The Higher Education Exchange is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the Higher Education Exchange agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The Higher Education Exchange is part of a movement to strengthen higher education’s democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the Higher Education Exchange publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.
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WHO ARE THE CITIZENS WE SERVE? A VIEW FROM THE WETLANDS OF DEMOCRACY

By David Mathews

One of the main objectives of the Higher Education Exchange (HEX) is to share with colleges and universities what the Kettering Foundation is learning about what a democratic citizenry is and does, in hopes of finding out, in return, what institutions of higher education are learning about this citizenry. With so many outreach programs, community development efforts, and centers for public life, the academy has never had more opportunities to interact directly with citizens—even more, recently, when institutions across the country engaged the public in deliberations on the mission of higher education. There were more than 100 forums held with citizens in 22 states. If academic institutions continue to hold public deliberations on other issues of mutual concern, a new way of engaging people could emerge.

While full of potential, these outreach projects have revealed significant differences in the way citizens feel and think about their role in democracy as compared to the way academic institutions see the role of citizens. Much of this difference may be the result of the influence of professional culture on academe.

When I talk about professional culture, I am not talking about individual professionals—doctors, lawyers, accountants, engineers, and the like. We depend on them and value their expertise. I mean the culture that has grown out of the way professionals usually see people, which is as those they serve (clients, patients). Patients and clients are largely passive recipients of services. Unfortunately and unintentionally, this mindset tends to diminish any recognition of people as citizens who have to be agents and producers in a healthy democracy. Citizens, as consumers of services, are reduced to objects of the actions by others, rather than being seen as essential actors. (For more on this subject, see David Brown’s new book America’s Culture of Professionalism.)

Citizens—when seen in the context of the things they do with others—create a dynamic civic life. This life is more political
than civil society, yet more social than grassroots politics. The citizenry is the workforce that produces public goods that serve the commonweal in a democracy—things ranging from neighbors joining forces to create a community garden to mothers banding together to prevent drunk driving.

At the foundation, we have been thinking about what people do in their civic life as analogous to what happens in the natural ecosystem. The most recent report on Kettering research, *The Ecology of Democracy*, describes the arena where citizens work together to solve problems and produce public goods as the “civic wetlands” of democracy.

Even though I have been talking about citizens, the political ecosystem includes both citizens and institutions like governments, schools, hospitals, and so on. The two are interdependent. Political life usually begins locally and small: that is, in neighborhoods, in informal associations, and around kitchen tables. Then institutions like representative assemblies, government agencies, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) bring other resources to bear.

I find the ecology analogy is useful because it provides a broader frame of reference for thinking about the citizenry. The analogy distinguishes the things that citizens do with other citizens, which are often informal or organic, from the things that politicians and government officials do, which are usually formal or institutional. In a political ecosystem, governments, schools, and other established institutions are roughly analogous to oil rigs, docks, and large buildings on the shore. The things citizens do and the associations among them might be thought of as something like barrier islands and the marshes of the wetlands.

I hasten to add that I am not implying that what happens in the wetlands is always good. As in nature, the political wetlands have the equivalents of poisonous snakes and alligators; they can be sources of prejudices, selfishness, and just plain meanness. Although a great many of the fundamental problems of democracy originate in the murky waters of the wetlands, many of the resources for combating these problems can also be found there.

Furthermore, while different, organic and institutional politics are profoundly interdependent. The connection between the organic and institutional spheres is obvious in places like the Gulf Coast.
Large structures like oil rigs and docks are affected by what happens on barrier islands and in salt marshes and vice versa. This was obvious when the lack of natural barriers exposed New Orleans and its institutional structures to the full fury of Hurricane Katrina. And it was obvious when a drilling rig exploded in the Gulf of Mexico, sending millions of gallons of oil into the wetlands.

Today, everyone rushes to protect the coastal wetlands when there is an oil spill, even though we once overlooked the value of what goes on in these swamppy areas. For years, we filled in the marshes, and the sea life that bred in the wetlands died. We removed barrier islands to make better shipping channels and unintentionally made better hurricane channels. We learned the hard way the important role nature’s wetlands play.

In looking at the role that higher education plays in public life, there is reason to worry that, with the best of intentions, academic institutions using their professional expertise might make the same mistakes as developers and engineers once made in “reforming” nature’s wetlands. And that is the main point I am trying to make. Since what goes on in the civic wetlands is so unlike what professionals do, it is easy to overlook its importance. Informal gatherings, ad hoc associations, and the seemingly innocuous banter that goes on when people mull over their everyday experiences can appear inconsequential when compared with what happens in elections, legislative bodies, and courts. Yet mulling over the meaning of the day’s events at bus stops can be the wellspring of deliberative decision making. Connections made in these informal gatherings can become the basis for civic networks, and the ad hoc associations formed there can morph into civic organizations.

Here is an example of how the citizenry can go unrecognized: Ernesto was a teacher who lived in a Hispanic community that was seen—and to some extent saw itself—as having no civic life, at least as public engagement is usually measured. The people were poor; they appeared to be busy just surviving. For most, English was a second language, limiting contact with those who spoke only English. Voter turnout was low. People protested occasionally, though it was usually about a local matter, and the protests seldom made the news.

The U.S. Bureau of Labor Statistics’ report on volunteering reinforces this perception of a weak civic life in Ernesto’s community.
Its 2012 report shows that only 15.2 percent of Hispanics volunteered for “unpaid work . . . through or for an organization,” as compared to 27.8 percent of whites and 21.1 percent of African Americans.

