

THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

CONNECTIONS

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2010



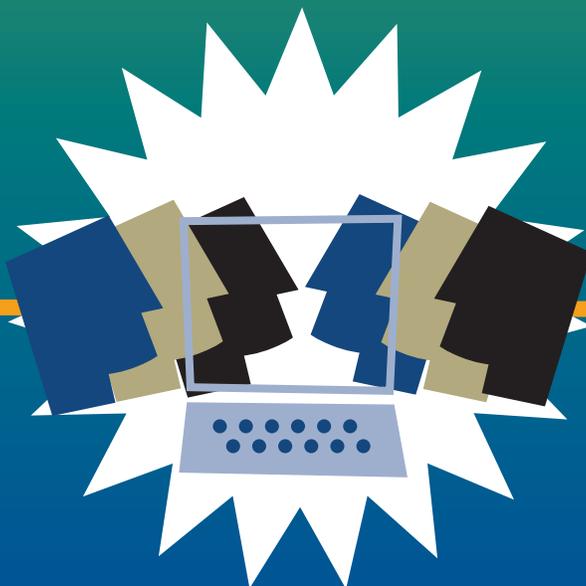
The role of
Civic
Organizations
in today's
society

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Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civil Engagement

By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach

How the “Body Politic” Thinks and Learns:



The Roles of Civic Organizations

By Randall Nielsen

Is our object to get a new playground or to create methods by which playgrounds will become part of the neighborhood consciousness, methods which will above all educate for further concerted effort?

—*The New State*,
Mary Parker Follett

The reports in this issue of *Connections* present a fundamental challenge for those of us who see communities as places where people engage together in public work. In our focus on the political roles of civic organizations, we emphasize the networks of working civic relationships that people create to achieve goals vital to their individual and collective interests. It is in and through those civic interactions that what Mary Parker Follett felicitously called the “neighborhood consciousness” develops.

Civic associations have historically provided the vehicles through which people entered the public life of their communities. The entry points and the qualities of the interactions they facilitate are the defining characteristics of any political community. We recognize, however, that many community-based organizations

have come to see people only in the context of the problems the organization solves through programs funded by external sources. Rather than resources to be engaged, people have become clients to be served or victims to be aided.

The change in the ways civic organizations locate themselves in communities can of course be seen as one aspect of a larger movement. Many of the challenges people once saw themselves and their fellow citizens responsible for—individual and social security, education, the gathering and sharing of news, and economic development—have become the purview of distinct experts and institutions. Even the challenge of “public engagement” itself has rapidly become a specialized field of expert consultants.

That presents a problem for those who feel that democracy depends on a citizenry willing and able to recognize and take responsibility for the governance of shared concerns. While there is no doubt that the professionalization of civil society organizations has resulted in an increase in the efficiency of the administration of programs, it has come at the cost of opportunities people have to think, act, and learn together in communities of public work.

How the “Body Politic” Thinks and Learns

The challenge is increasingly seen as an opportunity for innovation. What can new forms of organization do to strengthen the ability of citizens to carry out their responsibilities? Some civic entrepreneurs are exploring ways to create opportunities for interaction that bring people into

public work. How can those practices be supported and encouraged?

For the Chattanooga group, the key has been the use of learning as the conceptual lens. From reflections on their own recent history, they recognize that change is inevitable and that productive response to change requires learning. They are exploring ways to develop the capacity of citizens to control their own learning and thus the change in their lives.

Eleanor Cooper is a lifelong resident of Chattanooga and was actively involved in its remarkable renaissance, which began in the early 1980s. She notes that the history is commonly told as a triumph of city planning, with the construction of a down-

town aquarium as the keystone achievement. But Cooper contends that, while the story does include capital projects for

downtown revitalization and development of the waterfront, those physical outcomes were the results of the political changes that made the insights about possibilities and the necessary decisions possible. She tells the story as an ongoing process of civic learning.

Cooper recalls that in Chattanooga in the early 1980s many civic organizations worked toward their distinct missions in support of the arts, education, economic development, or social services. What was lacking was an entity that would bring people together to identify gaps in these missions and, more important, harness the “synergy to change.” Cooper was instrumental in the creation of an organization that developed practices through which people learned about their capacities as a community and redefined it as a result.

That insight has led Cooper and Jim Tucker, Professor of Learning and Leadership at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, to focus on what he calls “learning encounters” that take place through and across the civic and institutional entities of a community. How can they continue to be recognized and encouraged?

Communities are made up of many small, interacting civic spheres bound together in ever-shifting alliances that emerge from the recognition of the interdependence among different concerns. And that recognition depends on practices that facilitate collaborative public work.

public life as decision-making actors. A key appears to be the ability of innovators to recognize and strengthen ties among disparate governmental and nongovernmental organizations, who themselves can be motivated by the recognition of their inability to solve problems without an engaged citizenry.

The result of such civic innovation is generally not the creation of another distinct mission-based organization. Some have appeared to recognize that the challenge is in the cultivation of practices that connect the civic resources that exist. For example, a remarkable group in Chattanooga, Tennessee, is so concerned about being captured by a narrow mission that they call themselves the “Center for Whatever It Needs to Be.”

