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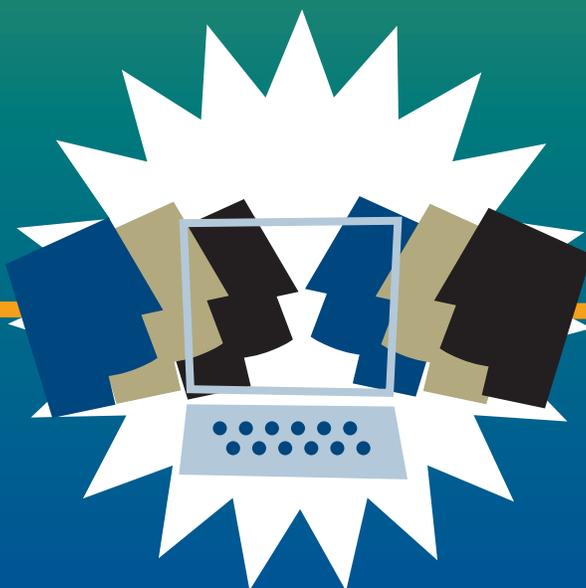


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Cooperative
Extension
and Community
Development:

How Politics *and the* Academy Mix



Higher education prides itself on generating objective research and cultivating inquiring and critical minds. Many educators posit that schools don't give the answers, but give the tools to find the answers. And yet when it comes to community engagement, the academy seems stuck in the mode of teaching rather than educating, or of giving the answers rather than the tools to find them.

Cooperative extension would seem the likely locus for strong community-university engagement because of their historical mission of bringing the resources of the academy to strengthen communities. Yet cooperative extension has its own challenges using community engagement as an approach in communi-

By Alice Diebel

How Politics and the Academy Mix

ties and often falls back on the technical transfer of knowledge and research: giving answers. First, extension often wants to avoid controversial, “political” issues to preserve a sense of scientific truth and objectivity seen as central to research. Second, they are funded through project lines on a budget—programs that seemingly have no space for an engagement line item. And finally, they do not believe they have the tools to engage the public effectively.

These challenges reach into the heart of the university and the nature of knowledge. While science, budgets, and tools are needed and should continue to be cultivated, today’s world needs something more. Extension could be the ideal place to shift the relationship between the university and the community. The space between the two can be an opportunity to democratize knowledge by engaging in the cocreation of not only the solutions, but also of identifying and selecting what problems provide the basis for the university’s resources. New knowledge comes out of places other than the university. We need a new kind of scholar, developing an expertise of engagement.

Extension professionals who are engaging communities require expertise of a different sort. Their work embraces the political, gravitates toward problems without solid, technical, or objective, research-based solutions, and learns while practicing in the community without a net. Three Kettering research initiatives are exploring these issues and actively trying to understand how some in extension are changing their approach to their work.

Michigan State University (MSU) has been working throughout the state to create and facilitate the space for public deliberation on contentious agriculture and natural resource issues. One case study in Grand Haven was highlighted in the last issue of *Connections*. As is always the case in engagement work, the story did not end a year ago.

In the first phase of the work, the university was invited by the Grand Haven city council to help the community address public concerns about large numbers of deer in residential areas—deer were considered a nuisance by some and a benefit by others. A citizen advisory group—with facilitation support from MSU—deliberated about how to manage

the deer population and how the issue relates to the kind of community Grand Haven should be. Such questions are typically the sort of value discussions that citizens need to engage but seldom have the opportunity.

The public was able to agree on a public education plan to help reduce the deer population; the public would be encouraged to avoid feeding the deer and make the community less attractive to the animals. The community stopped short of deciding whether and how to eliminate (cull) the deer population. However, Michigan State learned a hard lesson about the politics of a community when a member of the advisory group wrote a letter to the editor and reignited polarized politics. This action broke trust of the advisory group. As might be expected, the community organized into opposing activist groups and the local government turned inward. MSU concluded that clearer rules of engagement might have encouraged the community’s willingness to stay in deliberation with one another.

