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Focus on: Citizens and Public Choice
Partnering with Large National Organizations: A Win-Win Proposition

By Estus Smith

Should immigration be restricted? What should we do about health care? What should go on the Internet? National Issues Forums (NIF) have been posing questions like these to the public for nearly 20 years. The Kettering Foundation (KF) relies on NIF forums to provide grist for its research mill. But the foundation's interest extends beyond simply finding answers to the specific questions citizens explore through NIF. While the answers are important, the foundation is more interested in the way people arrive at them.

What interests the foundation is how citizens deal with these and other issues that critically affect all Americans. The primary question on Kettering's research agenda is to discover what it takes to make democracy work as it should. The foundation concentrates on the most important, if least understood, element of a democracy — the powerful, but unpredictable, public.

So it is to the public that we have turned to seek answers. What we have found — not surprisingly — is that citizens who accept their responsibilities and are able to make sound decisions about what is in the public's best interest are the lifeblood of a democracy. We study the way a deliberative public makes decisions on the major issues facing the country and, through studies of networking and deliberation, we seek to find better ways of providing space for public deliberation.

This past year, the foundation and its trustees took time to reassess and look ahead. We know that deliberation — as distinct from general discussion or debate — belongs everywhere people make collective decisions. Furthermore, our research suggests that opportunities for citizens to engage in deliberative discussions have to be available to every sector of a democratic society.

And so, we asked ourselves: What course of action should we pursue to help bring about these conditions?
Four options were outlined and discussed. One involved introducing deliberation to large national organizations whose objectives may be different from ours but whose approach to achieving those objectives includes public input and citizen action, areas of great interest to the foundation.

Large national organizations care deeply and know a great deal about certain issues. They are dedicated, for the most part, to educating the public and promoting action. As a nonpartisan research foundation, KF is interested not so much in the issues themselves, but in how issues are framed, how people talk about the issues, and what moves people to do something about them.

Consistent with its history, the Kettering Foundation continues to shape its agenda around problems that are too big for a single organization to solve alone. The advantages of working with large partner organizations are many. For example, by joining with existing organizations, we are able to get a broader array of participants involved in deliberative work. Also, these organizations have structures and histories that can ensure longevity for the work. This is not always easy to achieve by working directly with local NIF organizations.

While NIF’s effectiveness as a tool for building a deliberative public is virtually undisputed, long experience has revealed a number of obstacles that impede the growth and sustainability of the NIF Network. Among these pitfalls is the reliance on single individuals. All too often, a local NIF organization’s commitment to the work depends on a single enthusiastic individual. When that person burns out, leaves the organization, or changes positions, the NIF contact dies and so does that connection in the network. There is far less likelihood that this will happen when collaborating with a large organization whose modus operandi — education, public input, and citizen action — complements Kettering’s approach.

Another good reason to work with large organizations is that they are likely to continue the project because the selected NIF issue is at the core of their agenda and because they typically develop strategies to address the identified problems. This is particularly true of special interest organizations. Some years ago, the foundation began to teach national organizations how to frame issues in public terms. Organizations that
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wrote and distributed issue books include the Farm Foundation, the American Bar Association, and the Southern Growth Policies Board.

We have long had a successful partnership with the Federation of State Humanities Councils, the membership association for humanities councils in all 50 states and 5 U.S. territories. Humanities councils promote interaction and dialogue between humanities scholars and the general public and encourage programs that engage people in discussion.

In 1999, the National Institute on Alcohol Abuse and Alcoholism (NIAAA) contacted the foundation after learning that KF planned to release an issue book entitled Alcohol: Controlling the Toxic Spill. NIAAA is one of the institutes within the National Institutes of Health and is the primary federal entity responsible for research on the causes, consequences, treatment, and prevention of alcohol-related problems.

One of the goals of this organization is to “energize the public to address this issue within their families, schools, and communities in a sustained way, and to work for change.” The agency has come to understand that there are things about alcohol abuse and alcoholism that cannot be treated medically. Their research clearly shows that efforts by the individual, the family, and the community are needed to address these issues.
NIAAA was interested in not only using the issue books, but also in collaborating on a two-year project. The advantages to the foundation were obvious. NIAAA has liaisons with more than 200 organizations dedicated to long-term issues related to alcohol. The agency has amassed considerable research findings on topics related to alcohol and alcoholism. And it has commitments from 33 governors' spouses prepared to foster meaningful discussions in their respective states about alcohol.

Under the terms of the agreement, KF posed the research questions, prepared the issue books at two reading levels, and agreed to underwrite reports on the outcomes. The National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) identified NIF moderators and convenors for each state and alerted the NIF Network of the two-year program on alcohol and alcoholism. NIAAA unleashed the resources of its network in endorsing the issue book.

Altogether, the collaboration offered an opportunity for many interested local organizations to expand the number of citizens who took part in their forums, raised national consciousness of the issue, and promoted citizen involvement in setting an agenda for action. It exemplified the unique capabilities of each organization to achieve both common and unique goals. The Kettering Foundation has been asked to join 24,000 adults and youths in the PRIDE 25th Annual Conference on Drugs and Alcohol, to be held this summer in Cincinnati, Ohio. This is yet another opportunity to sustain interest in and further promulgate the work of the foundation.

In summary, this option — collaborating with large national organizations — holds considerable promise for the foundation. We can get more participants involved in the work. We can count on these organizations to continue their projects. And, not the least of the advantages, partnering with others can help reduce the foundation's costs.

Still, as we have learned well in our work, no approach is without drawbacks and tradeoffs. Some organizations are looking for quick fixes for difficult issues. Issues may be framed in political, rather than public, terms, and they may become polarized as a result of positions held by long-time advocates. In these cases, the foundation's interest in fostering the deliberative process could well be compromised.

We cannot, of course, expect that a large national organization will adopt KF's agenda lock, stock, and barrel. The question we will have to define for ourselves is what tradeoffs we are willing to make in this area.

In charting a path for the future, it is important for the Kettering Foundation to stay true to its own history. For more than 20 years, we have developed expertise in framing public issues and studied the ways people come to grips with them. Collaborating with large national organizations will help us greatly enlarge the scope of our work, and the foundation actively seeks to include such collaborations in its work.

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