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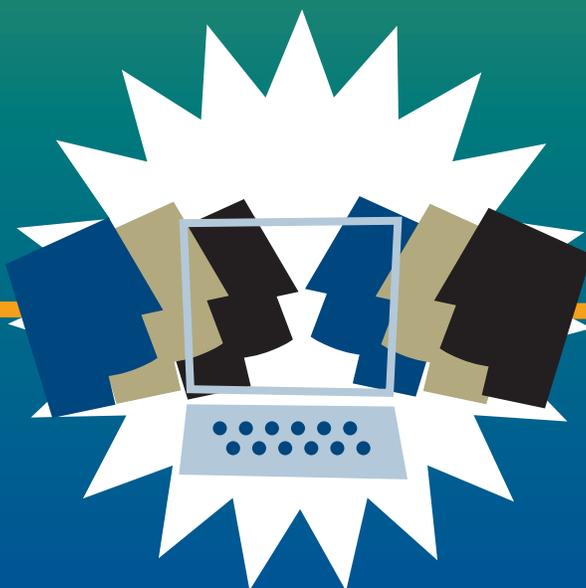


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Discovering CAPACITY

By Harold H. Saunders

How can spaces be created in which citizens can discover their capacity to generate or respond to economic change?

As the Kettering Foundation has focused its annual program review on the politics of economic change, this has emerged as the central research and operational question. The national and global economic environment has given the question compelling urgency that we could not have anticipated as we started down this path a year ago.

Cogent as this question is in today's economic context, its importance reaches far beyond the economic. It is the paramount political question before us today. And it may be that economic health and progress are ultimately more about politics than about economics.

On March 11, Kettering put this question to a panel and to an audience of approximately 80 interested individuals from inside and outside government in a high-ceilinged room in the National Archives building in Washington, D.C.

In setting the stage for the meeting, moderator Hal Saunders presented the challenge this way:

We are tackling a critical complex of problems on the minds of all Americans today—the cascading effects on their communities of the deterioration of the economy. Our purpose will be to probe for a fresh approach.

Responding to this challenge begins with the following seemingly contradictory observations:

First, the greatest untapped resources for meeting the challenges of the 21st century are the energies and capacities of citizens outside government.



Second, in countless settings, citizens express feelings of powerlessness to deal with *economic* problems beyond making decisions about their own personal next steps.

Yet, third, many steps to address larger economic problems ultimately depend on the behavior of these same citizens. For instance:

How individuals have handled credit—whether the credit card or the mortgage—has been a not insignificant factor in bringing on the present crisis.

Our new administration has called on citizens to come together to “rebuild America one neighborhood at a time.”

Leading figures in the field of international economic development have

Discovering Capacity

described the “missing ingredient in a half-century of economic development theory” as failure to recognize that “economic development is not just about economics; it’s about politics—how citizens decide collectively to act together to use the resources of a community to develop it.”

The overarching question we have come together this morning to address is this: how might spaces be created for public discourse in which citizens can discover things they can do in their communities to address the consequences of such problems as the housing crisis, unemployment, declining resources?

A subtext of this question emerges from the fact that what often blocks collaboration is not disagreement on how a problem might be solved but moral disagreement about what broad direction to take.

In concluding these introductory remarks, let me state the obvious: This is not a discussion about government policies. We are focusing on the role of citizens.

One more word about what was in our minds as we approached this question. Kettering since the early 1980s has focused not on the institutions of democracy—parties, governments in all their branches, interest groups, lobbies—but on citizens as political actors. Some of us would say that this kind of politics is not just about power but about relationship—how citizens interact so they can define problems, decide what they might do, and design action that broadens participation in a course of action.

Thinking this way, we have recognized that, as citizens begin to “buzz” around a problem, it may be that a few citizens may act as catalysts in helping a group to form, to talk through the problem to get at its root causes, to identify possible ways to address those causes, to reach some understanding on steps they might take using resources they can access, and then to draw others into the actions they decide to take.

