A REVIEW
of
KF Research:

The challenges of democracy—getting up into the stands

The range of our understanding of democracy—civic renewal

Insights about democracy—insights about changing practice
Reviewing a Review
The challenge is to piece together the whole story emerging from Kettering research.
David Mathews .......................................................... page 3

The View from Above: Looking at the Major Challenges to Democracy
By getting up into the stands, it is possible to take a broader view, note long-range trends, and distinguish between different types of problems confronting democracy.
Sideline Citizens, Privatizing the Public
Keith Melville ........................................................... page 7
The Problem of Moral Disagreement and the Necessity of Democratic Politics
Noëlle McAfee ......................................................... page 10

A Proper Focus: Analyzing Today’s Civic Movements
By looking at the positive countermeasures that are now attempting to reverse these downward trends, civic renewal can expand the range of our understanding of democracy.
A Movement to Revitalize Democracy in America
Carmen Sirianni and Lewis A. Friedland .......................... page 13
Civic Initiatives in American Democracy
Peter Levine ............................................................ page 17
Five Emerging Practices in the Scholarship of Engagement
Derek Barker ........................................................... page 20

Gaining Insights: Traveling in the Company of Others
By bringing together the insights of others about changing practice, the pieces begin to interlink into a whole story of democracy.
Bridging the Divide Between the Public and Government
Philip Lurie and Alice Diebel ........................................ page 23
Owensboro Revisited
Tony Wharton ........................................................ page 27
A Different Kind of Politics, with a Long Tradition
Nicholas V. Longo .................................................... page 29
Objective Three

Owensboro Revisited

What Do the People of Owensboro, Kentucky, Know about Deliberation?

It’s a reasonable question to ask. This city on the Ohio River in western Kentucky has been convening public deliberations since the fall of 1998 to address issues like kids and crime, race, law enforcement, changing families, community visioning, a proposed city-county merger, Social Security, land use, and health care. At least three nonprofit groups have been launched to facilitate this deliberative effort. Suzanne Morse wrote about Owensboro’s efforts at deliberation in her book, *Smart Communities: How Citizens and Local Leaders Can Use Strategic Thinking to Build a Brighter Future* (Jossey-Bass, 2004) and in an article for the Kettering Foundation in the Winter 2005 issue of *Connections*. Currently, David Ryfe is examining the efforts of one of these nonprofit groups, Community Conversations, Inc. The following is an interim report based on Ryfe’s notes and interviews.

A Brief History

A survey in 1995 by the Owensboro Chamber of Commerce and the local newspaper, Ryfe says, “showed that a majority of town citizens [was] deeply alienated from the political process.” Robert Putnam, Michael Sandel, Richard Harwood, and many others would tell you that this is a problem not confined to Owensboro.

Ryfe reports that for some years people had felt the town was run by “a small group of white men.” The community apparently had been satisfied with that arrangement. But in the mid-1990s, as the challenges posed by health care, a growing immigrant population, and a changing economy mounted, pressure for a different kind of politics increased. Citizens found that to deal with their problems, they needed a public that could not form in their political environment. Searching for alternatives, they decided to try deliberation. But the change only became possible when citizens reached a point of readiness, an openness to change. When conditions were right, the urge to deliberate found fertile ground.

Deliberation Is an Ongoing Political Act

Taylor Willingham, an Austin, Texas, moderator of deliberative forums, said once, “The act of engaging in a deliberative forum [is] a political act, not just a conversation.” She calls deliberation “the act that came before the act.” The citizens of Owensboro are actively exploring that line of thought. Ryfe calls the Owensboro experience an act of imagination. The people of Owensboro are imagining themselves as citizens—and if that sounds somewhat gloomy, think of the alternative too often seen in the United States, people who do not imagine themselves as citizens.

The Owensboro citizens who first began to learn about deliberation, Ryfe says, began “to see deliberation as a way of untangling
the knots tied by decision-making done in the mode of ordinary politics? This, of course, defines deliberation in relation to “ordinary politics,” but it does get at the idea of “sorting through,” one of the most valuable elements of deliberation. Using such skills in the community may be more difficult to quantify than “ordinary politics,” but it is a profound change.