Of course, what they do will name them. They describe themselves as connectors, developers of civic capacity, which can be used to deal with whatever concern emerges. Their work is based on the insight that communities are made up of many small, interacting civic spheres bound together in ever-shifting alliances that emerge from the recognition of the interdependence among different concerns. And that recognition depends on practices that facilitate collaborative



ADDITIONAL READING FROM KETTERING

The Chattanooga story encourages a recognition of communities as constantly evolving living systems. Communities emerge, and either grow and transform in adaptive ways, or decline in the face of changing conditions. It is in communities that people educate themselves and their children in shared norms and essential skills, protect themselves from threats, and provide the conditions for prosperous exchange.

The capacity that people have to address those goals is largely guided by the quality of the political environment they have created. The primary quality is their ability to interact in ways that facilitate the recognition of collective resources and overcome obstacles to effectively bringing them into public work. Communities that prosper through time have found ways to create conditions for their people to think and act together effectively. Building and maintaining a community is therefore a matter of building and maintaining the relationships that facilitate the civic interactions through which people think and act together.

Thus we think of the political community as nested spheres of communicative exchange. The nodes of the ever-changing network are the organizations, associations, and other places where people interact in a way that builds the capacity of the body politic to think and learn—and thus to effectively act on shared concerns. The qualities of collective thinking are determined by the structure and character of the interactions in and among those associations.

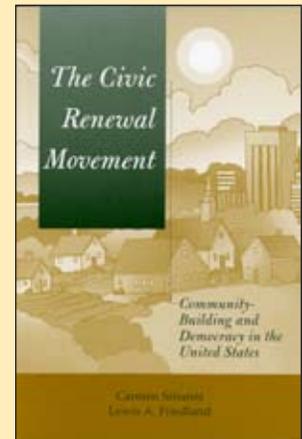
Organizations like the nascent Chattanooga center face difficult challenges. How will they become recognized—and thus named—in their communities? How will they judge the results of their own efforts? How will their efforts be judged by others? We need more opportunities to learn about the challenges civic innovators face in creating and sustaining entities for learning-based change. The connective practices they work through are the key to understanding how communities can continue to develop as places where people can prosper together.

Randall Nielsen is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at nielsen@kettering.org.

THE CIVIC RENEWAL MOVEMENT: Community Building and Democracy in the United States

By Carmen Sirianni and
Lewis A. Friedland

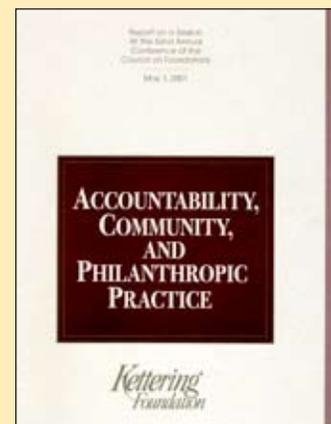
This work explores innovation in various forms of civic engagement, while documenting the renewal of the civic movement and analyzing the power of citizens in their communities. From civic environmentalism to public journalism, Sirianni and Friedland offer unique insights into the future methods and directions of American self-rule while providing a resource-rich guide for future research in the field.



Kettering Foundation
Press | 2005
\$9.95 • 260 pages
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ACCOUNTABILITY, COMMUNITY, AND PHILANTHROPIC PRACTICE

This report is an adaptation of a remarkable conversation about accountability among leaders in the fields of philanthropy and community building that took place at the 52nd annual conference of the Council on Foundations. Participants explored the meaning and significance of accountability in contemporary philanthropy, the practices that aim to ensure accountability, and the challenges of entering into a different kind of relationship with the communities they serve.



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SELECTED WRITINGS OF LI SHENZHI

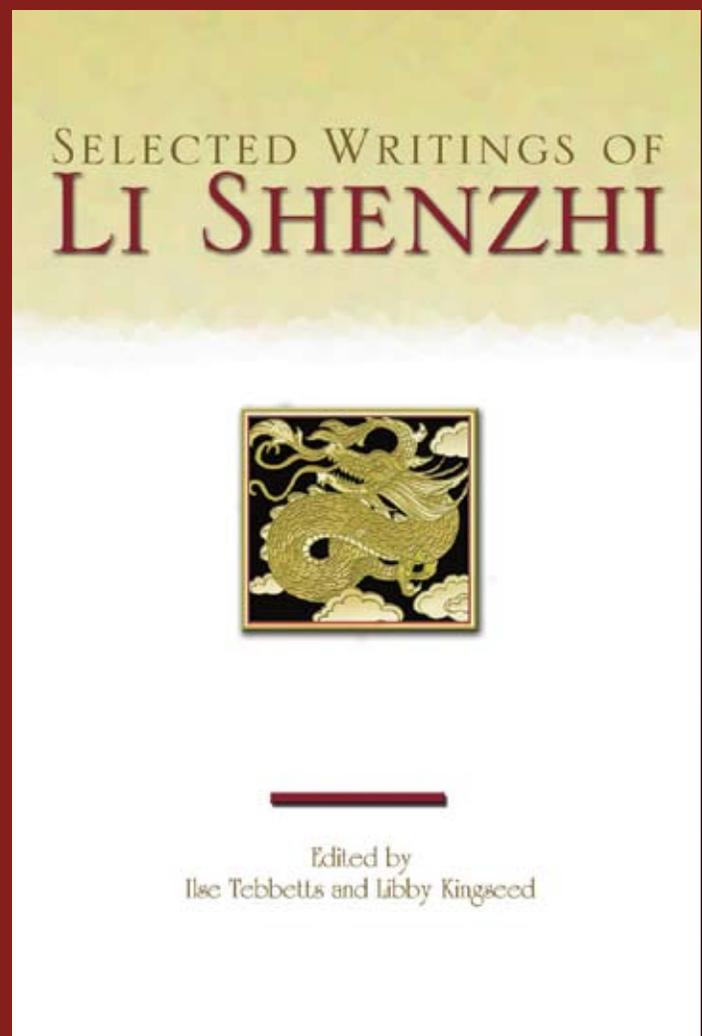
This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shen zhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China's liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

