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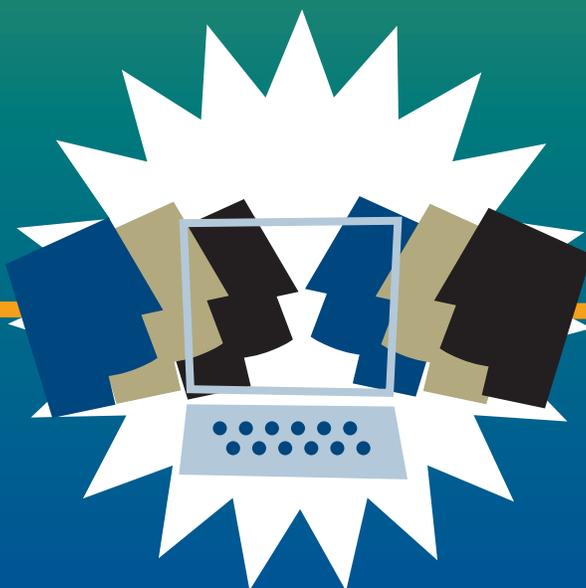


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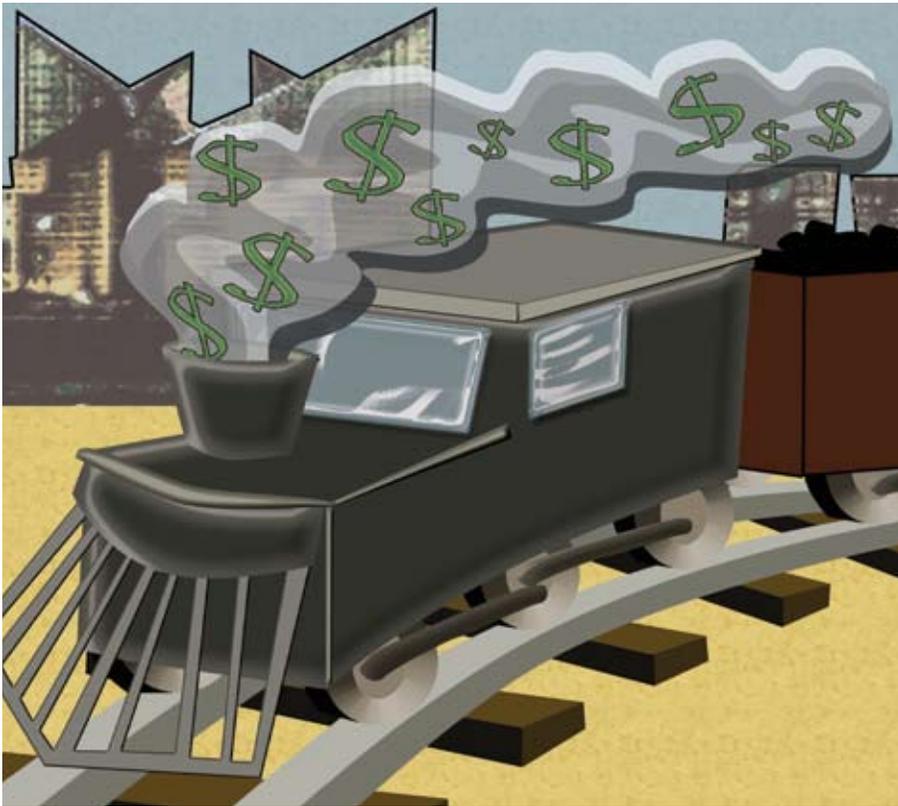
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Chattanooga *Chugging*

By Ramón E. Daubón

For 35 years, the city of Chattanooga, Tennessee, has been undergoing a remarkable economic and social transformation. What had once been a dismal economic, environmental, and social wasteland has morphed into a vibrant, engaged, and livable showcase. The story of what happened there has been amply reported. But scrutiny of its civic underpinnings allows a look at the public politics behind the economic change and addresses the why and the how.

Chattanooga is located on the Tennessee River in the southeast corner of the state. By the turn of the 19th century it had become a budding industrial city and railroad junction. The city continued to benefit after World War II as textile and

tanning industries migrated from the U.S. northeast. These plants caused heavy pollution to the local area. Eventually though, the industries themselves began to decay and in the 1960s, their downfall added abandonment, unemployment, street crime, and physical deterioration to the worsening quality of life in Chattanooga. The decay was concentrated in the industrial areas and nearby working-class neighborhoods, emphasizing the racial and class segregation that characterized the city. At the passage of the Clean Air Act in 1969, Chattanooga was declared “the dirtiest city in America,” and was “unfit” to receive federal funds unless drastic measures were taken.

