

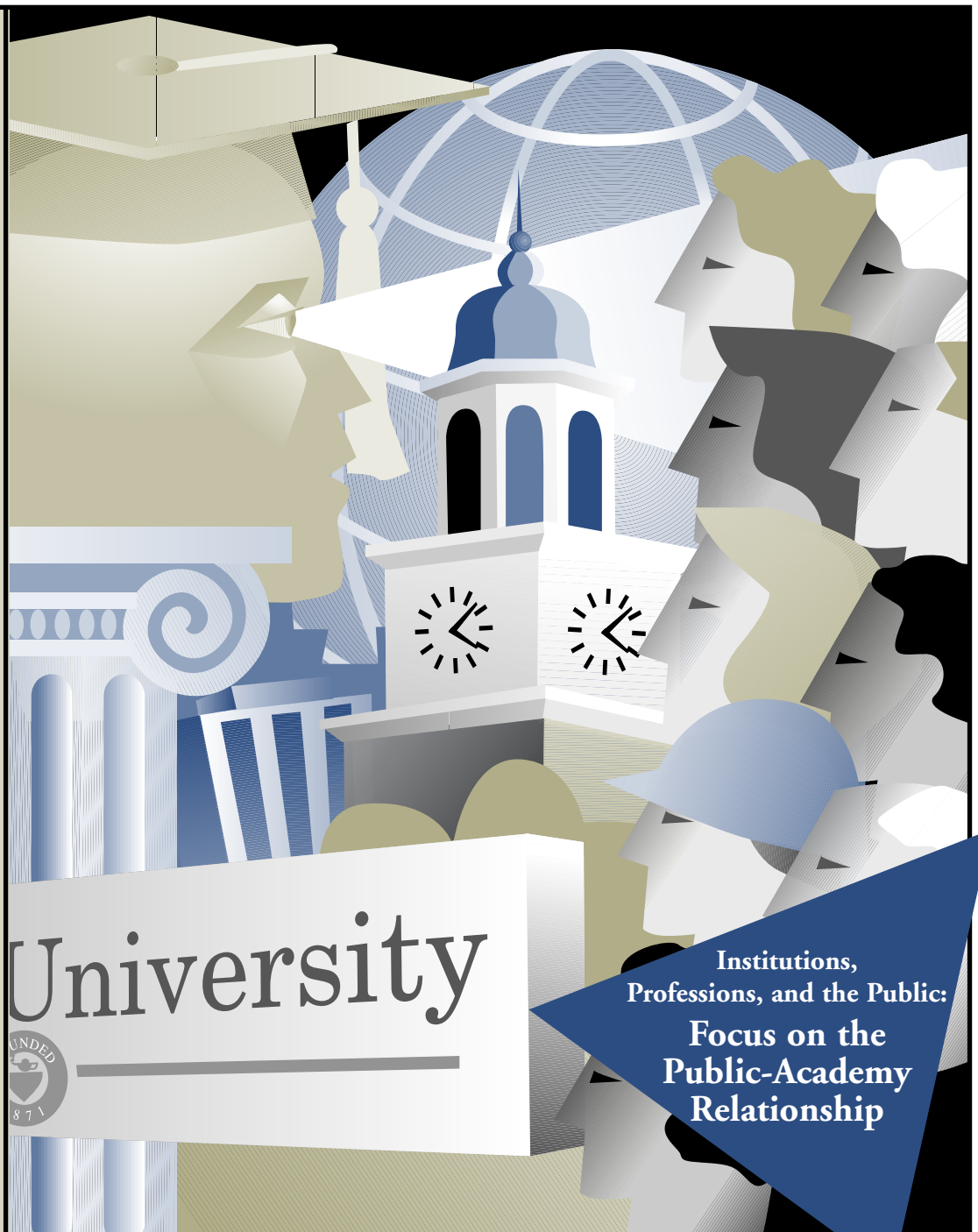
# CONNECTIONS

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# College Students as Citizens

By *Maxine S. Thomas*



*Maxine S. Thomas*

One of the key assumptions in Kettering Foundation research is that democracies require institutions that enjoy the confidence of citizens and serve to strengthen civil society. Unfortunately, many of our major institutions do not enjoy the public's confidence. Higher education is one of such major institutions. There is a disconnect between higher education and the public that goes beyond the institutions and extends to the students as well. Since Kettering focuses on putting an engaged citizenry back into our communities, we are particularly interested in learning about the way students carry out their citizenship roles. It is important, then, that we develop research focused on institutions of higher education and their efforts to encourage students to become political actors.

Current research at the foundation explores the effects of experiences with public-politics ideas and practices on students and on college campuses. Our work on the effects of deliberation on college students' attitudes toward politics includes issue framing and deliberation work with faculty and student leaders at Miami University (Ohio) and Wake Forest University.

Denny Roberts at Miami University has brought students together to frame an issue of concern to fraternities and sororities. The research will result in an issue booklet, a narrative report on the forums, and a report on efforts to introduce public

deliberation into Greek organizations on other campuses.

Katy Harriger and her colleagues at Wake Forest University recruited 30 to 40 first-year Wake Forest students

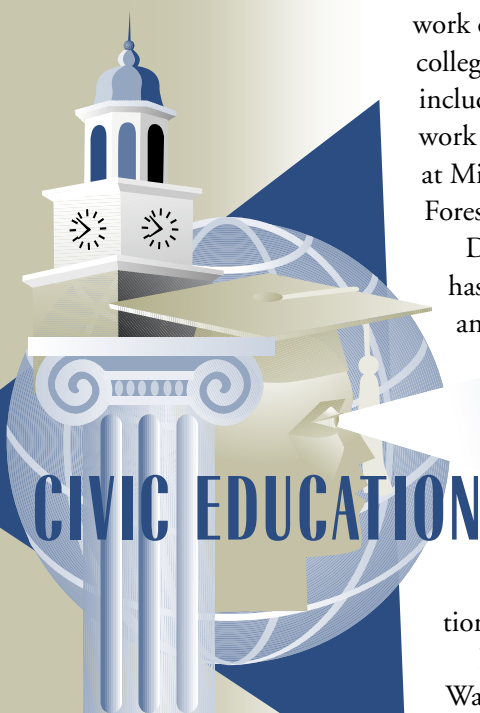
to participate in a four-year study of the effects of public deliberation on college students. Now in their third year, students participate in deliberative forums in classrooms, on campus, and in the local community. Students were interviewed at the beginning of the study and will be interviewed again at the end. Each year, following deliberations, study participants take part in focus groups. Comparison groups of students who are not involved in the study are also convened each year. Annual reports document the project's progress and share interim findings. A final monograph-length report will be issued upon conclusion of the study next year.

In 1993, the foundation commissioned Rich Harwood to talk with college students about politics. Now, more than 10 years later, it is high time to revisit these conversations. An update of that work is currently under way.

It is this kind of effort, and more, that is needed to ensure that students are prepared to carry out their democratic roles on campus and, more importantly, in their communities after they leave school. But there are downsides as well.

Clearly, it is important to know what students think and to examine how best to prepare them to participate in our democracy. But focusing the foundation's research on college students considerably narrows the scope of the research to higher education and civic engagement. For one thing, most Americans are not college graduates. And, for another, such research bypasses more fundamental questions concerning the changing role of the academy itself in the larger life of the community.

*Maxine S. Thomas is secretary and general counsel of the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached by E-mail at [thomas@kettering.org](mailto:thomas@kettering.org).*



*The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is an operating foundation — not a grant-giving 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 — the study of what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required for strengthening public life. Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research corporation supported by a \$250 million endowment.*

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