HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
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.
HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE
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ENGAGING THE WORK OF DEMOCRACY
By David Mathews

All of the Kettering Foundation’s research is done from the perspective of citizens, so the foundation asked the Higher Education Exchange to bring that perspective to each issue. For example, the research on the mission of higher education, which I mentioned in last year’s issue, requires starting with people’s concerns—and then finding out what, if anything, they expect colleges and universities to do about them. Research is already underway that moves in the opposite direction by starting with the mission of higher education. In the near future, I hope we will begin a companion study that puts the public’s concerns in the forefront. It should tell us a great deal about the public’s perspective.

The public’s point of view is crucial because it has implications for the considerable effort that colleges and universities are putting into engagement projects and service learning. Those efforts are helpful, yet a democratic public isn’t a constituency to be served; it’s a producer of public goods, things that benefit society or a community as a whole. Those range from goods that benefit a community, like building a playground for children, to products that benefit the entire country, like organizing mothers to stop drunk driving. The public is a working body, a dynamic force, and effective engagement has to engage the work itself. It isn’t just the playground that’s important; it’s the building. It isn’t just stopping drunk driving; it’s the organizing that has to be engaged. I mean that the work that institutions of higher education do should reinforce the work citizens do in building and organizing. And that requires looking closely at how citizens do the work of producing public goods.

Much of the foundation’s research has gone into trying to understand this work. The more we all know about it, the more effective engagement can be. So far, Kettering has been able to find six practices that are essential.

What the foundation has learned is that the work of citizens begins in identifying or naming problems that need to be solved. If people are to become invested in solving these problems, the
names have to capture the things people hold dear, the things that affect them personally or the well being of their families. In past issues of HEX, I used safety, freedom, and being treated fairly as examples of these common imperatives. Unfortunately, academic names of problems, while accurate, aren’t enough to engage citizens.

Of course, naming a problem doesn’t solve it. Usually people put forward a number of options for action. And the options reflect the things people hold dear. The question is, what is the right thing to do? When all of the options are on the table, it creates a framework for decision making. The nature of that framework is also crucial. The options have to be presented with full recognition of the tensions that grow out of the advantages and disadvantages in every course of action. People have to make difficult trade-offs.

When making decisions, people tend to respond with first impressions and reach hasty conclusions. To move to more shared and considered judgment, the decision making has to be deliberative; that is, all options have to be weighed carefully against the many things people hold dear. This is real work; in fact, some call deliberative decision making choice work.

Action requires people and resources, and finding them is another part of the work of citizens. Often useful assets go untapped because they aren’t the most obvious ones, like money, facilities, or equipment. Citizens have other resources that need to be used—such as people’s capacity for caring for one another, the strength in the networks they can form, and their personal skills and experiences.

Decisions aren’t self-implementing, and civic actions can be so diverse or even competitive that little is accomplished. Institutions organize their actions through planning and bureaucratic coordination. Citizens, on the other hand, have a capacity for self-organizing; we see examples just after natural disasters when volunteers organize their own relief efforts. They have a shared purpose—survival. Self-organizing can also occur at other times if deliberative decision making has been able to identify enough common purposes so diverse civic actions can reinforce one another. Creating the deliberative habits that make complementary action possible is also part of the work of citizens.

The most important practice in the work of citizens is learning how to fail successfully. Failing successfully is learning
from mistakes. This learning has to be collective; it isn’t like the individual learning that goes on in classrooms. Collective learning is key to keeping up the momentum necessary to combat persistent problems that every community faces. The work of citizens is full of ups and downs; success can be elusive. Learning from failures is key to moving ahead. And every practice in the work of citizens creates an opportunity to learn.

Not only are the ways citizens do their work distinctive, but also are their goals and the results their efforts produce. Research done with the foundation shows that getting people to work together is, itself, an important objective of citizen politics. As one of the people cited in the research reasoned, “If all the people in the city are banded together to make it a better place to live, then it will be a better place to live.”

The objectives of the work citizens do may seem quite modest, but they are also quite practical. When it comes to realizing our dreams for our country, grand visions and all-encompassing reforms don’t seem as credible as small projects where citizens take responsibility, decide on what should be done, and do much of the work themselves, according to findings in Richard Harwood’s book *The Work of Hope* (Kettering Foundation Press 2012). Homegrown change is appealing because it is authentic. Unsure that they can trust large institutions, people look to their fellow citizens to fix what is out of whack through joint efforts that build confidence. For example, neighbors who decide to paint a school together may not do it just because the school building will be more attractive; their real purpose may be to demonstrate what can be accomplished when citizens join forces.

This research also found a connection between local issues and national resilience. As Harwood wrote, “The people we met believe the country faces enormous challenges that require significant action. The purpose of starting small and starting local, and . . . meeting one achievable goal after another, is to rebuild the confidence and sense of common purpose in the nation.” But what about global problems? Those who believe in starting small say that, without a sense of efficacy and shared purpose, people won’t be able to tackle larger problems. And they point out that local efforts can and do grow into larger movements.
The foundation has not only learned a great deal about the tasks that make up the work of citizens (naming, framing, etc.), but also learned about the character of the work. For instance, the foundation calls the ways citizens go about their work practices in order to distinguish them from techniques. Practices have an intrinsic value; they do more than accomplish an immediate task at hand. Hammering a nail is a technique; few go out to hammer nails just for the fun of it. Playing a piano, on the other hand, has a value beyond striking keys on a keyboard. It creates music that can stir the soul. Similarly, a practice like deliberating to make a decision promotes values like fairness and civility.

Kettering also sees the practices citizens use in doing their work as democratic when these practices give citizens a stronger hand in shaping their future. To name problems in terms that resonate with the things people hold dear creates ownership. To employ resources that citizens can draw on from ordinary life empowers them. These are democratic practices.

In addition, we are seeing that the democratic practices used in the work of citizens are interrelated. They are part of a whole, the way a golfer’s swing is one fluid motion that integrates the backswing with the striking of the ball and the follow-through.

The foundation is eager to compare what it is learning about how citizens do their work with others who are observing and analyzing that work. And, as I wrote earlier, we think what can be learned from this work has significant implications for college and university engagement. Most of this engagement is done by providing valuable resources that these institutions have in abundance, like expert information, professional advice, technical assistance, and other forms of service, some of which come from student volunteers. All of that is useful, and sometimes it’s critical. It can augment the work of citizens. However, from the public’s perspective, this kind of assistance is not all they care about. People want more power in their own hands to shape a future that seems increasingly dangerous and unpredictable. So the relationship they would like to have with colleges and universities has to be more than one that provides services, however valuable and appreciated those are. It has to be a relationship that is more than one that’s responsive to their needs, even if people get to define those needs. Democratic citizens want
a relationship that puts more levers of control in their hands. They don’t want to be empowered as much as they want to empower themselves.

What I have just written about the work of citizens reflects the foundation’s best guesses to date. These guesses are based on more than 30 years of observing scores of communities where citizens have tried to join forces to solve a wide variety of problems. For more details, see the forthcoming book *The Ecology of Democracy* (Kettering Foundation Press 2014), which includes a composite case study of one community, Suggsville, and one university’s efforts to reinforce what citizens were doing. But we realize that what we have found to date is incomplete and, in some cases, probably in error. So Kettering is looking for cases where colleges or universities are trying to align their work more closely and constructively with the work of citizens. We would appreciate hearing from any of you who are trying this.
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