We have also learned to think of public life as a complex political process of continuous interaction—relationships—among citizens and then among signifi-

cant clusters of citizens. The challenge, we have discovered, is to figure out what tools those citizen catalysts might use to help fellow citizens name their problems and discover their capacities.

Biologists have discovered the phenomenon of “self-organizing systems”—organisms and groups of organisms that have the capacity to organize themselves into more and more complex systems to meet greater challenges, each with capacities that go beyond those of the preceding system. Taking a leaf from their book, we are reaching for insight into the moments when citizens take the steps that bring them together and then organize them to do work they could not have conceived of when they took the first step.

In the fall of 2008, we had asked Steve Farkas of FDR Group to conduct focus groups to give us a glimpse into how citizens in communities were talking about the rapidly deteriorating economy to give us a start on research for developing a guide for National Issues Forums.

Reflecting on his findings and on Kettering’s extensive experience with an impressive number of forums over a quarter of a century, we concluded (1) that citizens have trouble connecting with mega issues like the national debt, Social Security, and the financial system; (2) that each community’s problems will be different; and (3) that it is, therefore, time for a fresh approach.

We coupled those conclusions with our growing insights (1) into the nature of a political process as contrasted to individual political practices and (2) into the organic—as contrasted to the institutional—dimensions of politics. In the past three years, we have increasingly focused on the most basic political interactions seen as citizens recognize problems that affect them and begin talking with friends, neighbors, and colleagues about them. We have used the metaphor of the “political wetlands” to capture politics of this organic character.

This confluence of insights and events made now the moment to embark on an experiment—an experiment to learn how experienced citizen catalysts might reach into the political wetlands in a way that would help create conditions in which citizens could come together, talk about the problems they face, and gradually discover capacities and resources for dealing with them.

In the language that we have used for 25 years to describe and teach the work of the National Issues Forums, we need to learn how a few citizens can create conditions in which citizens might “name” their own issues, “frame” possible approaches in

We are reaching for insight into the moments when citizens take the steps that bring them together and then organize them to do work they could not have conceived of when they took the first step.

dealing with those challenges for a deliberative dialogue, assess resources in their community for dealing with them, and put those resources together in a course of action—all of this in an organic way.

The challenges in such an approach will be (1) to find colleagues who are prepared to collaborate as designers or as catalysts in this experiment with sensitivity to its underlying purpose; (2) to find points of entry into communities where citizens may be receptive to such an approach; and (3) to craft questions that would elicit citizens’ thinking about the nature of their communities’ problems, about resources they themselves might marshal, and about steps putting those resources to work. We would welcome your thoughts and help.

Harold H. Saunders is director of International Affairs at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at saunders@kettering.org.

