

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

# CONNECTIONS

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2012

## EDUCATING FOR DEMOCRACY

Stories of  
**INNOVATION**  
in  
**HIGHER  
EDUCATION**





NEW from Kettering Foundation Press

# Democratizing Deliberation

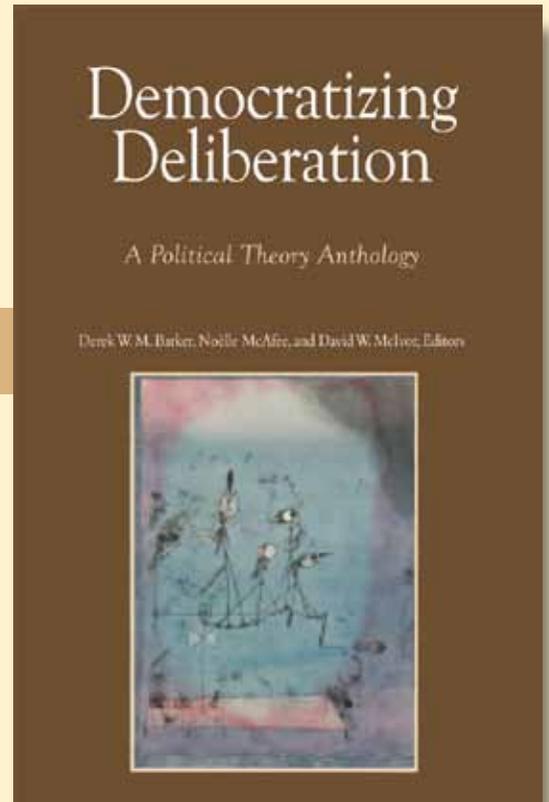
A Political Theory Anthology

Edited by Derek W. M. Barker, Noëlle McAfee, and David W. McIvor

*Democratizing Deliberation* brings together recent and cutting-edge political theory scholarship on deliberative democracy. The collection reframes deliberative democracy to be sensitive to the deep conflicts, multiple forms of communication, and aspirations for civic agency that characterize real public deliberation. In so doing, the book addresses many of the most common challenges to the theory and practice of deliberative democracy.

Kettering Foundation Press | 2012

\$15.95 • 184 pages • ISBN 978-0-923993-41-2



To read excerpts and purchase this book, visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what makes democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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**Editors**

Derek W. M. Barker  
Melinda Gilmore

**Copy Editor**

Lisa Boone-Berry

**Design and Production**

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**Illustrations**

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# CONNECTIONS

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# Reimagining the Civic Life of Non-College- Bound Youth

*Wanda Madison Minor*

**F**or just more than half of the young adult population, institutions of higher education guide and nurture their civic and social development and help them learn and practice the skills needed in a democracy. But who prepares the other half for their role as citizens? In particular, who prepares the youth who not only have few opportunities to pursue higher education but also often come from single-parent families, experience severe poverty, and live in disconnected neighborhoods? Where are they likely to acquire and practice the civic skills they will need in order to be the kind of citizens a democracy requires—engaged, confident, and deliberative? And how can higher education talk about its democratic mission when its programs fail to reach the most disadvantaged groups of young people? I have been working with the Kettering Foundation to ask these questions in a recent series of workshops, including a meeting this spring that brought

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## Reimagining the Civic Life of Non-College-Bound Youth

together youth-development practitioners from a variety of institutional sectors. The purpose of the two-day research exchange was to understand how the most disadvantaged populations might transition into full and active citizenship so they can make decisions, solve problems collectively, and participate in public life. Specifically, in this ongoing research, our hope is to move beyond a deficit model to understand what opportunities and assets all youth have to develop the civic skills that are needed to sustain a vibrant democracy.

Whether as a causal factor or an indicator of other variables, attending college appears to be closely related to how young people develop as citizens. We began our research by focusing on non-college-bound youth (NCBY), defined in the academic literature as a diverse group of young adults who are: (1) high school graduates with no college experience, (2) out-of-school youth who may be enrolled in GED preparation programs, and (3) institutionalized and socially disconnected youth. This third group generally includes the most vulnerable of this population: foster-care youth, youth involved in the juvenile justice and criminal justice systems, undocumented immigrant youth, runaway and homeless youth, former special education youth, youth in the mental health system, and youth with physical disabilities. According to the practitioners in our exchanges, the civic, educational, and economic gaps among youth continue to grow, and going to college—or not—appears to be at the center of these disparities. Getting through the transition period (when young adults complete their education, get a job, start a family, and purchase a home) is increasingly difficult for all young adults and is nearly impossible for the most vulnerable.