The epithet and warning stung city leaders and promotional actions were taken. But by late 1978, it had become

clear that results were not forthcoming; new industries were not coming fast enough to replace the dying ones and reinvigorate the city. The deepening problem and the failure of the first strategy led to a reassessment and an effort in the early 1980s to engage a broader swath of the public in deliberations about the future of Chattanooga. By 1982, hundreds of community discussions had taken place, involving several thousand residents, and a new collective vision began to emerge. While still not fully representative of the diversity of the general population, the discussions conveyed a more organic sense of self-governance and involved a broader cross-section of neighborhoods, race, and class than ever before. A recommendation to broaden engagement reshaped the municipal governance—away from an appointed commission of notables and toward a city council elected directly by neighborhood wards. This change in the composition of the council is generally recognized as the beginning of a widespread base of support for the effort.

Fast forward 25 years, and Chattanooga is a changed city with a sparkling restored downtown and residential districts, a new economic base of tourism and service industries, a deep environmental conviction, and a conspicuous civic pride.

Racial and class separations were always a part of Chattanooga. The rift was highlighted by the physical layout of the city, with the wealthy residential neighborhoods on the mountain across the river and above the pollution, the middle-class neighborhoods on the outskirts, the working-class neighborhoods near the factories and plants closer in. The downtown lay in the middle, where the social classes came together during the day. The city prospered while settled industries provided jobs. But there seems to have been no vision beyond the industrial era.

The initial crisis response was inspired by expert advice prevalent at the time, based on “chamber of commerce” incentives and built upon the historical power structure: well-intentioned people with authority would hire experts and make decisions. It took almost a decade to

realize that it wasn't working and that a broader base was needed. Meanwhile the civil rights movement's convulsions elsewhere in the South had largely bypassed the crisis-ridden city but left an awareness of changing values. This helped the community discover that it could, and would need to, collaborate across racial and class lines. That the first concerted "flagship project," a freshwater aquarium aimed at attracting tourism, was carried out over the objections of many experts is symptomatic that a different way of making decisions was at play. That it remains the visible symbol of the renaissance offers clues to the relational changes involved.

For instance, interpretation of the economic challenge, the "naming" of the problem, changed over time as attitudes evolved with the process: toward a public—rather than technical—decision and toward collaborative—rather than directed—action. Most important perhaps, people's heightened sense of their collective capacities for improvement dramatically altered the relationships involved: within each of the city's class and racial segments as they began to

cational quality to a population with new higher expectations remains daunting. Moreover, success has brought its own challenges. Large industrial operations enticed by the business climate promise job opportunities that will attract and absorb immigrant workers but not the hard-core unemployed. Worst of all, a climate of successful complacency, even in the face of unfinished business, might discourage the broad-based civic energy that inspired action in the early days. Locals are thus struggling with a second reinvention for their city, now around this new set of challenges. They are looking back and reassessing what they did and what universal lessons their admittedly unique experience might contain that could be useful to others as well as to themselves in their process of continued learning. Following are some of the questions they struggle with.

Understanding Learning-Based Change

Usually, people in communities see themselves as incapable of exerting action to change their conditions unless there is

an imminent threat to their prosperity or security, at which time they will mobilize resources that they may not have even realized they possessed. How can communities recognize and muster their resources to provoke change when there is no crisis? On practical terms, if residents of a community can create favorable conditions to

respond affirmatively about their own effectiveness, what might those conditions be? These would be the key elements to a community taking charge of its own change. It is clear that such learning about capacities needs to take place before a community can change. But what precisely does a community need to learn about itself in order to change? And because collective learning must be also

internalized by individuals, how does one generate such learning on an individual level but in a shared, public way?

Changing the Ways People Relate

Another factor required for stimulating change is altering the way people relate. Patterns of interaction are established in culture and habit precisely to maintain a certain order. As such they are designed to inhibit alterations of that order and seldom contain mechanisms for their own evolution. A conscious effort has to be made to instill that evolution, but without generating defensive reactions that would shut down the process. A strategy of change would thus need real-life examples whereby networks of social interactions have been modified and the ways people interact have been redefined. But patterns of relating are simply reflections of underlying power relationships, and changes in the former will perforce imply changes in the latter. A crucial question then is the manner in which power will be newly created by developing new spaces of power, reflected in new ways of relating. How can that power allow for new wealth—will community change result in broad economic development or just in the generation of selective new sources of income?

Change in Civic Infrastructure

Finally, structures and processes are also important to community change. It is critical to ascertain which organizations—old or newly minted—will promote change. Within them will be issues about their funding, their permanence, the diversity of their leadership and governance, and their openness to community input.

Crucial to the continued sustainability of the efforts in Chattanooga are issues of the precise kind of collective learning that has taken place, how that learning happened, and how it can be continually encouraged. With their accumulated learning and their need to face their changing circumstances, Chattanoogaans are now asking the question that only they can answer: what can we do better or differently now?

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Not all problems have been solved in Chattanooga. . . . They are looking back and reassessing what they did and what universal lessons their admittedly unique experience might contain that could be useful to others as well as to themselves in their process of continued learning.

think proactively, between them as they reached across age-old racial and class barriers, and toward the public and civic institutions that mediated the process and which participants now felt that they controlled.