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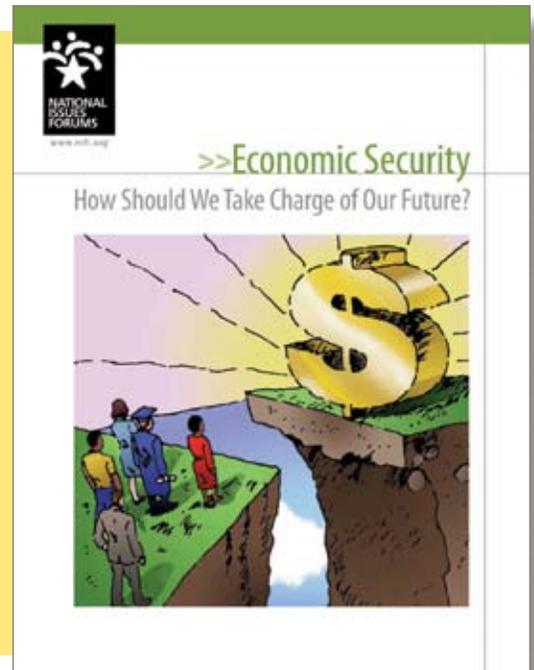
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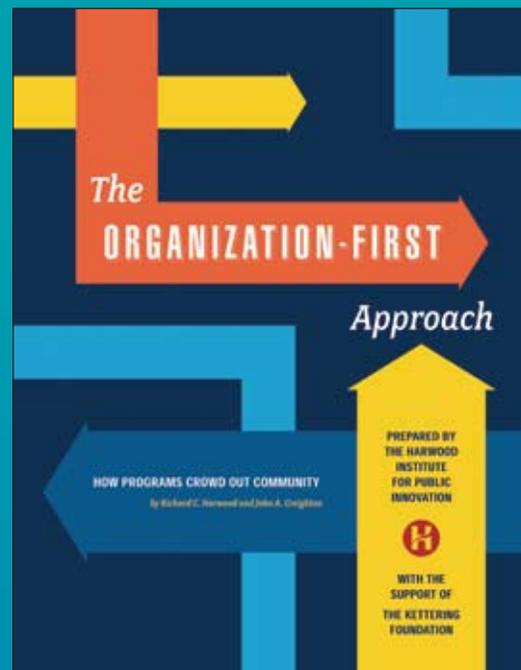
The Organization-First Approach

How Programs Crowd Out Community

by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

"The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization's programs and agenda instead of the community's needs or aspirations."

— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation



Kettering Foundation and the Harwood Institute for Public Innovation | 2009

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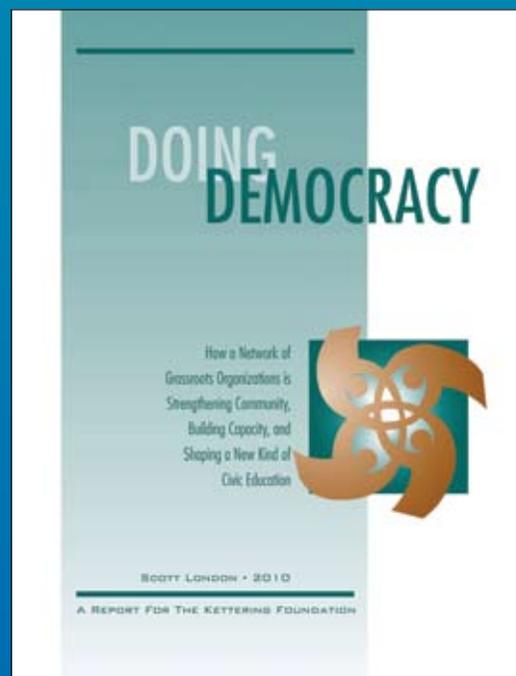
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Doing Democracy

A report for the Kettering Foundation

by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.



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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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