Such responses reflect politics—and some might argue the very reason the university should stay away from political concerns. However, the natural resource-public intersection creates exactly the kinds of political difficulties that communities and cooperative extension offices are facing. No longer is a fact sheet on deer populations sufficient to deal with such problems. Instead, the university had to learn—along with the community—what information would be of use and how to engage the issue in ways that improve the political decision making of the community rather than return it to politics-as-usual.

It is a challenge to create the kind of community that is willing to face its problems through an agreed upon process that encourages deliberation of the strong, moral tensions among difficult choices. In the Grand Haven case, the community stopped short of tackling the difficult question of whether to cull deer—and how many. The dilemma the

community shrunk from in its new politics reflected competing values of preserving an environment with its messy—sometimes dangerous—wildlife, or creating an environment that has property values as its foremost concern. Safety and prosperity are core community values that reside in tension with one another in this case.

The good news is that the citizens are engaged—perhaps more than ever. And, by some political means they will address these issues. This time the citizens organized themselves without the MSU deliberation experts and they are paying attention to their relationship with the local government and who represents them. What we do not yet know is what it will take for this and other communities to push themselves to deal with hard choices by getting at those deeply held

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values. We need to experiment more with how extension could build a greater understanding of how to encourage deliberation in the political environments they operate in.

We hope a research plan by the Southern Rural Development Center (SRDC) will provide some insights into how extension can develop a different awareness of the political environments they enter. In the South, communities with a high poverty rate often appear helpless and unable to create the changes needed to prosper. What makes one community thrive while a neighbor continues to falter? We hypothesize that the politics of the community make a difference. How might an extension agent enter a community and assess its political strength? What are the capacities that might be developed as extension learns along with the community?

How Politics and the Academy Mix

A survey of constituents and stakeholders of SRDC identified the need for more effective means of engaging citizens on difficult issues. Recognizing that traditional approaches of economic development tend to leave citizens out, the SRDC is pursuing new ways exten-

ent approach that makes it explicit that the outcome is uncertain? (Never mind that outcomes in such endeavors are always uncertain.)

We hope to learn how extension comes to understand citizens and their communities. What are the beginning

assumptions extension agents make about citizens? What do they understand about their impact on citizen capacity? What do they learn through their political engagement in these communities? What do they do that helps citizens recognize and develop their resources?

Finally, Cornell University will examine the politics of engagement across the country. They have created a research plan to examine the breadth and depth of

civic engagement through cooperative extension. Cornell's "call for stories" will help catalog the kind of engagement practices extension is using and what they

gain from it. Such stories will help create a vision for what extension might be if engagement became a key part of what agents do in their communities.

By creating a series of narrative descriptions, Cornell hopes to develop a model that describes how the democratic potential of extension may be strengthened. For Cornell and all of Kettering's extension partners, engagement is not about eliminating the important research that universities have to offer communities. Rather, engagement is about doing the work of outreach, scholarship, and practice differently. What would it look like if universities listened first instead of spoke first? What if ideas from the community generated research on problem solving? What if the work of extension helped citizens learn how to find the answer within their communities before looking outside? How would this approach strengthen communities and our democracy?

Alice Diebel is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at diebel@kettering.org.

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sion might approach the community. The SRDC has identified four states with extension departments interested in engaging citizens in high-poverty communities so they can find a way toward prosperity.

One of Kettering's key insights this past year is that in difficult economic situations, many citizens fail to see themselves as actors able to remedy community problems. In most communities, economic decisions are made by elites working to bring in outside resources to "save" the community. This approach fails to recognize that citizens may have resources to help. John McKnight has developed this approach to asset-based community development, but too often neither extension agents nor citizens recognize those internal resources.

