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
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
Self-Organizing and Community Politics

By Phil Stewart

Over the past 25 years, the Kettering Foundation has identified six practices that enable citizens to gain a significant measure of control over their lives. Because they have this benefit, they are called six democratic practices. In shorthand, these practices include “framing” issues so that citizens can see themselves implicated in them, “framing” approaches and alternatives in ways that enable citizens to recognize the tensions among things held valuable that must be resolved to enable community action, and making choices through “public deliberation,” which enables citizens, through listening to diverse perspectives, to work through the inherent tensions in serious issues and come to some form of public judgment. Once a community comes to judgment regarding a course of action, citizens make “covenants” with each other, most often informal and tacit, but sometimes formal and explicit, regarding actions to be taken, singly or collectively. These covenants lead to “mutually complementary public acting” on the collectively agreed change or course of action. In the final step of this “citizens political process,” citizens “learn” from their experience, and the cycle begins again.

All well and good as a model, but when citizens go into their own communities trying either to observe or to implement these citizen-based democratic practices they often encounter two fundamental problems. When they seek to observe real communities in action, only bits and pieces of this process as described often are visible, and most often only the formal, institutional components. Or, one may observe some elements of the process, such as some efforts at public deliberation, but little action or learning. Even more fundamentally, when citizens seek to re-create a citizens democratic process in their own communities they often find that while they know well the “elements” of this process, both they and Kettering lack a deep understanding of the conditions under which democratic practices arise and flourish. Why is this so, and what directions might new research take to address these concerns?

Recent studies of highly complex systems provide a fruitful way to think about the conditions needed for citizens to do the work that only citizens can do. Physicists, mathematicians, and economists have found that some complex systems tend to be highly self-organizing, an unexpected yet highly significant characteristic. The concept of self-organizing systems of interactions may open the way for deeper understanding of the conditions that make citizens democratic practices possible. Indeed, these insights may inform research into why some communities on the Gulf Coast, when abandoned by all levels of government following Katrina, nevertheless, organized themselves to bring about their own recovery.

Similarly, our Russian colleagues, led by professors Ekaterina Lukianova and Svetlana Chernikova of St. Petersburg University, are using insights on self-organizing to understand how remote villages in the far north of Russia, following the collapse of Soviet power in the early 1990s, apparently without any central direction or oversight, self-organized themselves along traditional, pre-Soviet and old Russian social and political lines. While our collaborators and we are at the very early stages of research, we hope to stimulate discourse and dialogue that may enrich this effort. We do this by laying out what scientists are beginning to identify as the core characteristics of self-organizing systems and by suggesting some implications these could have for democratic politics.

At the heart of self-organizing systems are networks of interaction. Networks are informal, nonstructured, and nonhierarchical. An example might be a small group of citizens in the barbershop discussing what to do about the pollutants showing up in their well water. Across town, a totally separate group deliberates over coffee on other aspects of the same issue. No one has called them together.

What pushes citizens to engage in these conversations and in other aspects of citizens politics? It is almost never extrinsic rewards, such as money, nor is it the threat of coercion. Rather, the motivation for the formation and participation in networks is intrinsic, based on self-interest and the need for social contact all humans share. Organic politics takes shape, probably everywhere, because that is the most basic way human beings address collective needs.

There is no leader, no global controller, yet there often are multiple, overlapping connections among the multitude of informal networks that make up the community. Connections are formed among and across networks as a result of the forces of competition and collaboration, resulting in the constant negotiation of relationships. And, as various networks of citizens continue their conversations, a shared sense of purpose may arise, though there would almost never be a formal statement of goals or mission. Rather, common perspectives take shape, though they are continuously subject to change. So, then, how does one find
the “community leaders” through whom to “organize” the community? The theory of self-organizing suggests the notion of what Kettering long ago called “leaderful” communities, communities in which “leaders” emerge at the nodes of networks. These leaders are often invisible to outsiders, as well as to institutional politics, yet they are vital agents in enabling organic politics.

At the intersection between organic and institutional politics, organizations, hierarchical organizations, may tend to form. But, these often tend to be crosscutting, with many levels and sorts of weblike interactions and channels of communication. The most influential organizations in citizens politics often will not be formal, nor will they be highly visible. Rather, they tend to be those informal networks, with changing and overlapping “membership.” Indeed, when citizen-based networks turn themselves into formal entities, they often tend to lose their roots among citizens in the heat of internal organizational demands for fundraising and the need to demonstrate “accountability” more to sources of funds than to the citizens in whose name and interest they formed in the first place.

Self-organizing systems, on the other hand, retain their vitality through “continual adaptation.” The lack of formal structures, missions, and obligations means that behaviors, actions, strategies, and processes can be revised continuously as a result of ongoing citizen interaction. The self-organizing system of politics continuously adapts to changing stimuli, needs, and opportunities. Citizens in self-organizing systems are not, however, so changing and formless as to be unable to act. Rather, through continual, multilayered, weblike interactions, focused around issues of common concern, citizens appear to develop an implicit obligation to assist others, which can be called a covenantal reciprocity. This, in turn, may be related to the desire to assure oneself the benefits of getting assistance. Mutual reciprocity, mutual implicit undertakings appear to be a key to action in organic politics.

One may be tempted to say, democratic citizens politics, organic politics is too complex to understand, let alone attempt to create. Give me the “simplicity” of institutional politics. At least then I know who the actors are, as well as the rules of the game! Yet, there is hope that these suggestive insights about the nature of self-organizing communities, drawn from the hard sciences, may enable us to better understand how some communities react when abandoned by all official institutions following, for example, Hurricane Katrina, or as in the case of many small communities in the north of Russia left totally to fend for themselves after the fall of communism. Because in some communities self-organizing did arise and did bring to bear complex underlying networks of relationships and ways of acting and thus created a new capacity for restoration of not only the physical community but also the soul of the community. Such is the challenge as we set out on this new research path.

Phil Stewart is a Kettering Foundation associate. He can be reached at philstewart16@hotmail.com.

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Self-Organizing and Community Politics

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explored in Connections
in Kettering’s Readers’ Forum at www.kettering.org
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.

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

Essays from Faculty

Reflections from the Field
Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship through Deliberative Dialogue

By Katy J. Harriger and Jill J. McMillan

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—David Mathews, president, Kettering Foundation

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Findings from the Classroom
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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