

# CONNECTIONS

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## Countering Democracy's Challenges

By David Mathews p. 2

## Recasting the Narratives That Shape Our Public Life

By Paula Ellis p. 23

## Being a Civically Engaged College

By Adam Weinberg p. 36



Experiments in  
**DEMOCRATIC  
CITIZENSHIP**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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# CONTENTS

- 2 **Countering Democracy's Challenges**  
David Mathews
- 15 **The Educating Neighborhood:  
How Villages Raise Their Children**  
John McKnight
- 23 **Recasting the Narratives That Shape  
Our Public Life**  
Paula Ellis
- 30 **Park Life: Experimenting with Democracy  
and Civic Engagement in Cincinnati's  
Oldest Public Park**  
David Siders
- 36 **Being a Civically Engaged College That  
Contributes to Democratic Ways of Living:  
Reflections of a College President**  
Adam Weinberg
- 45 **Parents for Public Schools: Encouraging  
Educational Citizenship**  
Joann Mickens
- 51 **Becoming a Catalyst for Civic Learning**  
Betty Knighton
- 59 **Public Deliberation, Historic Decisions,  
and Civic Education: A Journey with a  
Presidential Library**  
Kathleen Pate
- 67 **Science and the Cultivation of Public Judgment**  
Daniel Sarewitz
- 72 **How I Learned What Not to Do as a School  
Superintendent**  
Charles Irish



# Park Life: Experimenting with Democracy and Civic Engagement in Cincinnati's Oldest Public Park

By David Siders

**P**iatt Park, established in 1817, is the oldest public park in Downtown Cincinnati, being witness to nearly 200 years of civic life. Imagine the scenes of daily life over the decades as times changed amidst this beautiful urban oasis, two city blocks long, featuring rows of benches for public seating and densely populated with trees and flowers. What could be a more lasting tribute to democracy alive and well in a community than a public park that welcomes all people, no matter background or socioeconomic status? Today, Piatt Park serves as a perfect

ecosystem to study and explore the ecology of democracy: a myriad of stakeholders and institutions surround the park—including businesses large and small, a large number of residents, and one of the busiest public libraries in the nation. All are neighbors of the park; all are part of the larger ecosystem.

Naturally, toxic problems exist that will most likely never go away. In recent years, stakeholders attending community meetings have essentially decried, not in my backyard! They say things like:

- We don't want homeless people in our park.
- Teenagers loiter and make me uncomfortable.
- Too many panhandlers in the park!
- Where are the police?
- Why is there so much litter on Tuesdays in the park?

But others who regularly use the park ask other questions:

- Why can't you leave me alone and just let me enjoy the park? Isn't everyone allowed to be in the park?
- Where else would I go if I can't stay here? I have a right to be here!

Next, add to all of this a strong dose of cultural, environmental, and socioeconomic change: a powerful



*Piatt Park is Cincinnati's oldest public park, established in 1817. This photo includes two of several large residential buildings along the park.*

*A bronze statue of William Henry Harrison points to a historic Presbyterian church and another residential building along Piatt Park.*



community development group funded by major corporations of the city of Cincinnati is surveying property and real estate in the blocks surrounding Piatt Park, with the intent to develop new retail spaces, restaurants and bars, and high-end condominiums. In the same area, a former-hotel-turned-apartment building (15-stories tall located at the east end of the park) recently suffered a financial crisis while being renovated and construction stopped immediately. Broken windows theory could swiftly apply to this hindered project. Vast and dramatic change will certainly alter this ecosystem.

Beginning in 2016, the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County joined in a research exchange with other libraries throughout the country and the Kettering Foundation. Kim Fender, executive director of the library, and I were excited to initiate a new experiment in democracy and civic engagement. Initially, our library planned an experiment that was designed to tackle the broad, toxic problem of homelessness.



**We prepared to hold deliberative forums, with the easy-to-understand name “Community Conversations in Piatt Park,” in order to meet people where they are.**

During research exchange sessions at the Kettering Foundation, we decided to refocus our project to consider how all citizens might use and enjoy Piatt Park. We developed a planning and advisory team comprised of stakeholders that represent our community: employees of Cincinnati Parks, the CEO of Downtown Cincinnati, Inc. (a nonprofit business organization with a mission to build a dynamic metropolitan center valued as the heart of the region), and the director of Strategies to End Homelessness (a local umbrella of direct service providers and advocacy for unhoused people).

