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

By Bob McKenzie

The David Mathews Center for Civic Life (formerly the Alabama Center for Civic Life) began work in 2007 to connect a number of community research initiatives in regard to educational resources and economic development issues. This report concerns the way in which these research efforts were combined. Community forums have been integral to these efforts. A first lesson about this sort of work is that it takes time.

One base for the effort was preexisting work with the Southern Growth Policies Board (SGPB). In 1999, SGPB officers met with Kettering Foundation staff to explore application of deliberative forums to their work. The pilot project was framing an issue book, Pathways for Prosperity. Following that first effort, each year SGPB had just been formed as a 501(c)(3) for the purpose of developing infrastructure and habits of deliberative decision making in the state. ACCL representatives met with the governor’s chief of staff to offer aid in developing as many community forums as possible in the host state. They then met with the head of the Alabama Economic and Community Development Agency to arrange for a state report (in addition to forwarding forum results to SGPB for inclusion in its report).

ACCL turned to former partners to develop the forums. The Economic Development Institute (EDI) at Auburn University was already engaged in Kettering Foundation research in a rural Black Belt community on that community’s awareness of its capacities to develop economically. EDI director, Joe Sumners, helped organize and moderate forums. Both EDI and ACCL worked with the several councils of government regional planning and development agencies and with the Auburn Center for Arts and Humanities (CAH) to arrange forum sites. In early 2005, fifteen forums were conducted, involving approximately 430 citizens all across the state. The state report of findings was distributed at the SGPB annual meeting in June.

In the meantime, ACCL was working with CAH on two projects. One involved a core of public librarians and community partners to field test distance-learning support modules to enhance understanding of deliberative practices. These modules were being developed by Ed Florey, Chip Cooper, and Rick Dowling. The networking of public libraries as sites for community decision making was a sought-for byproduct. The other involved intensive work in Anniston to test whether developing community histories of schools would enhance contemporary community support of its educational resources.

As these projects were developing, ACCL was also briefing the directors, staff, and chairs of the governor’s Black Belt Action Commission about the application of community forums to its work. ACCL staff met with several of the committees of the commission. In May 2005, the ACCL president conducted a forum in Selma for the committees on education and health with citizens from all across the Black Belt. This forum was organized by the Black Belt Community Foundation.

The ACCL experiences with these projects led to an ACCL proposal to the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) to develop an issue book for community use. ACCL wanted to develop “a national issue of local application.” In other words, the issue book would not be one that asked for citizen “input” on a national policy issue. It would be directed at decisions each local community must make in regard to its educational resources for economic and workforce development, not just its schools.

Developing an NIF issue book involved several meetings at the Kettering Foundation with other entities, framing issues of local concern. The effort was supported by focus group research conducted by Doble and Associates in Birmingham, Pittsburgh, and Silicon Valley.
Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs

Valley. In addition, ACCL also contracted with an independent researcher to conduct supporting research in Alabama. Lawrence B. Durham interviewed 27 business persons and economic and workforce development professionals in Alabama. The object of this supporting research was to help construct an Alabama version of the NIF issue book for use with the emerging networks of public librarians and councils of government.

ACCL hired a researcher/writer for the issue book. Elizabeth Renicks conducted personal research and worked closely with Dobie and Associates and Durham to develop data and illustrations for the issue book. She also solicited pertinent community illustrations from the NIF network.

An interesting part of the story is the way in which the focus of the issue book evolved. The original target of this effort was the subject of workforce development. That focus evolved as the research proceeded.

Coincidentally, SGPB’s annual issue for 2007 was on workforce development. The SGPB framing was the starting point for research. The SGPB issue map sketched three possible approaches.

1. Focus on educational achievement.
2. Focus on serving industry.
3. Focus on workforce traits.

As the ACCL research proceeded, the focus shifted from workforce development (more a professional expression) to preparing today’s kids for tomorrow’s jobs (a more public expression). The ACCL research and framing sought to break potential discussion out of a concentration on schools alone. Initially, ACCL developed four possible approaches. They were:

1. Focus on a firm foundation.
2. Focus on academic competition.
3. Focus on community first.
4. Focus on creativity.

In developing the issue book for NIF, the fourth possible approach was folded into the perceived strengths and weaknesses of the other three approaches. This method of handling a valid fourth perspective is often used in issue book design. Three-approach issue books can be more easily conducted in the time most commonly available for a single forum.

The issue book is titled Preparing Today’s Kids for Tomorrow’s Jobs: What Should Our Community Do? and is now available through NIF.

Test forums were conducted in Alabama in the fall of 2007, using an adapted Alabama version that included the original four approaches. These forums were conducted in Anniston, Collinsville, and Chatom. Each used as convenors the public librarians recruited by CAH as a pilot group for testing of the distance-learning support modules. Each forum sparked additional interest in community forums as a means of engaging citizens on local education and other community issues.