In 2000, Community Conversations, Inc. was founded as a means to promote deliberation. According to Ryfe:

The eleven founders of CCI . . . drew early and often from their participation in a 20-month community politics initiative. . . . Over these 20 months, the group engaged in a series of exercises that had it organizing and facilitating forums, and naming and framing issues.

The people of Owensboro are imagining themselves as citizens—and if that sounds somewhat gloomy, think of the alternative too often seen in the United States, people who do not imagine themselves as citizens.

At the same time, the Public Life Foundation of Owensboro (PLFO) began the “People’s Health Project,” a longitudinal effort to explore issues of inequity in access to health care. According to Suzanne Morse’s research, this effort was “an opportunity for citizens from all parts of the community to identify their chief concerns and priorities and to gauge the kinds of action steps the community would be inclined to support.” PLFO organized 52 forums throughout the city and county in 2001-2002. That effort in turn produced the third Owensboro nonprofit group, Citizens Health Care Advocates (CHCA), which works to sustain deliberation on health issues.

Objective Three
Deliberation Is Not Just a Precursor to Action, but an Essential Parallel Activity

What we see in Owensboro is a recognition that deliberation is never completed, there is never a time when deliberation is no longer necessary. Consider how the community has dealt with two different outcomes. Over the last several years, the region has repeatedly explored some kind of city-county merger of local governments, and deliberation has been employed repeatedly. Kathy Christie, former executive director of CCI, said of one such effort, “One of the group told the newspaper that the group had gotten further in this one meeting than the two governments had gotten in the last 10 years on the issue. Another participant said this was his fourth meeting at trying to make a decision and this was the closest they had ever come.” Ryfe notes that some of those attempts, while making progress, have not yet resolved the inherent tensions. Yet the community did not regard this as a failure and walk away. The merger deliberations continued.

On the other hand, the People’s Health Project produced concrete results: two new studies of health care in the area, a task force on the issue, and the creation of a new position in the hospital to address some of the issues raised. Most significantly, the community did not regard this success as a “case closed.” Rather, the community formed CHCA to perpetuate deliberation on this topic. Owensboro, then, may be developing a habit of deliberation, recognizing it not simply as something on the way to action, but as work with its own rewards.

The habit of sustained deliberation must overcome nondeliberative routines. If we celebrate Owensboro’s successes, we must be forthright about the challenges it faces as well. Ryfe reports that CCI has struggled to establish a culture of deliberation in the face of those who consider it “too time consuming, too academic, . . . too much talk, not enough action.” In addition, many in the CCI organization felt the process was ineffective. They wanted to do something with the information gathered in the deliberation process. They wanted to “take the information and try to convince some state public policy or . . . influence what happens at the federal government or local government.” Obviously this attitude clashed with others who were more concerned about the process or who felt it was important to “just allow people to talk.”

Ryfe also raises issues of leadership, teaching, and inheritability as relevant to this point. At CCI, after several of the original eleven members cycled off the board and were replaced, new members began to say that deliberation, as NIF understands it, was too laborious and process-focused. They wanted to move more quickly toward solutions. “New Board members tended to see the process as an impediment to ‘getting things done,’ though of course they often disagreed about what, precisely, ought to be done.”

While it appears that a critical mass of citizens in the community has adopted deliberation as a habitual political act, it is by no means certain. Old routines, such as limiting political talk and action to a few people, and expecting tangible results and explicit civic change are seductive because they offer efficiencies that deliberation as a habitual political act, it is by no means certain. Old routines, such as limiting political talk and action to a few people, and expecting tangible results and explicit civic change are seductive because they offer efficiencies that deliberation cannot always match. If citizens return to deliberation again and again as a new form of politics, they can overcome such routines. That may be happening in Owensboro. Experience indicates, however, that the organizations they have formed to invigorate public life cannot take it for granted just yet.

Tony Wharton is a journalist and writer. He can be reached by e-mail at twharton@comcast.net.
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research 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 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 corporation supported by a $250 million endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's Web site at www.kettering.org.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459-2799. The articles in Connections reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or its officers.

Editors
David S. Frech
Libby Ringseed

Copy Editor
Lisa Boone-Berry

Graphic Design and Production
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

Illustrations
Long's Graphic Design, Inc.