NCBY begin to experience the disparities starting as early as childhood, where the environments they grow up in are markedly different from their college-bound cohort. Youth who go on to college are more likely to come from affluent neighborhoods, be raised in higher income homes, have parents

that are more civically engaged, attend schools with more resources where there are greater opportunities for them to participate in extracurricular activities, and have a wide range of civic activities that they can engage in at school and in college. Conversely, NCBY reside in communities that have fewer ties to public officials, have less political clout, and have fewer vibrant civic associations where public actions can be organized. Rarely do NCBY have opportunities to assume leadership roles in their schools and communities or to participate in civic activities.

Consequently, they are less likely to learn how to be productive citizens.

They are less likely to vote, volunteer, exchange favors with their neighbors, work with neighbors to fix community problems, and participate in one or more civic or social groups where leadership and social skills can be learned and practiced. These gaps continue through adulthood, especially when it comes to civic participation. In fact, the more educated one is, the higher the civic participation rate among all civic activities, as measured by the National Civic Health Index. An example of the disparity in civic participation occurred during the 2008 election, when 74 percent of young adults with at least a bachelor's degree or higher voted, 68 percent of those with some college or an associate's degree voted, 53 percent of high school graduates with no college voted, and only 31 percent of high school dropouts voted. While society invests billions of dollars in higher education and provides college students with extensive support, more often than not, NCBYs fade into the background after high school and in many instances become invisible members of their community.

However, in the course of our workshop conversations, a puzzle emerged: despite their circumstances and desperate situations, even the most vulnerable

among this population are hopeful. Although marginalized by society, they do not see themselves as problematic or deficient. However, many of the labels we have for these young people, including NCBY, stigmatize them and define them in terms of what can be seen as deficiencies. Rather, participants in our research want us to reimagine the way we see and talk about this population. This is where we need practitioners' and young adults' help. We need to use a descriptive term that better captures young adults' democratic aspirations.

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**Youth-development practitioners are starting to see their work in civic terms and are experimenting with ways for young people to experience agency in their communities, even under the most extreme circumstances.**

Building on this more aspirational view, youth-development practitioners are starting to see their work in civic terms and are experimenting with ways for young people to experience agency in their communities, even under the most extreme circumstances. Participants in our recent workshop consisted of higher education representatives, a former youth-development researcher, faith leaders, retired school administrators, community-based and nonprofit leaders, and independent consultants, all with a shared interest in the civic life of NCBY. They shared the raw emotions, rich discourses, and experiences of this group of young adults in their communities. While it would be impossible to capture all of their stories in this article, three examples highlight some of their experiences:

- Peggy Flanagan, director of the Native American Leadership Program of Wellstone Action, is concerned about the “electoral strip mining” that occurs with-

## Reimagining the Civic Life of Non-College-Bound Youth

in the Native communities; politicians show up during election season but do not return until another election. Yet, she seeks to provide capacity-building opportunities for people in her community through a leadership program that helps participants learn and practice the skills needed in a democracy. This program, through leadership and civic-engagement skills training, helps young adults develop the capacity to be effective citizens and citizen leaders by addressing the problems and issues that affect them and their communities, including lack of jobs and opportunities, lack of political representation, inadequate access to education and health care, environmental challenges, and high rates of domestic and sexual assault. Participants learn how to build relationships based on common ground, share information to intentionally build the power of others, give others responsibilities matched with their skills, make themselves accessible, and communicate authentically. She is most proud of the many successes of her work, especially when marginalized citizens see their “civic esteem” rise and they self-actualize to become city council people and community leaders—making decisions for themselves and others and collectively setting policies that affect the entire community.

