A Note from the Editor

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 untired. 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
**Looking Back/Looking Ahead at Communities**  
David Mathews

**A Need for Human Logic in Education**  
Bob Cornett

**Taking a Look at Organic Community-Level Politics**  
Derek Barker, Gina Paget, and Dorothy Battle

**Developing Civic Practices in South African Communities**  
Teddy Nemeroff

**Community Change and Action Research: The Unrealized Potential of Cooperative Extension**  
Alice Diebel

**What’s Changed? Are Citizens Reestablishing Education Ownership?**  
Patricia Moore Harbour

**Communities as Educators: A Report on the November 2007 Public and Public Education Workshop**  
Connie Crockett

**Self-Organizing and Community Politics**  
Phil Stewart

**Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do?**  
Bob McKenzie

**Public Work vs. Organizational Mission**  
Connie Crockett

**Studies of a Role for Communities in the Face of Catastrophe**  
Paloma Dallas

**Books Worth Reading**

- **Hearing the Other Side: Deliberative versus Participatory Democracy**  
  By Diana C. Mutz, reviewed by Matthew Johnson

- **Innovation: The Missing Dimension**  
  By Richard K. Lester and Michael J. Piore, reviewed by Randall Nielsen
For citizens, communities are purposeful civic relationships. They are formed to achieve basic goals: protection from threats to security, economic prosperity, and the education of future generations in the norms and skills essential to their survival. These relationships are and have always been what constitutes a “community.” Maintaining these relationships maintains the community. If people aren’t associated or assembled for these purposes, there is no community.

What follows from this basic idea is that a community is an educator. Schools are institutions created to support the community in that endeavor. However, the prevailing way of thinking treats a community as merely a source of support for schools, which is why Kettering has had difficulty over the years in trying to move the topic of conversation from schools to education. Last November, we convened a small workshop that was different in that schools did not become the magnet to which all thoughts were drawn. They were acknowledged, but merely so. Our guests were community organizers whose interests lay elsewhere. These were people and places harnessing locally available resources for educational purposes.

Our guests spoke to us about how those who don’t work in the schools can take responsibility for education. We were pleased to host community members from Albion, Michigan, Georgetown, Kentucky, and St. Louis Park, Minnesota, along with a group of scholars and retired superintendents. What distinguished this group was the democratic nature of their efforts, apparently diffuse leadership, and the work conducted as a way of life, rather than as a project.

We asked our guests how their communities came to emphasize education over schools; what made people move from concern to complementary, broad-range public acting; and how concerned citizens learn from their work together. We also wanted to better understand the ways school-to-public engagement can be aligned to relate to the work of citizen-to-citizen engagement. We found something worth studying in their stories of educational work as shared community endeavor.

Communities as Educators:
A Report on the November 2007 Public and Public Education Workshop

By Connie Crockett
Kettering looks to uncover the critical moments in stories of community action from thick descriptions of how large groups develop a consciousness about goals and plans to act. We have learned that there are moments or phases in a process when democratic practice either builds, or is halted, as when local institutions take over at the implementation phase. The danger at such moments is that if there is nothing for citizens to do, the work that builds community ends.

Each group at our meeting noted experiencing these moments, but pressed on to enlarge their work, always seeking to make it more democratic. One of our visitors told us that they “put their resources on the table and back away” to allow shared decision making. These groups continue to work through the tensions between civic missions, egos, and scarce resources by reminding themselves of their shared concerns, their larger purposes.

The insight that all of the community needs to be involved as educators led St. Louis Park to adopt a community covenant to put children first. For residents like Bridget Gothberg, that meant every decision would be filtered through the question, what is best for the young members of the community? Once the community decided to make itself the best place to raise a child, it moved away from a project mentality to a prevailing way of life. It’s a cultural shift that became the learned lesson of “How we do things here.” Leaders have come and gone without the work ending. New people accept the premise and add to it. Outcomes are generalized; solution wars are averted. St. Louis Park is a place that is working not to do something different, but rather to do the usual things differently.

When a school cook of 30 years accepted that lens, she began to see a role for herself beyond that of feeding many children in a short time frame. The “Children First” premise changed how she reacted when she noticed a harried young girl who had missed lunch. “Slow down, honey, I’ll fix you something to eat,” she told the youngster. Her kind attitude prompted tears and a hug from the child, who confided that she had never before been called “honey.” The cook’s caring attitude may have made a significant difference in that child’s academic life.