Furthermore, communities have political histories in how they solve their problems. Who are the decision makers? How are citizens engaged? What is the role of the media? Who "names" the problem? What do the networks of interaction look like? How are decisions finally made? How open are those in power to a differ-



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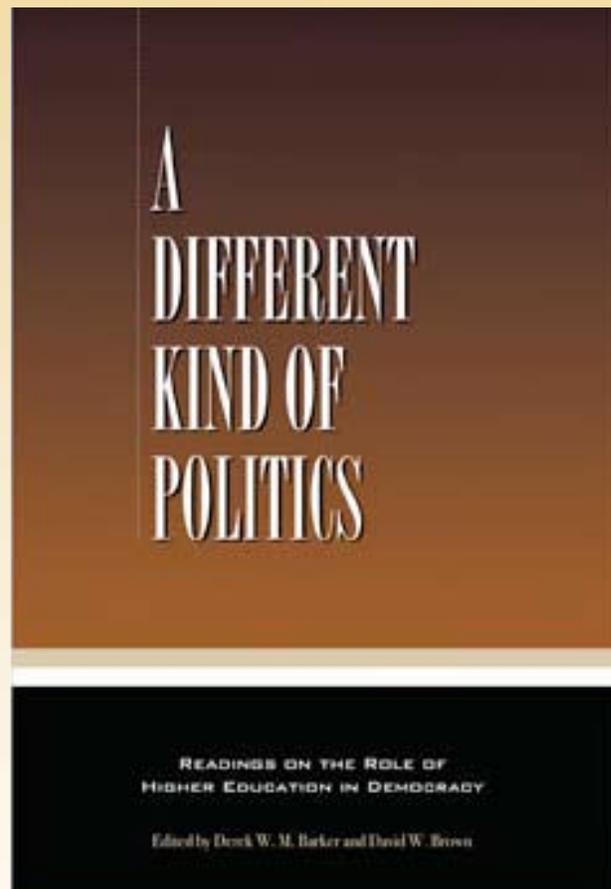
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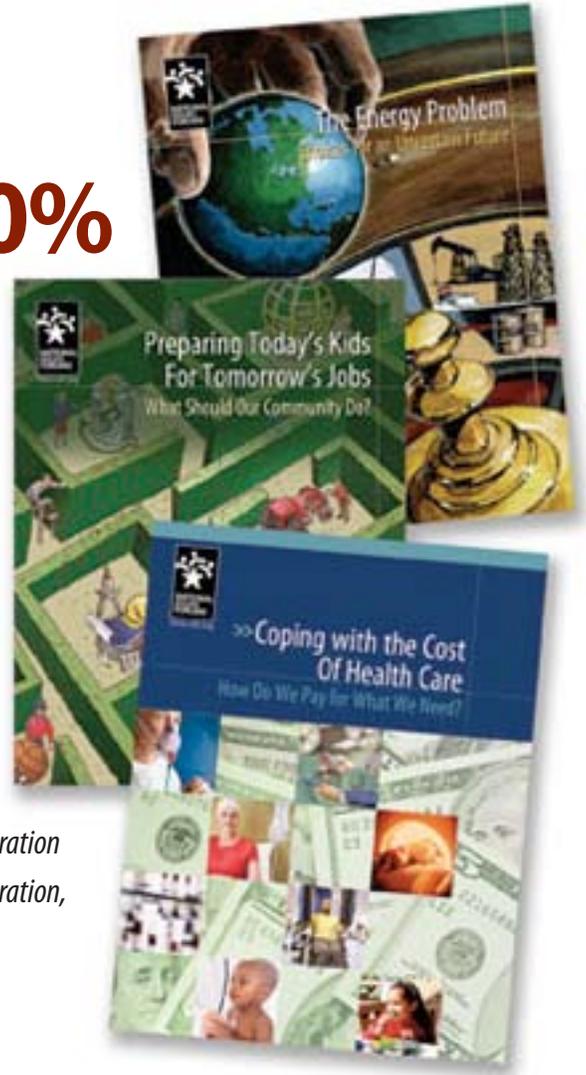
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The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter.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

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