- Marilyn Culliver Armistead directs West Mid Alabama Community Development Corporation, a nonprofit organization that represents a rural, isolated, and desperate three-county area. She struggles to provide education, training, space, and justification for why the population of formerly incarcerated young adults she works with needs to be served and supported (she also works with youth with special needs and youth who have not been involved in the courts). Working with these re-entry youth, the organization struggles daily to make the lives and the circumstances of this population visible to decision makers and to the broader communities. The circumstances they encounter



seem sometimes overwhelming, but, because the participants and the program administrators see themselves as a family and as a last-chance opportunity, they persevere and support and depend on each other. Participants experience agency when they see that they have acquired new skills that allow them to give back and help others in need. They renovated a local public housing community that had not been upgraded in the facility’s nearly 40-year existence. They were also able to help families affected by tornadoes that swept through the community in April 2011. Participants’ educational hopes and dreams are realized when they complete the program successfully, having acquired a GED and a set of skills that will help sustain them throughout adulthood. More important, they realize that they do have assets and can be valuable members of the community from which they were once ostracized.

- Ann Higdon, an award-winning educational and social entrepreneur, shares her experiences of founding a program with only a vision and a sizable personal loan. In 2011, her organization, Improved Solutions for Urban Systems, was recognized as one of the nation’s

“Top 25 Innovations in American Government” by Harvard University’s Kennedy School. The education and training program, located in Dayton, Ohio, takes unskilled, high school dropouts from the direst circumstances—poverty, drugs, teen pregnancy, and homelessness—and makes them high school graduates. Successful graduates become industry-certified to build homes; repair manufacturing equipment; and install, do preventive maintenance on, and network, secure, and troubleshoot computer technology. Some are also credentialed in the health-care industry as phlebotomy technicians, EKG technicians, and patient-care technicians. As an illustration of the prevailing attitude toward these youth, Higdon told us that a local reporter referred to these youth as “the over-age, underachieving, non-attending, court-involved, disciplinary-problem, court-involved, drop-out youths.” Program leaders, however, see them become “transcenders” who are succeeding against all odds and moving beyond their present circumstances to become productive citizens in their communities, in their state, and in the nation. The participants see themselves emerging from youths considered both

troubled and troubling to independent adults, able to take care of themselves and their families and giving back to the community through hands-on community-service work.

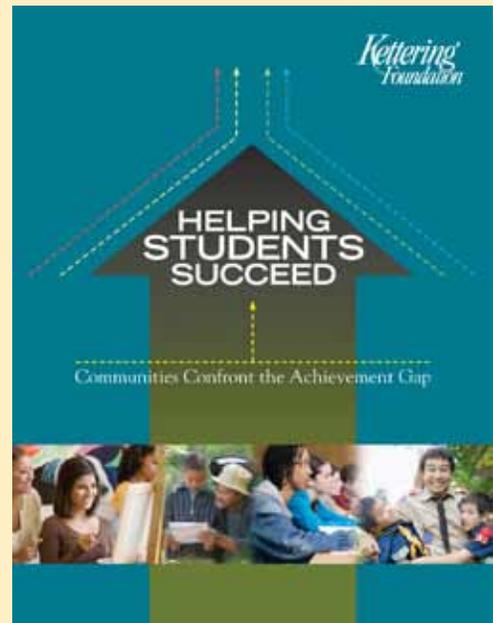
A common thread runs through the lives of NCBY. Although they do not always succeed, they are resilient; they believe in themselves and in their future; they trust each other; and they trust the leaders who take time to nurture their social, civic, and educational development and show that they care deeply about what happens to them. Citizenship for this group of transitioning youth is about trust, community, respect, and aspiration. Yes, some of them are disconnected, and some of them are homeless and vulnerable. Many others are struggling to make ends meet, living with families longer, working multiple jobs, postponing getting married and having their own children, and hoping to one day be able to afford their own home. But this diverse and multifaceted population is more than those negative adjectives used to describe them. They are “aspirants” and “transcenders” who are hopeful about their lives and their futures. They are optimistic that their past and their present circumstances will not hold them back and will not keep them from achieving their American Dream. They ask for more institutions in their communities that they and their fellow travelers can turn to for support, encouragement, and educational, civic, and workforce development opportunities. In the meantime, we hope to learn more about what happens when youth-development practitioners take a civic approach to their work and provide experiences in civic agency that meet the aspirations of young citizens.

