

Letting Foundation

CONNECTIONS

Winter 2006



CONNECTIONS

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Reclaiming Our Institutions

Challenge Three

Further research contends that many of our institutions are distressed because citizens indicate they have lost considerable confidence in them.

Professionals, Institutions, and Community Challenges

By Randall Nielsen

A fundamental obstacle to dealing with the challenges people face in communities is that the practices of professionals and their organizations often fail to recognize people and their civic organizations as actors. This, in part, explains the widespread reports that people feel less confidence in the legitimacy of professional institutions. Perhaps more important, it can explain the lack of confidence people report in the capacity of their communities to effectively engage the problems they face. The Kettering Foundation has documented this in its research into the ways people interact with institutions of journalism, higher education,

public administration, philanthropy, the law, and public schools.

In the last year, the foundation convened a workshop to explore the efforts of some professional organizations and associations to relate more effectively in—and thus strengthen—the civic life in communities where they work. Participants are motivated by the sense that the problems they face in communities are increasingly of the type that cannot be solved by unilateral institutional actions or traditional political organizing. Issues like drug and alcohol abuse, economic development, and the education of young people cannot be dealt with through institutional means alone. To use a term familiar to readers of *Connections*, work-

shop participants are trying to establish and support more effective forms of *public acting* in communities. We can report this as part of a larger finding: a growing set of professionals, professional associations, and professional organizations are coming to see limits to their ability to unilaterally deal with the challenges that define the missions of their profession.

Perhaps due to their distinct locus in communities, administrators of public schools have recognized these difficulties for some time. The last decade has seen a growing interest in *public engagement*. This term has come to include a wide variety of interpretations. Not surprisingly, many amount to old wine in new bottles. They focus on parents, with the terms of the engagement being the school-based issues faced by educators. The promise of such efforts is clear: given the current tendency to view education as a consumer good, it is helpful to be better connected to the customers. However, the downside is equally clear: a focus on parents leaves out the majority of people in most communities. That can be critical at times when larger levels of community support are needed. For example, when a school levy is up for renewal, parents alone do not decide the issue.

Seeing public schools as providers of services to otherwise passive consumers

Challenge Three

has additional dangers for administrators. In the absence of a widely shared sense of responsibility for the challenges related to education, schools are often held accountable for responsibilities that they simply cannot fulfill. Unless people—parents as well as non-parents—come to recognize and choose among the tradeoffs inherent in the decisions that they and school administrators face, efforts to improve communication can result in ever-increasing sets of conflicting demands. Most administrators know from experience that, in the absence of a community of people that are willing and able to make coherent collective choices regarding obstacles related to education, increasing opportunities for engagement with individuals can do as much harm as good.

That insight—seen in similar ways across a variety of professions—is what connects the participants of the foundation's Civic Engagement Workshop. The focus is on what has been termed *public capital*—the structure and practices through which communities work. In some communities where public capital is lacking, the symptoms are seen as a lack of civic participation. Acting on community challenges tends to be thin, ephemeral,



How do professionals and their organizations impact the capacity of people to deal with the challenges they face in communities? Kettering Foundation research has developed a lens for understanding how communities work that focuses on a set of key practices that together constitute public working. The research has helped professionals to recognize that

the ways that issues are named and the ways that options for acting are framed are keys to the qualities of the interactions that follow.

Professionals and their organizations play a key, though often not self-conscious, role in naming

issues and laying out options for their engagement. The effects they have on communities' capacity to act is not always positive. That point and the general lack of self-consciousness is worth noting because it highlights a way for professionals to positively affect communities' ability to collectively recognize and deal with challenges. Across the professions, we are seeing a growing recognition of the power of the role professionals play in naming and framing issues.

In the reports from workshop participants, we have seen two types of

experiments. One type involves distinct projects to name and frame issues of professional interest and organize the convening of public forums. The resulting "public voice" is used to inform the organization's work and, in some cases, used to encourage complementary acting by people and civic organizations. Another type of experiment focuses less on new "projects" *per se*, but involves a more general interrogation of professional routines. Rather than ask, How could we engage the public? they ask, How does what we do affect the capacity for effective engagement to occur in the public? The results are explorations of the roles they can play in creating public capital that will remain beyond any distinct project.

Attempting to change professional routines is difficult. The most immediate challenges for most of the workshop participants are the incentives that govern the routines of their own organizations. Organizations trying to do something different run headlong into habits embedded in techniques that are resistant to change. Given the increasing number of professional organizations that are attempting some type of public engagement, more research into their motivations and the obstacles they face promises to make a valuable contribution.

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and disconnected. In other communities the symptoms are quite different—rather than a lack of interest or participation by individuals and interest groups, communities can be paralyzed by distinct, competing actions that pull against each other. The difficulty is to bring what often seems to be a cacophony into a harmonious concert of activities. What is missing in either case are civic, professional, and institutional efforts that complement and support each other. The challenge faced by many professionals is more one of "public building" than public engagement.

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.

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