OUR HISTORY

Journeys in KF Research
How Kettering Discovered Democracy
David Mathews

Key Events in KF History
Collette McDonough

The Issue Guide and the Issue Forum: Political Inventions
Brad Rourke

A Treasure Chest about to Open
Nicholas A. Felts

From Public Policy Institutes to Centers for Public Life: Transforming People and Communities
Alice Diebel

At Franklin Pierce, Learning to Make a Difference
Joni Doherty

Town versus Gown? Not Here
Sara A. Mehltretter Drury

Kettering’s Evolving Understanding—and My Own
Ray Minor

Two Decades of Learning with Communities
Phillip D. Lurie

Public Education as Community Work
Connie Crockett, Phillip D. Lurie, and Randall Nielsen

Listening for, and Finding, a Public Voice
Bob Daley

Informing or Engaging: What Is the Role of Higher Education in Strengthening Public Life?
Derek W. M. Barker

Scholars and Scholarship with Ties to Communities
Ellen Knutson and Ileana Marin

KF and Journalism: On Again! Off Again! On Again!
David Holwerk

From Civil Society to Civil Investing, and Beyond
John Dedrick

Creative Acts as Democratic Work
Paloma Dallas and Melinda Gilmore

The Dartmouth Conference
Harold Saunders and Philip Stewart

Kettering and China: Thirty Years and Counting
Maxine Thomas

Kettering’s Archives Hold a Quarter-Mile of History
Maura Casey

Kettering Campus Vignettes
Brian Cobb, Mindy LaBreck, and Terry Nichols
Informing or Engaging:

What Is the Role of Higher Education in Strengthening Public Life?

Kettering’s work in higher education has focused on engagement and engaged scholarship.

Higher education is a key institution in our democracy, charged with shaping the next generation of our citizenry. From Kettering’s perspective, future citizens need more than information if they are to be effective actors in public life. They need to be able to come together with other citizens—across partisan divides—and make a difference in their communities. However, a key challenge underlying Kettering’s research is how higher education views its civic role. That is, as these institutions have evolved, rather than an engaged citizenry, they have in most cases narrowed their role to developing an informed citizenry.

To address this challenge, over time Kettering has developed a small network of college campuses that are experimenting with deliberative approaches to civic education and public forms of scholarship that integrate the civic aspirations of academics into their professional work.

Kettering’s research on higher education, of course, was part of the foundation’s shift from technical innovation to democracy and citizenship. At the beginning of this shift, the foundation faced a critical puzzle. The dominant narrative was that the public was apathetic and uninterested in politics. Low rates of voter turnout and opinion data on attitudes toward government reinforced this view. There
seemed to be no demand for the type of democracy that Kettering saw as increasingly necessary to address our nation’s problems. A key insight helped shape Kettering’s research agenda for the next 20 years: perhaps what appeared as apathy and disinterest was in fact a deep sense of frustration and alienation. While the public may be disgusted with politics-as-usual, perhaps citizens could be reenergized by a different kind of politics worthy of their time and attention. Indeed, researchers in Kettering’s network found evidence for this hypothesis in a series of focus group reports of public attitudes toward politics. Following the landmark *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America* study of the public-at-large published in 1991, the Harwood Institute found this phenomenon to be especially true of students in the 1993 study, *College Students Talk Politics*. While frustrated with politics-as-usual, college students were enthusiastic about working together in their communities and engaging in public discourse across partisan divides. As David Mathews wrote in his foreword to *College Students Talk Politics*, “This study found that students have retained a remarkable ‘instinct’ for democratic practice; there is a buried civic consciousness in students.”

Sparked by the idea that people had a latent potential for civic awakening, Kettering began thinking about the possibilities for higher education to provide the sorts of experiences that students seemed to want. The foundation became aware of the larger possibilities for higher education’s civic role by looking historically at the major movements in higher education, from the liberal arts colleges of the founding era, to land-grant and minority-serving institutions founded after the Civil War, and community colleges in the 1950s. In “The Public and Its Colleges,” an article that appeared in the 1998 issue of the *Higher Education Exchange*, Claire Snyder-Hall observed that, in each case, the colleges evolved in the context of larger civic movements. They were responding to particular groups, each demanding not only technical knowledge or vocational training but also education as full participants in our democracy. Although it seems strange to speak in this way now, at the most transformative moments in its history, higher education has been itself a civic movement.

Stirrings within the Academy

While Kettering was just beginning to focus its attention on higher education in the 1990s, within the academy interest in civic engagement was also beginning to take shape. A consensus emerged that universities seemed to have narrowed their vision and lost their way. Based on interviews with faculty at the University of Minnesota, Harry Boyte observed a widespread disenchantment among academics with their disconnection from public life—even among academics who joined the profession with hopes of their ideas contributing to social change. Academics began talking once again about civic education and their democratic role. In 1999, a “civic movement” was formally declared with a document now known as the Wingspread Declaration, in which a group of college presidents committed to an expansive...
vision of an informed and engaged citizenry. By the turn of the millennium, nearly every campus had courses and offices devoted to civic engagement.

Although something was stirring in higher education, from Kettering's point of view, what it actually meant for democracy had yet to be determined.

Kettering has developed its experiments based on a different, and, we believe, more complete concept of higher education and its civic mission. This approach reflects a fundamentally different understanding of civic engagement.