*Wanda Madison Minor has led deliberative forums and been engaged with the National Issues Forums for more than 30 years. Currently, she is principal of Madison Minor Group, LLC and serves on the board of directors of the National Issues Forums Institute and the advisory council of the Alliance for Positive Youth Development. She is a former adjunct professor at Monmouth University in West Long Branch, New Jersey. She can be reached at madison.minor@gmail.com.*

ADDITIONAL READING FROM KETTERING

## Helping Students Succeed: Communities Confront the Achievement Gap

Between 2007 and 2009, more than 3,000 citizens met with their neighbors to talk about the issue known as the achievement gap. As they deliberated, the citizens learned a great deal—about their schools and their neighborhoods, about the persistence of subtle racial inequities,



Kettering Foundation | 2010  
18 pages

about the lives of young people, and about how these factors interact to support or prevent learning. Attitudes about teaching and parenting were questioned and reassessed. These and other findings are the subjects of this Kettering Foundation report. In the end, forum participants realized that schools cannot shoulder the entire task of educating the next generation, that the quality of education cannot be measured by test scores alone, and that success for all our children requires something more from all of us.

To read this report and watch the companion documentary, *No Textbook Answer: Communities Confront the Achievement Gap*, visit [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).



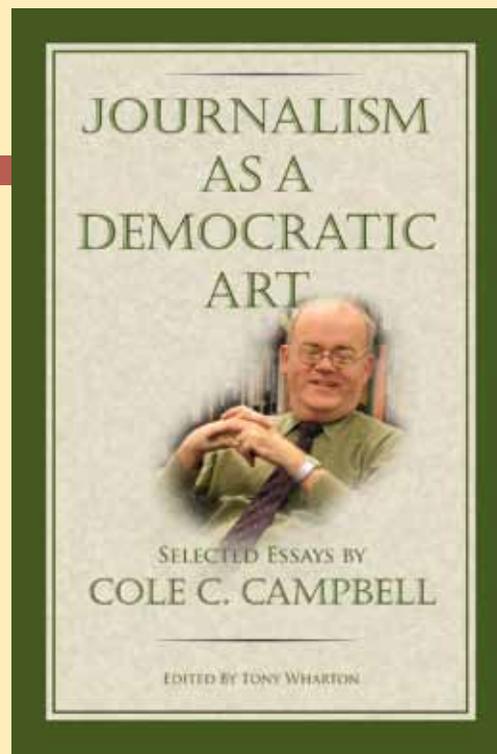
# NEW from Kettering

## ***Journalism as a Democratic Art: Selected Essays*** **by Cole C. Campbell**

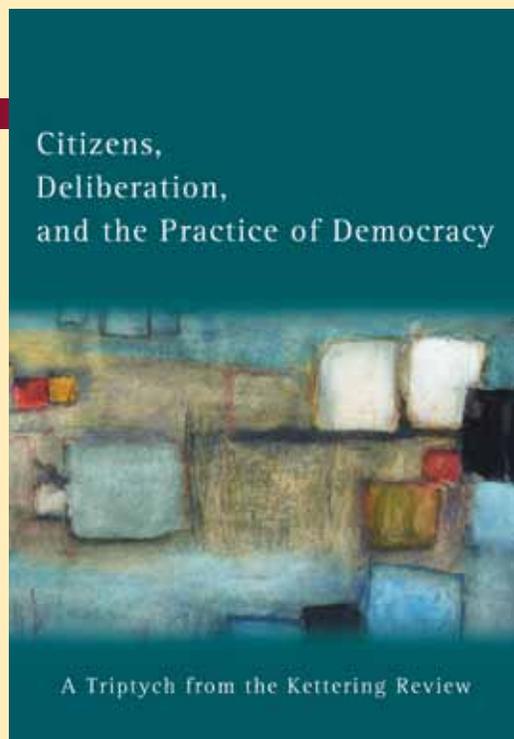
Edited by Tony Wharton

*Journalism as a Democratic Art expresses at its heart Cole Campbell's belief that "people expect the press to help their communities solve problems." As one-time editor of the Virginian-Pilot in Norfolk, Virginia, and then the Post-Dispatch in St. Louis, Missouri, Campbell worked to align his profession with that belief, often facing considerable resistance from other journalists.*

*Campbell's essays address a variety of subjects, including a partly finished dictionary for journalists; timely essays written in the months after Hurricane Katrina and 9/11; and an interview by Jay Rosen, longtime professor of journalism at New York University.*



Kettering Foundation Press | 2012  
**\$15.95** • 196 pages • ISBN 978-0-923993-40-5



