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 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
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required infrastructure to raise chickens, the group realized that they had not fully figured out how they would get the chickens to market. Rather than abandoning the enterprise at that point, which had in the past often been the response in such situations, the group turned its focus to generating a marketing plan and identifying potential outside partners who could help them gain access to distribution networks.

Another interesting result in successful rural area projects that IDASA has run has been a subtle change in attitude towards government development assistance. In most places where IDASA starts an initiative, community groups look to government as the primary driver of development efforts in their areas. At the end of a successful project, project participants still believe that government assistance is required for development, but only to address specific infrastructural or other gaps that prevent their own initiatives from succeeding. Thus government comes to be seen as a strategic partner in development, rather than as its agent.

The accomplishments in all of these projects are made possible by a focus on creating spaces where people can learn to talk about problems without the pressure to produce solutions. Generally a dialogue is needed in communities when the solutions proposed by stakeholders fail to take account of the entire public’s interest in a problem. Thus, clearing the space of the need for solutions enables people to listen more carefully and take a fresh perspective. Yet convincing people of the need to talk about problems without immediately trying to solve them is often the most difficult step in any deliberative project. Indeed IDASA has found that this is not only an approach it must advocate, but a skill that its projects must teach. The core message of its work is that development is not signified by material goods, but rather in a community’s improved capacity to respond to increasingly difficult public and private challenges. Material progress is simply a result of that deeper development of civic capacity.

Teddy Nemeroff is with IDASA Kutlwanong Democracy Centre. He can be reached at tednemeroff@hotmail.com.
state’s history, but I digress.) Agriculture colleges such as Michigan’s became prototypes for the land-grant university system, which began during Abraham Lincoln’s administration with the passage of the Morrill Act in 1862.

The land-grant system led to the creation of the cooperative extension program—the university’s outreach to communities, sharing knowledge, research, and expertise to address local needs. It is easy to romanticize any historical account, but there is ample evidence to suggest that the land-grant system and its cooperative extension programs were developed not just to improve agricultural productivity, but also to improve community life by encouraging local networks and creating viable, cooperative communities. This kind of relationship between academic institutions and communities truly reflects a democratic purpose for higher education. (Scott Peters has written extensively on the democratic and civic history of cooperative extension for the foundation.)

One of the key links communities had to universities in rural areas of the United States was through the services of cooperative extension. Since 1914, the federal government has contributed significant funding for this program so that it can operate in over 3,100 counties across the country. Cooperative extension focused on rural communities, providing knowledge for problem solving and research to improve agriculture. While “extending knowledge and research” is still needed for some technical issues, the problems communities face in today’s world need a different approach. Passing information down is insufficient.

Despite its important roots, cooperative extension has changed over time, mirroring the trends of most contemporary institutions—a trend that has moved away from this democratic purpose. This trend has also made it much more difficult for citizens to be active participants in shaping the outreach and cooperative extension work of universities. Like businesses, academic institutions recognize they have a customer to serve and thus work to create products they think customers need. However, this “service,” or “expert,” approach puts citizens on the receiving end, with not only a limited voice over what they receive, but with fewer opportunities to shape their own futures the way those Michigan farmers did. The customer-service stance actually inhibits the local expression of needs and leads institutional actors to perceive citizens as apathetic, as “blocking progress,” or as “complaining.” The way customers gain control over their lives and futures is by using their feet—by not participating.

Kettering has long recognized this problem of institutions standing in the way of citizen capacity for self-rule rather than finding ways to build capacity. In particular, the academy tends to provide its expertise without recognizing the expertise that citizens can bring to solving real problems. Thus, when the academic, land-grant institutions try to solve problems through research and the extension of that research to the public, the results are often not what citizens need or want.

In response to this situation, Kettering seeks experiments where institutions are more aligned with democratic practices, or self-rule, just as cooperative extension was originally designed to do. In a new expression of this effort, Kettering sees great potential in revitalizing the democratic mission of cooperative extension as a recovery of its roots, and because of its wide reach.

