work generates more questions. Some of the questions that arise from my work: How do people in their ordinary, everyday political talk discuss the choices to be made and address the tensions and trade-offs involved? What are the political narratives created by the everyday political talk of people in their communities? How does organic political talk contribute to substantive community change? When people talk politics in an organic manner, under what conditions does the talk turn to commitment and complementary action?

We continue to seek stories of spontaneous, self-organizing, and self-regulating political engagement in communities. Please share your experiences and help improve our understanding of communities and their role in making democracy work as it should.

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Dorothy Battle is a Kettering Foundation associate. She can be reached at debat818@aol.com.

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Books for

Essays from Faculty

*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.
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.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. The articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

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Design and Production
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.