## ***Citizens, Deliberation, and the Practice of Democracy: A Triptych from the Kettering Review***

*Citizens, Deliberation, and the Practice of Democracy brings together writing by 19 leading thinkers on the contemporary challenges of democracy. These provocative essays, first published in three issues of the Kettering Review to celebrate 25 years of the National Issues Forums, challenge readers to rethink conventional notions of democracy, public deliberation, and citizenship.*

Kettering Foundation Press | 2012  
**\$15.95** • 236 pages • ISBN 978-0-923993-44-3

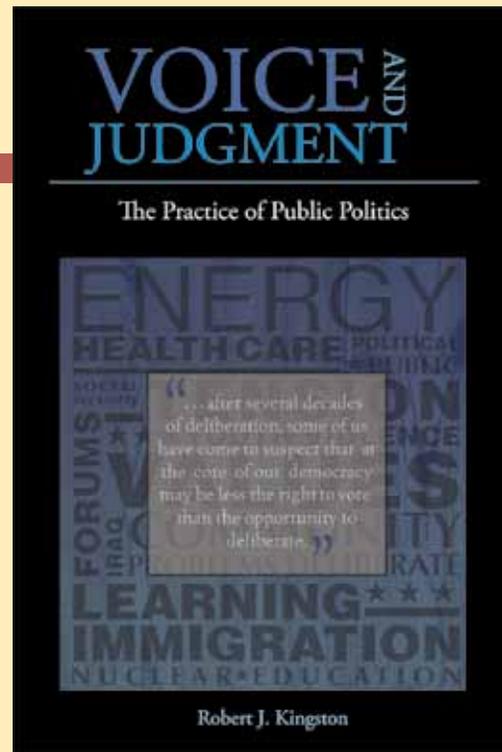
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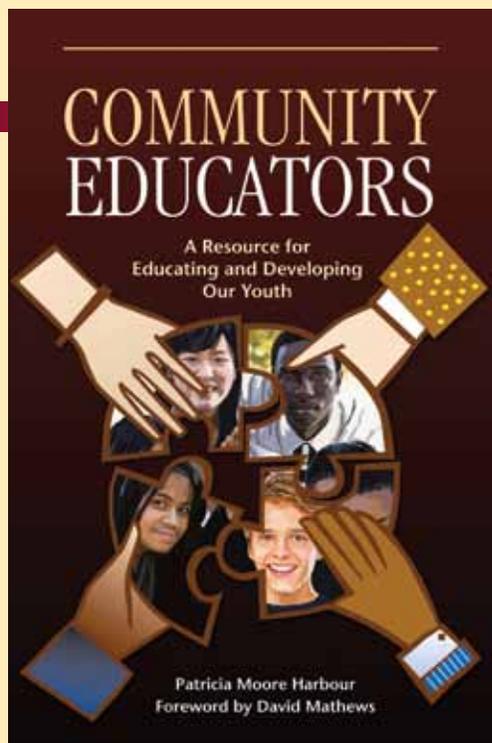
## **Voice and Judgment: The Practice of Public Politics**

By Robert J. Kingston

*"We are victims of argument and instruments, from time to time, of circumstance or the influence of others' whims. Our civic movement, however, is from a state of anxiety, puzzlement, blame, defensiveness, or anger, toward the place where contraries meet, where unavoidable tensions remind us that no life is lived without risk . . . or collaboration. A deliberative public begins with opinions but shares experiences; it recognizes shared concerns or 'values' in unexpected, sometimes unfamiliar circumstances; it responds to the divisive with restraint. . . . Public deliberation reveals not a verdict but the making of a 'public,' the formulation of a public will that can be described and put to use."*



Kettering Foundation Press | 2012  
\$15.95 • 272 pages • ISBN 978-0-923993-42-9



## **Community Educators: A Resource For Educating and Developing Our Youth**

By Patricia Moore Harbour

*Community Educators asserts that the relationship between education, community, and democracy are inseparable and illustrates that education is broader than just schooling. Current thinking about education is challenged and reveals how the public participates in the education and development of youth. This book is a call for action and responsibility—both individual and collective—to transform education beyond simply reforming schools.*

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444 North Capitol Street NW, Washington, DC 20001; (202) 393-4478

6 East 39th Street, New York, New York 10016; (212) 686-7016

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