In today’s world, communities can find a wealth of good, scientific information on the Internet, but they find less help on how to deal with public disagreements about land use, economic downturns, immigration challenges, and the like. These problems have implications for the kind of extension resources communities need and the receptiveness of extension to citizen input to the issues. To address them, communities require a public that is able to act collectively to name its problems and commit its resources to addressing them together, as public problems.

Kettering’s research asks, how can cooperative extension be an effective resource for solving the problems communities face in today’s world? What will it take for institutions, such as those in the land-grant system, to return to their democratic roots?

The W. K. Kellogg Foundation shares Kettering’s concern about the direction of land-grant universities. In the late 1990s, Kellogg published a significant report, Returning to Our Roots, on the future of the land-grant universities. Kellogg felt there was a need for public universities to renew their partnerships with the public. They especially saw the need for land-grant universities to engage in communities through cooperative extension.

In response to this shared concern, Kellogg and Kettering are creating a new research-oriented partnership, which will focus on rebuilding the democratic roots of cooperative extension through the land-grant system. Community Change and Action Research

Kellogg and Kettering are creating a new research-oriented partnership, which will focus on rebuilding the democratic roots of cooperative extension through the land-grant system.
We have learned that significant, meaningful change can occur when practitioners reflect on their work both with the communities they work in and with practitioners who do similar work.

A first step in this research initiative has been work recently conducted by Michigan State University under the leadership of Frank Fear, Senior Associate Dean of the College of Agriculture and Natural Resources (ANR).

ANR has decided that rather than take unsolicited research to the community, it would make its resources available at the community’s request “to work on complex and controversial ANR issues—at the local, regional, and statewide levels.” ANR recognizes that simply extending its own self-initiated research and information is not useful for citizens who face community challenges or public problems. And now the issues are coming. These are issues that require a blend of community judgment about what should be done and ANR research in response about what could be done.

When dealing with should, controversy can erupt and communities need a different kind of approach by extension to help the community work through its differences and identify the partners and resources to get there. MSU is one partner among many, as reflected in the following story.

Grand Haven, Michigan, is a community on the coast of Lake Michigan. It is rich with natural resources: relatively low population, lots of fresh water, wildlife, and undeveloped land. It also has a large deer population. Like the public, the deer appreciate Grand Haven’s resources, and their numbers have grown to the extent that many consider the deer a nuisance. These people want to see all the deer killed, while others in the community moved to Grand Haven because of the wildlife and actually feed the deer.

The city council had considered creating deer management plans, which were developed and presented by experts at great expense to the community. But the council, at the urging of the assistant city manager, decided to try a deliberative approach. They created an advisory council involving citizens, government and community agencies, and university wildlife experts.

A long-time National Issues Forums leader from cooperative extension, Jan Hartough, and MSU’s Frank Fear worked in Grand Haven to build a deliberative approach to this community conflict. The deliberation was difficult and took many meetings, but the advisory council was able to name the problem and frame approaches to deal with it. As we see in so many deliberative approaches, the citizens came to realize that the issue was less about deer management and more about carving out a course of action that reflected the shared sense of the kind of community Grand Haven wanted to be. They essentially renamed the problem. The committee’s final plan was accepted by the entire city council.

The assistant city manager knew she was taking a risk by advocating for a citizen-focused approach, but in the end, she was glad she stood with the citizens. A plan by experts would not have resolved the differences in the public’s judgment about the kind of community the citizens want to have. She asked cooperative extension for help on a specific problem, and the response by extension was tailored to the situation.

Kellogg and Kettering are embarking on this initiative, which will involve many land-grant institutions and their cooperative extension programs, to explore the possibilities of renewing the approach that was so successful in the early days of the land-grant universities. The approach being used in this collaboration has real promise by building practitioner and community capacity for collective problem solving, by building a learning environment for future experiments, and by building a body of knowledge that is recognized by the university as scholarship. In the end, it is democracy that wins.

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—Anne Colby, senior scholar, Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Teaching

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—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

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By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan
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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.

Editor
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Design and Production
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long’s Graphic Design, Inc.