Our planning and advisory team was essential in our capacity to develop community forums that will

facilitate communication, deliberation, and collective learning pertinent to the concerns and facts surrounding individuals and groups of people who utilize the public space of Piatt Park. Thanks to the wisdom of our group, we now have a template for a communication model that can serve to unite people on issues of public space and to allow a collective, community-defined understanding of a citizen’s responsibilities to enjoy public spaces. Our public library’s experience with delivery and outreach of services to all citizens in a free and public manner, our experience in planning and organizing, and our provision of meeting spaces for public use positions us with a potentially effective strategy to unite people based on collective learning of shared issues of concern.

We prepared to hold deliberative forums, with the easy-to-understand name “Community Conversations in Piatt Park,” in order to meet people where they are. We wrote a script to guide how our forums will work within, ideally, an hour timeframe. The framework includes open-ended questions such as:

- What do you want your neighborhood park to look like?
- What bothers you?
- How does this problem affect you and your colleagues?



*Piatt Park is an urban oasis for all residents, downtown workers, visitors, and the homeless community.*

- What should we do, and what would be the consequences?
- What are we learning?

We realized the importance of “probing questions” like: How would the solutions proposed today impact you or other people in the community? How would you go about implementing that course of action? The script for forums can also serve as a training or preparation guide for potential forum moderators and as a model for possible community conversations in the future—no matter the subject matter at hand.



**Along the way, our planning and advisory team discussed current, ongoing, rapid, and potentially dramatic changes in the community directly surrounding Piatt Park.**

We prepared promotional fliers for the public forums, and thanks to the wisdom and community connections of our planning and advisory team, we created a concrete way to invite the diversity of stakeholders of the park to help ensure the opportunity to participate.

Along the way, our planning and advisory team discussed current, ongoing, rapid, and potentially dramatic changes in the community directly surrounding Piatt Park: a local community development corporation has taken ownership of two public parks within blocks of Piatt Park. Will park rules change if the corporation takes ownership of Piatt Park? We have also wondered how new businesses and resident popu-

lations could impact the use of Piatt Park. Our implementation of deliberative forums about Piatt Park is more important than ever as rapidly changing communities influence the story of our project.

As we have reflected on the planning process, our planning and advisory team further concurred that change in communities has significant ramifications on our ecology: new emphasis on police patrols in the park has possibly changed usage of the park. Street outreach workers from the Veterans Administration and a local social services organization for teenagers are actively working with their clients in the vicinity in an ongoing manner. A church group feeds the public in the park on



*Piatt Park is heavily populated every day.*

Tuesdays and has been a source of litter in the park. The colleagues in our team are realizing new ways that rapid and significant change in our community dramatically affects its citizens. As we know, democracy requires a community, or a society of citizens, to work together to address common problems. We believe that our community conversations, with the intent to allow citizens to make connections, discover problems behind the problems, make decisions, and learn how to act on decisions, will support the ideal of people experiencing happy and fulfilling lives. Our team is excited and enthusiastic in regard to learning more about how democracy requires institutions with public legitimacy to contribute to strengthening society—especially in the midst of change.

Our careful planning turned into community action! On September 12, 2017, we held our first community conversation about Piatt Park in the Tower Room of the Main Library of the Public Library of Cincinnati & Hamilton County—a community meeting space that perfectly overlooks Piatt Park. We decided to hold this first forum with our Downtown Residents Council—a significant group of stakeholders because Piatt Park serves as their front and back yards. The park serves as residents’ prime green space and community



**We now have a new level of citizen input and collective learning—and a potential course of community action—upon which to reflect.**

space in the neighborhood. We had a robust session. Some of the things we heard during the forum include: “Democracy can be messy, but everyone should have a right to enjoy the park,” and “What about the Downtown Residents Council adopting the park to schedule events and work with police to make the park safer?” We now have a new level of citizen input and collective learning—and a potential course of community action—upon which to reflect. As we plan our next deliberative forum, in which we will invite the broader community of stakeholders of Piatt Park, our experiment with democracy and civic engagement continues amidst swift, influential change in the neighborhood. ■

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