If Ernesto had seen these statistics, he would have known that they didn’t reflect all that was happening. The bureau’s report wouldn’t have surprised him because he knew few people were involved in formal volunteer programs. Yet they would help a neighbor in a heartbeat, just not through formal channels. Citizens were constantly joining together to solve problems and creating things that benefited everyone. They started a community garden on a vacant lot and built a clubhouse where they taught classes, held barbecues, and played music. They seldom held formal meetings; still, they talked about political issues over backyard fences, at the doctor’s office, and on the neighborhood street corners. These were issues, such as the lack of jobs and what was happening to their children, that affected them personally. This kind of civic life, unfortunately, often went unrecognized as such—even by those most engaged in it.

The political wetlands hold an array of unique and valuable resources like those in Ernesto’s community. Like nature’s wetlands, they may appear placid, but they are teeming with life. Important work is going on in them. As in nature, harmful substances are being filtered out while birth and regeneration are everywhere. In the civic wetlands, people practice a politics that is quite different from institutional politics—different in objectives, organization, and methods. I would call this politics citizen-centered, because citizens are defined by their relationships with other citizens, not just their connection to the state. These civic relationships are based on reciprocity—receiving and giving in return.

Citizen-to-citizen relationships are not the same as those of family and friends. They can include some who, without being family or friend, are still needed to solve problems. They are pragmatic and work-related. Civic relationships develop when citizens coalesce in order to rebuild their community after a disaster, when they organize to construct houses for the homeless, and when they come together with police to keep young people safe.

The political wetlands also harbor mindsets about how things get done that influence the way people act. Norms prescribe certain
behaviors and proscribe others. (I just mentioned one—reciprocity.) These wetlands are also structured around a multitude of social relationships, some tightly resistant to outsiders and others more open and inclusive. Such ways of relating affect what can and can’t be done, as well as the “costs” of conducting the business of politics (the better the relationships, the lower the costs).

The political wetlands aren’t silent; they influence how people communicate with one another, which influences the nature of decision making—“who talks to whom about what” is politically significant. And the wetlands develop cultures that determine how well people learn from their experiences and whether they change as their circumstances change.

Political wetlands have their own structures, which are not board tables, but kitchen tables; not assemblies like legislative bodies, but common gatherings, once in post office lobbies and now on the Internet. These structures are more like sand than concrete. Ad hoc groups and alliances form, then fall away as a project is completed, yet reappear when another task is at hand.

At its best, citizen politics in the wetlands is focused on the well being of communities as a whole and their capacity to overcome adversity—their resilience. This politics involves more than volunteering to serve Thanksgiving dinner at a homeless shelter. It goes deeper than voting, obeying laws, and paying taxes. It includes, but goes beyond, serving on advisory bodies and participating in government hearings. It is a politics where citizens don’t just comply or advise; they act. They get things done. They produce.

In the wetlands, citizen politics operate on a micro level. The groups that citizens form tend to be informal and aren’t large. There may not be a great many of them, but they are powerful when connected. Their influence lies in the significance of the ideas they generate, the work they do by collective effort, the pervasiveness of their associations, and the hope they generate.

The wetlands of democracy can’t be ignored because the work citizens do there is needed to complement the work of governments, schools, and other institutions. Elinor Ostrom, who won the Nobel Prize for her research, offered this practical argument for valuing the work of citizens:

If one presumes that teachers produce education, police produce safety, doctors and nurses produce health, and social workers
produce effective households, the focus of attention is on how to professionalize the public service. Obviously, skilled teachers, police officers, medical personnel, and social workers are essential to the development of better public services. Ignoring the important role of children, families, support groups, neighborhood organizations, and churches in the production of these services means, however, that only a portion of the inputs to these processes are taken into account in the way that policy makers think about these problems. The term “client” is used more and more frequently to refer to those who should be viewed as essential co-producers of their own education, safety, health, and communities. A client is the name for a passive role. Being a co-producer makes one an active partner (Ostrom 8).

As Ostrom makes clear, products from the work of citizens can reinforce what institutions do, because citizens make things that institutions can’t. I am not talking about volunteer service to take the load off professionals, although that is commendable. I have in mind supplementary projects, or what I would call “complementary production.” For example, the work of schools is teaching, but it is just part, but not all, of educating. While most formal instruction is usually best left to professionals, many people can educate. And what children learn in educational settings other than schools can reinforce what happens in classrooms. Schools can benefit enormously from what citizens do to prepare the next generation of young people for the future.

Ostrom notwithstanding, given the powerful resources and orderly routines of professionals, the political wetlands may appear not only dangerous, but also deficient. So, professionalized institutions are prone to act on people and communities rather than in league with them. And when they concentrate on reforming the wetlands, they miss opportunities for building on the politically regenerative forces that are, in fact, already at work in them.

Institutional reforms tend to colonize the political wetlands, that is, to remake them in the image of the institutions that want to reform them. Sadly, the consequences of these well-intended efforts are often just the opposite of what the reformers set out to do. For instance, when informal wetland associations are induced to become formal organizations, they lose the characteristics that made them effective. Associations of neighbors-helping-neighbors
may become rule-bound and less responsive to people’s varying circumstances. This has happened in some neighborhood associations that were deputized by local governments to help set budget priorities. They became quasi-official bodies.

While thinking of the public as a political wetlands may seem odd, it is relevant to higher education because the institutional domain in our political system is in serious trouble—afflicted by everything from hyperpolarization to a serious loss of public confidence. Institutional politics, with all its expertise, doesn’t appear to be able to reform itself. This troubling situation has implications for colleges and universities. Perhaps they should look more closely at the benefits that can come from citizens and their ways of working in the wetlands. And those in academe that are preparing tomorrow’s professionals might also look more closely at the assumptions professional culture implicitly makes about the citizenry and democracy.

REFERENCES
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