Would this civic movement aim to educate students in their civic capacities, to participate in politics and public life, to negotiate conflict and work together across their differences? Or would it teach students to make a difference by using their knowledge as individuals through direct service? Arguably, both goals represent coherent and complementary visions for higher education and its civic mission. Indeed, during the formation of the civic movement in higher education, both visions were part of the conversation. However, Kettering realized the civic engagement movement had become more focused on the application of expert knowledge rather than the relational norms and habits needed to revamp our politics; in the categories of the philosopher Jürgen Habermas, it had prioritized instrumental reason over communicative rationality.

The civic education of college students, while much improved, has mostly emphasized individual community-service experiences. As Rick Battistoni, himself a proponent and practitioner of service learning, has argued in the 2014 issue of the Higher Education Exchange, such efforts are "a mile wide and an inch deep." By emphasizing such programs, higher education sends students the signal that individual service is a more satisfying and direct way of making a difference than working through politics and public life. Students are taught to see communities as recipients of their expertise rather than ecosystems rich with their own civic assets. More than ever before, students have opportunities to apply their knowledge in community contexts, but higher education seems to have reached its limit when it comes to educating their civic skills and capacities.

Similarly, academics in outreach and extension fields are talking about civic engagement more than ever before. However, what they mean by civic engagement remains unclear. Again, the dissemination of expert knowledge brings academics into communities and constitutes an important part of their civic mission. But might they also see a role for themselves in strengthening the civic capacities of communities? Reflecting on a series of research exchanges with cooperative extension and outreach professionals, David Mathews' Ships Passing in the Night? posited a fundamental disconnect between the role of the university in disseminating technical knowledge and communities' needs to come together to solve their own problems. Similarly, a recent study by Ted Alter, based on interviews at Penn State University, found that most faculty saw their civic role in terms of disseminating and applying their expert knowledge, while only a few saw themselves as strengthening civic life or addressing controversial issues.

A Different Civic Mission

In this context, Kettering has developed its experiments based on a different, and, we believe, more complete concept of higher education and its civic mission.
As Martín Carcasson and others have written, this approach reflects a fundamentally different understanding of civic engagement than what he calls “expert politics.” Rather than attempting to solve problems through the application of expert knowledge, Kettering focuses on “wicked” problems, ones rooted in irreconcilable value conflicts. The question for Kettering is how to develop the civic skills and habits to address these underlying conflicts.

Building on Kettering’s research with the National Issues Forums, the foundation has worked with a small network of practitioners engaging students in dialogue and deliberation on controversial public issues. The effects of deliberation on students’ attitudes toward politics have been documented in the 2008 collaborative study with Wake Forest University, published in the book *Speaking of Politics*. Comparing a cohort exposed to dialogue and deliberation throughout a four-year curriculum with a control group, the study found the experimental group to have a more participatory understanding of citizenship, more sophisticated understanding of political issues, and a higher degree of political efficacy. A follow-up study with alumni of the Wake Forest program is underway to test the long-term effects of deliberation. Kettering has also observed similar effects in research exchanges with centers on college campuses around the country that provide institutional spaces for convening deliberative forums and with faculty who are incorporating deliberative practices into their pedagogies.

Similarly, Kettering has also developed collaborative experiments using community engagement approaches that involve students in recognizing and working with the civic assets of communities. Rather than serving an external community, the Living Democracy program at Auburn University, developed jointly with Kettering, places students in communities where they live and work for the summer. Kettering is currently seeking to expand experimentation in this area.

Kettering has also developed research exchanges with outreach and extension scholars and faculty in applied fields to think critically about how they might reconceive how they are working as scholars in and with their communities. In the next year, Kettering plans to convene a new...
Fish Pond

In the early years of the foundation, a small pond was located near the entrance to the nature trail. The pond could be viewed from the courtyard area, south of the Cousins House, and there was a wooden deck surrounded by a host of tall trees. People used this area for meditation, reading, or just relaxing. This area was blanketed with plant life of every size and shape. The pond had beautiful yellow and white water lilies and was home to Japanese koi and native frogs. One summer we even had a snapping turtle! The pond was indeed a great natural habitat for many species, drawing in many different kinds of animals including deer, red foxes, and blue herons. Wildlife and plant life continue to thrive on the grounds.

Public opinion analyst Daniel Yankelovich joins the Kettering board.

The Domestic Policy Association publishes its first three issue books, Retirement and Social Security, Inflation, and Jobs and Productivity.

Derek W. M. Barker is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at barker@kettering.org.

How might higher education rekindle a larger vision of its civic and democratic mission? Kettering convened a meeting this summer of nine college presidents from a range of institutions to discuss this question. In the spirit of Snyder’s historical research, the presidents noted that most of their institutions were formed not only for vocational purposes but also for the development of the next generation of civic leaders. The presidents agreed to work together and with Kettering to advocate for returning their institutions to the civic purposes for which they were created. They were concerned about higher education’s role in addressing problems of social inequality, but sought to broaden conversations on this issue beyond the narrow focus on vocational education, to also include education in active democratic citizenship for working class and marginalized students.

If our goal is for the citizenry to be not merely informed, but also active and deliberative, what is the role of higher education? Reflecting upon 20 years of research on higher education, this is the question to which we have come.