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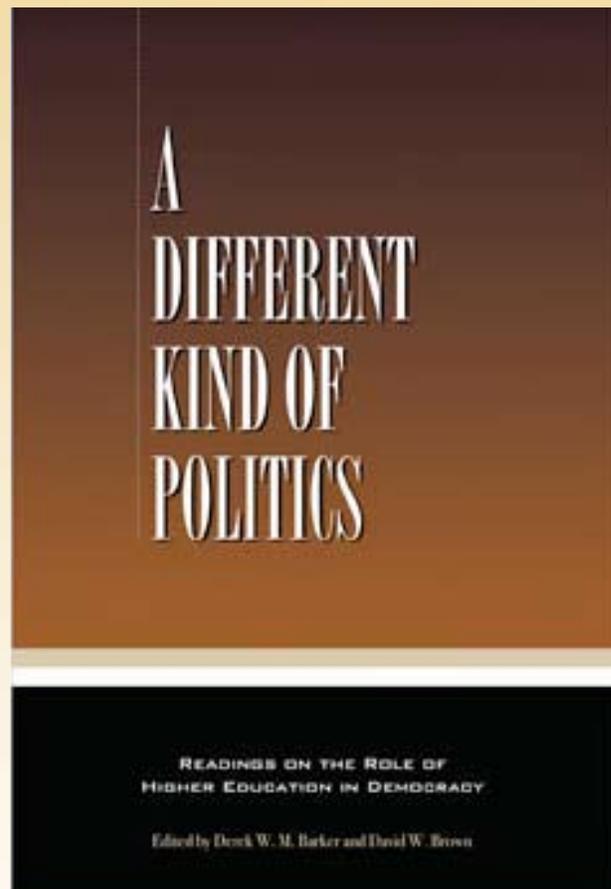
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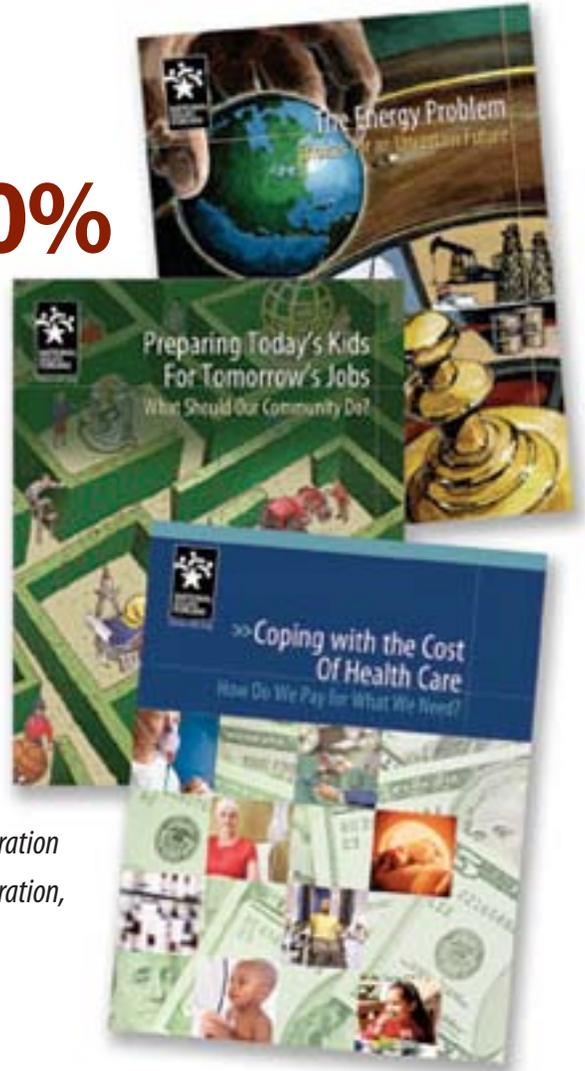
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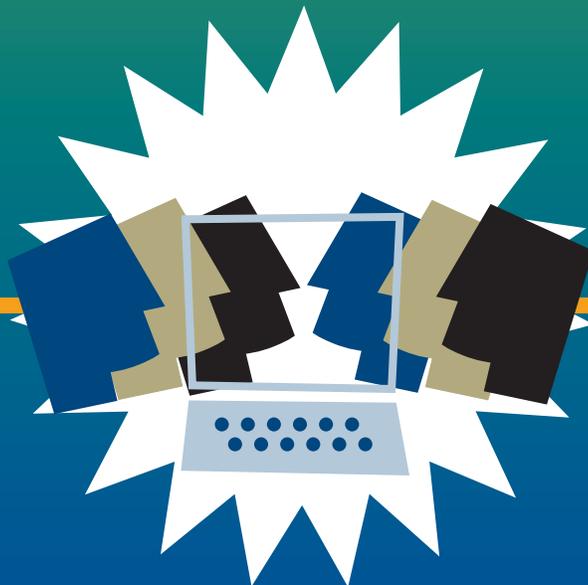
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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. 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.



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Nonprofit Organization U.S. Postage PAID Dayton, OH Permit No. 638