Our Kentucky educators told us that connecting young people with the real life of community is key to helping them find their place in the world. For them, scientific inquiry emerges in response to the need to solve problems born of a sense of place. So we were told that the restoration of the American chestnut tree, the blossoms of which once made the local mountains appear snow covered, motivates a grandparent group called “Kids, Codgers and Crones” in shared educational work. The old folk will not see the trees thrive in their lifetime, but the young people will carry the passion for the chestnut forward along with the recognition of a context for what they learn in classrooms.

When citizens educate, it is rooted in what they know and the problems they confront. Georgetown, Kentucky, has retired racehorses needing attention and care that have inspired responsibility from formerly withdrawn kids. Another local resource for educating is the bluegrass music found everywhere. Having learned to fiddle by being surrounded by fiddlers, 18-year-old Chloe Roberts organized a bluegrass camp for kids in a distant corner of the state. She says “The elders teach us that there is life beyond school, that there is a community to belong to. Now it is my job to pass what I’ve learned along to others.”
Like the backward-looking Sankofa bird, Bruce Mundy believes kids need to know where they come from to find where they’re going.

housing projects in north Lexington, his organization got young people hacking away at the 10-foot weeds around an old cemetery. They found the gravesites of native African poets and Kentucky Derby winners, researched those names, and got the (now pristine) site on the National Register of Historic Places. “Scuse me while I teach history!” he joked. Like the backward-looking Sankofa bird, Mundy believes kids need to know where they come from to find where they’re going. Painted trashcans share the history learned with the larger community; sculptures are formed from junk bicycles. Whatever they have, they use. “We do a lot of stuff. We love our kids; we have to.”

The third community group, “Albion’s Promise” in Albion, Michigan, was described as a “great experiment” in the politics of cultural change. “It’s not rocket science,” said Kevin Brown, “it’s harder.” Relationship building takes time, commitment, a willingness to allow others to take credit, allowing multiple pathways, drawing from the deepest well of community, and recognizing the unrecognized. When the initiative asked young people with whom they would want to share news of an accomplishment, they heard the same convenience store clerk listed by many. The result may have come as a revelation, but the clerk is a caring and consistent presence in those young lives. Once recognized, such community “educators” can become part of the community strategy for education.

Albion’s Promise doesn’t hold to a proscribed definition of what it means to be an educator. People are asked “What can you do?” rather than the more limiting “Help us to do this . . .” For the Albion community, professionals and institutions can facilitate the work, but the public must continuously evaluate priorities. The way they see it, education is improving in Albion because everyone who wants it to improve is working on it.

People decide something needs to be done and enlist others to help them take on the problem. That is common place. When they do the work democratically, we find something worth studying. There is no clean formula for how any of our visiting communities do what they do, because those we met with in November educate not as a program, but as way of life. What they do is how they live, with end results unknown, in an experimental mind-set of learning to be the best community they can be. Kettering notes this finding: Recognizing education as a multifaceted challenge for communities is work we share in common. We are looking for more stories of educational work that is seen as a shared community endeavor. How do people where you live address the collective problem that is education? We would be pleased to hear from you on the topic.

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Communities as Educators
HAVE YOUR SAY... Discuss the ideas
explored in Connections
in Kettering’s Readers’ Forum at www.kettering.org
Deliberation and the Work of Higher Education: Innovations for the Classroom, the Campus, and the Community
Edited by John R. Dedrick, Laura Grattan, and Harris Dienstfrey

This thoughtful collection of essays describes in candid and practical terms the ways that deliberation both inside and beyond the classroom can be used to support students’ development as responsible citizens. . . . It’s hard to imagine a richer bounty.

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

Agent of Democracy: Higher Education and the HEX Journey
From the editors of the Higher Education Exchange, David W. Brown and Deborah Witte

Ten thoughtful theorists and practitioners address how higher education prepares citizens for public life, how (and why) universities engage in the larger community, and how we can rediscover the civic roots of higher education. This book of essays is a contribution to a resurgent movement bent on strengthening higher education’s democratic mission and fostering a more democratic culture throughout American society.
Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue

By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

Harriger and McMillan’s “experiment is significant because it was informed by an acute sense of the troubles facing modern democracy. . . . Students in the experiment discovered another dimension to democracy and a new role for themselves as citizens.”

—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

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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.

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