



HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



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WHAT IS THE REAL COLLEGE OF EDUCATION?

By David Mathews

Each year the Kettering Foundation reviews all of its research through the lens of one of its major areas of study. This year, that area has been the relationship between the public and public education. Our three periodicals, the *Kettering Review*, *Connections*, and the *Higher Education Exchange*, share this review with various audiences. The *Exchange* delves into the implications of what we have found in the research for institutions of higher education.

Since the focus of our review has been public education, it would seem that this *Exchange* would be about how colleges of education or programs prepare schoolteachers and administrators. That, however, isn't what happened. This issue examines the proposition that the real school of education is, in fact, the entire institution itself; that is, the university or community college as a whole.

What might the implications be of taking this proposition seriously? We don't have a preconceived answer; we are just raising a question. We certainly don't intend to join in making colleges of education the scapegoat for all that is troubling in the country's public school systems. We can only report on how we came to focus on the entire institution and not just the division dealing with public education.

As discussed in the forthcoming issue of the *Kettering Review*, the foundation has been looking at the public schools for decades, but eventually we found it necessary to put schooling into the larger context of education. And that shift in focus began to take us beyond the confines of any one department or college. Since our primary research subject is citizens, we were struck by how often people distinguish schooling, which they consider to be the business of professionals, from education, broadly defined. We also found it helpful to distinguish between the instruction of young people, which is necessary to pass along the experiences of past generations, and the cultivation of the ability to learn, especially the ability to learn from and with others. We came to think of education as the cultivation of learning. Academic divisions that deal with teacher preparation properly concentrate on the

role of teaching in the development of a capacity for learning, but every division of an institution of higher education has to be concerned with learning.

Where *does* learning occur? That question led us to look at all types of institutions that educate. And what we learned about these institutions made us realize that the institutions fall within the purview of a number of colleges.

Lawrence Cremin, Pulitzer Prize-winning historian (and former Kettering Foundation trustee), identified a variety of educating institutions in his three-volume study of American education. Cremin showed that the country has always educated through families, along with churches, libraries, museums, benevolent societies, youth groups, agricultural fairs, radio and television stations, newspapers, and military organizations. We found a similar perspective on all that educates in the scholarly writing of Hervé Varenne, who documents the pervasiveness of “education writ large,” as Cremin would say.

As we continued our research at Kettering, we realized that communities have other educational resources that aren’t confined to institutions like museums and libraries. Citizens have found these resources in such unlikely places as farms for retired racehorses. This led us to identify scores of educators who aren’t schoolteachers but who use local resources to educate. Some have educated through community projects, such as one to reintroduce chestnut trees into Appalachia; others have done much the same thing using a community-built fish tank on the Gulf Coast. While chestnut trees and fish tanks don’t meet the usual criteria for educational resources, the citizens using them were often professionals in other fields who did recognize that these resources could prompt learning.

It was only a short—but big—step to move from seeing the educational resources in a community to seeing the community *itself* as an educator; that is, an accountable political actor capable of bringing together all of its educating institutions, which would significantly strengthen the hand of the citizenry. And once the foundation’s focus included the community itself, we found ourselves looking at the many ways colleges and universities engage communities through agriculture, business, health, and social work, to mention a few.

To conclude that an institution as a whole is implicated in what happens in education and learning does not mean, however, that the influence is always constructive. The profound effect that community colleges and universities have on schools isn't always acknowledged because the influence is indirect. For example, higher education sets the standard for what it means to know. Its epistemological preferences are reflected in everything from testing to the standards used in accountability measures. Academic institutions favor an epistemology that promotes technical rationality, which has been the key to much of our progress in the sciences. But we have seen the downside of elevating this way of knowing above all others when looking at frustrations with accountability standards. These standards are based largely on the measurable outcomes that are compatible with the way technical rationality defines knowledge. Yet the standards do not necessarily reflect what citizens want to know and aren't always consistent with what people think institutions need to do to be accountable.

Higher education also defines what it means to be a professional. And professional practices and values are reflected in the norms for school administrators and teachers, including ideas about the role citizens should play in professional enterprises. From a professional perspective, citizens appear to be consumers of services, not political actors doing things that enhance the learning of young people. For instance, we have seen communities where the public has lost a sense of ownership and responsibility for public schools. Citizens don't believe they have ownership because they can't influence what the schools do; control seems to be in the hands of educational professionals. This lack of a sense of agency may have something to do with the power of a professional mindset.

Having arrived at a point at which we could see a community as an educator, we wanted to look more closely at what determines the way a community goes about educating. We got a clue about where to focus our attention from a report on neighborhoods in St. Paul, Minnesota, that were using local resources to educate. The ultimate purpose of the projects was to change the culture of learning in the community. So the logical question for us is, if higher education influences the culture of learning in our society—and

surely it does, often in beneficial ways—how does this culture compare to the ideal culture of learning in a community that encourages everyone to contribute to educating young people? We aren't sure, but the two cultures seem quite different. So the question about cultures of learning, like questions about ways of knowing and the role of professionals, pushed us even deeper into thinking of the university itself as the actual college of education.

The next question is, of course, how would an institution that sees itself in this way go about its work? Would it have a college of community studies that would include a department of education writ large? Or, would the response not be organizational at all? Would there be other ways to look at epistemological issues, such as the relationship of academic ways of knowing to public ways? (Actually, a great deal has been written on public ways of creating practical wisdom using the human faculty for judgment, and some of the articles have been published in past issues of *HEX*.) Or what about examining the unintended effects of professional norms on civic responsibility and action? As I said in the beginning, the foundation doesn't have answers, but this issue of *HEX* should be of some help to those who want to explore the proposition that the condition of education in America is an institution-wide responsibility.