A second lesson for this sort of work is that it takes networking. Now that the NIF issue book is available with a starter video and a moderator’s guide, ACCL (now the Mathews Center (MC)) and CAH (now the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for Arts and Humanities (CMD CAH)) will cooperatively develop a series of forums next fall and spring in five pilot communities. These communities will use the issue book and closely related NIF issue books on What Is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools? and Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap? These issue books all relate to how a community applies its total educational resources to developing its economic potential. These communities will also use the SGPB issue for 2009. The focus of which is yet to be announced.

The umbrella for this pilot project will be an MC program entitled Alabama Issues Forums (AIF). AIF will be built community by community; that is, each community will be encouraged to develop its own issues forums identity. For example, AIF can include Anniston Community Forums, Chatom Community Forums, Collinsville Community Forums, Elba Community Forums, and Prattville Community Forums.

Each pilot community will have a convenor/organizer (already committed). These convenor/organizers include public librarians, a community foundation executive, a pastor, and a cooperative extension agent. Each will recruit a shadow moderator for initial forums. MC and CMD CAH staff will serve initially as moderators supported by graduate assistants affiliated with CMD CAH. The shadow moderators will move into moderator roles as they gain understanding, skill, and confidence. MC and CMD CAH will equip graduate assistants, student interns (from both Auburn University and the University of Alabama), and other interested citizens from the participating communities to serve as recorders and reporters for community forums.

MC and CMD CAH will jointly conduct at American Village in Montevallo a workshop of convenor/organizers, shadow moderators, recorders, and reporters. This workshop will be conducted under the concept and title of Coaching Community Innovation (CCI). It will stress understanding and skill in interrelated democratic practices, not just moderating. Attendees may include persons from other than the pilot communities. The on-site CCI work will be augmented with distance-learning support modules developed by MC. MC and CMD CAH will work together to produce a public report of the
forums. This public report will be released to the media at a wrap-up activity, also at American Village.

Another project in the planning stages is to invite the business persons and workforce development professionals interviewed by Durham to form a panel to react to the findings from the community forums. The idea of creating an Alabama version of the NIF book has been suspended, but the framework may be used for further interaction with the Durham interviewees in nonforum venues.

A third lesson for this sort of work is that it takes looking into the future for how to keep it going and expanding. The wrap-up activity at American Village will also serve as a kickoff for the next AIF cycle. Tentative plans are to develop that cycle around one or more public health issues, using a different set of pilot communities. The intent is that each group of pilot communities may continue the local issues forums programs they have created. This approach aims at growing AIF into a statewide entity with multiple cooperating institutions and communities.

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The Organization-First Approach: How Intermediary Organizations Approach Civic Engagement and Communities (John A. Creighton and Richard C. Harwood); The Contagion of Inwardness (Richard C. Harwood)

By Connie Crockett

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How can people organize themselves to deal with public challenges? Poverty, homelessness, drug abuse, and violence are the kinds of wicked problems we all recognize, but often feel helpless to act upon. “Intermediary” community-based organizations—organizations that span the gap between formal institutions and the citizens they serve—have historically been a vehicle through which citizens can begin to address the types of challenges that can’t be solved by institutions alone. Do these boundary-spanning organizations recognize the roles they play in allowing the public to do its work? How do they understand the roles of citizens in public life? How do they practice meaningful public engagement?

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1 The Alabama Center for Civic Life was incorporated as a 501(c)(3) in 2005. The center was renamed the David Mathews Center for Civic Life in January 2008.
2 The EDI research has resulted in a series of reports, summarized in “Building Community in Smalltown” (2007).
3 In 2007, this center was renamed the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for Arts and Humanities. It is the outreach division for the Auburn University College of Liberal Arts.
4 Public issues related to education and schools are difficult to frame. A dominant tendency is to look only at schools, not overall community educational resources. Over the years, the NIF network has made use of several issue books: Regaining the Competitive Edge: Are We Up to the Job? (1990), Education: How Do We Get the Results We Want? (1992), Contested Values: Tug-of-War in the School Yard (1994), Public Schools: Are They Making the Grade? (1999), What Is the 21st Century Mission for Our Public Schools? (2007), and Too Many Children Left Behind: How Can We Close the Achievement Gap? (2007).
5 For further information on American Village, consult www.americanvillage.org.
READERS’ FORUM

HAVE YOUR SAY... Discuss the ideas

explored in Connections

in Kettering’s Readers’ Forum at
www.kettering.org
 Essays from Faculty

*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

Reflections from the Field

*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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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.

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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