Not all problems have been solved in Chattanooga. A persistent residual underclass remains unabsorbed by the growing job opportunities, while providing edu-

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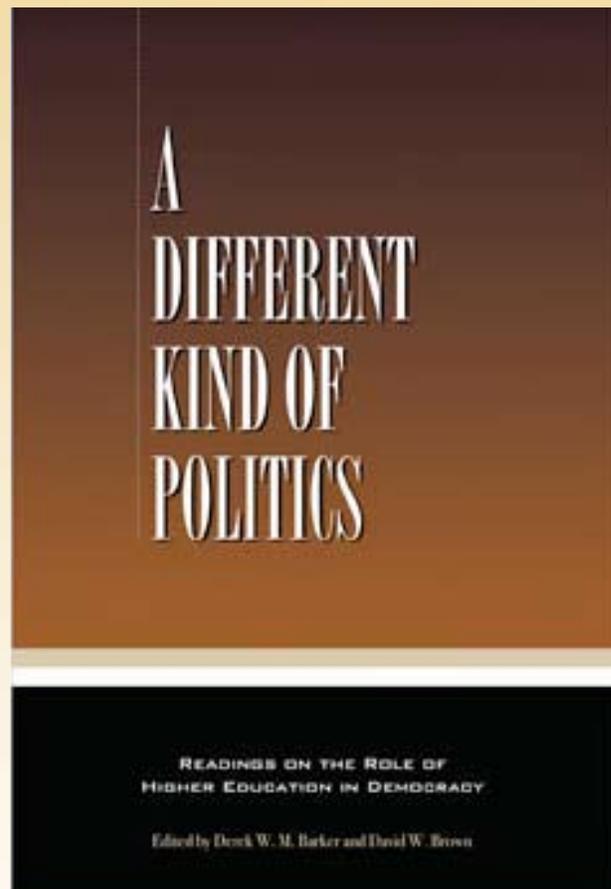
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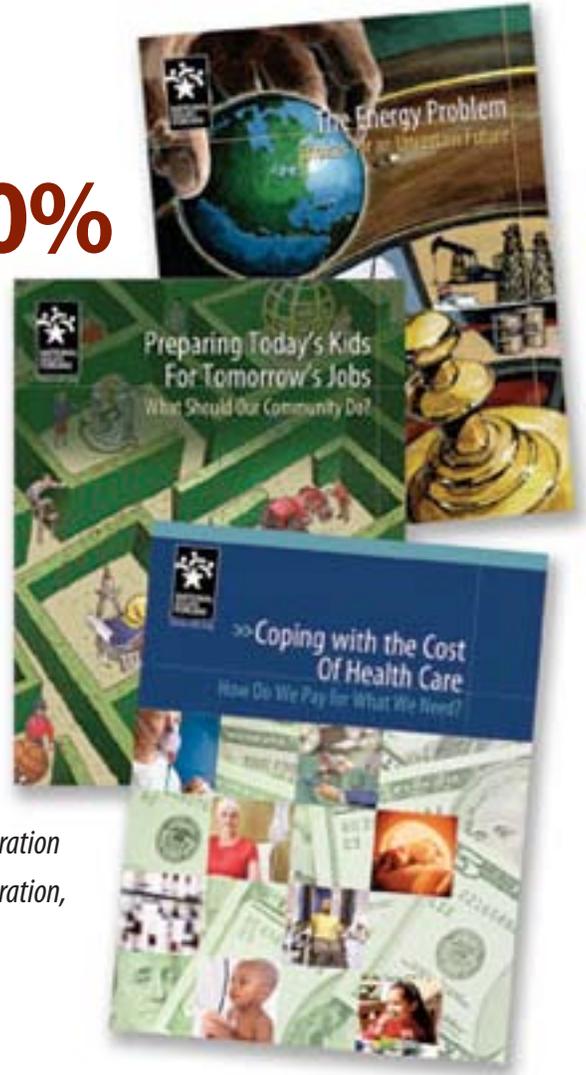
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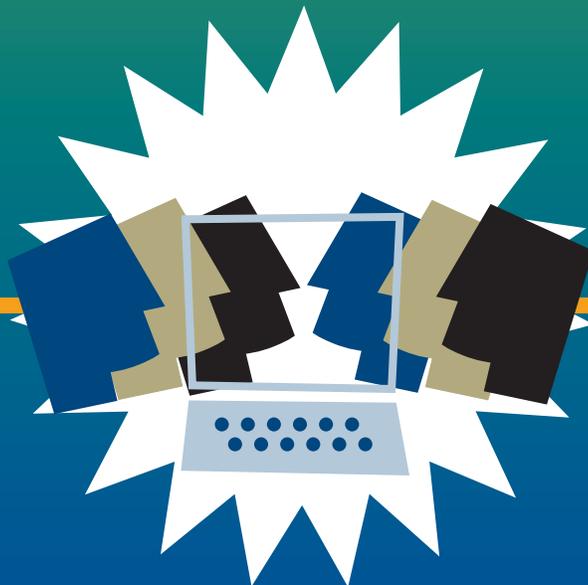
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The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

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