

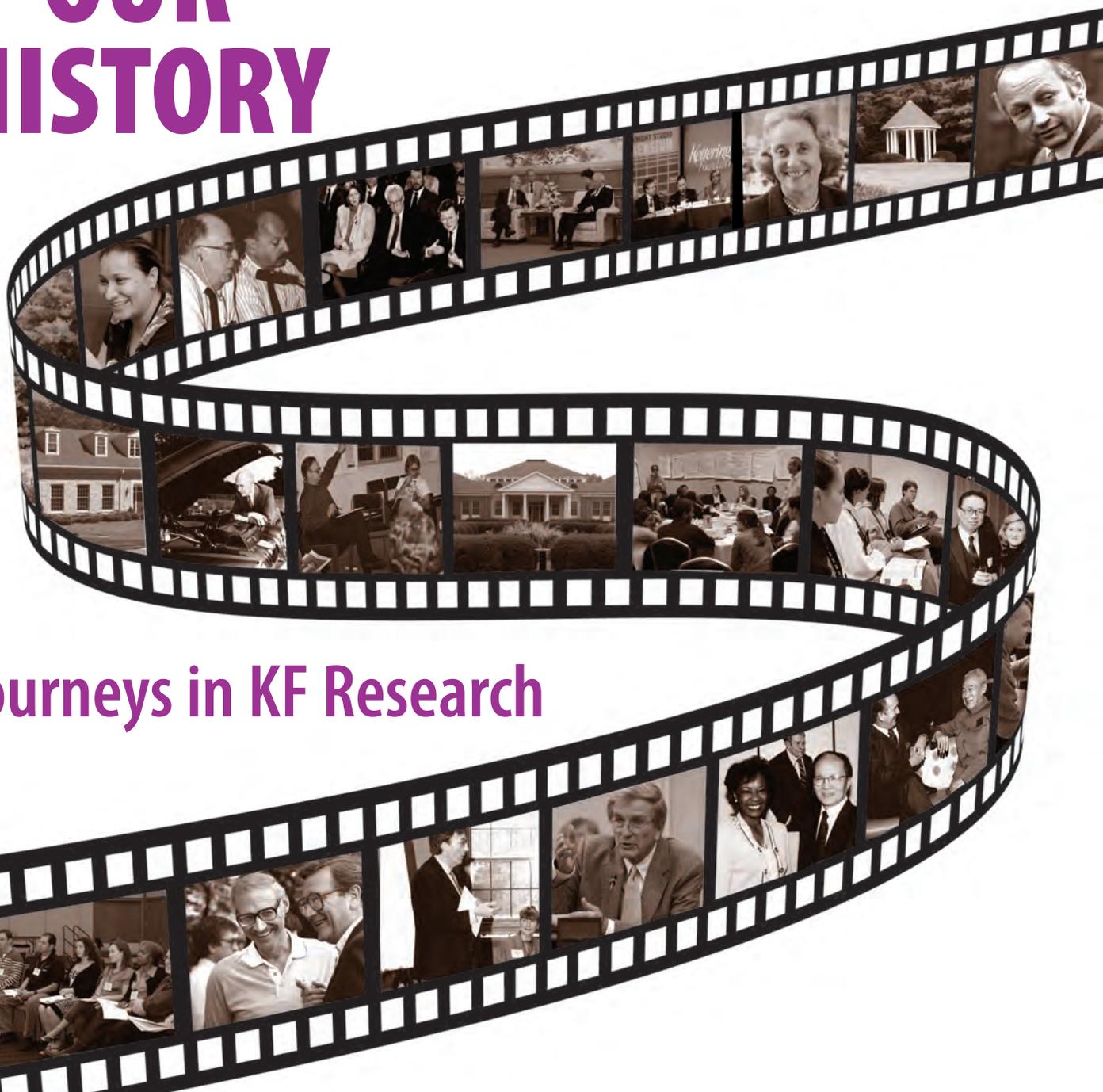
THE KETTERING FOUNDATION'S ANNUAL NEWSLETTER

CONNECTIONS

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2015

OUR HISTORY



Journeys in KF Research

CONNECTIONS

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The Issue Guide and the Issue Forum: Political Inventions

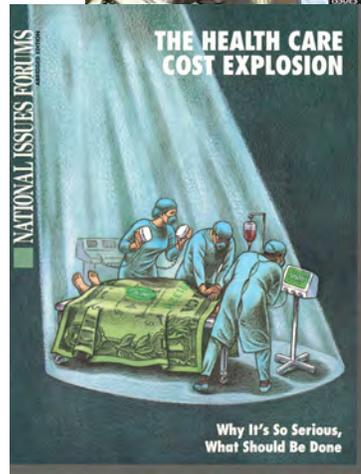
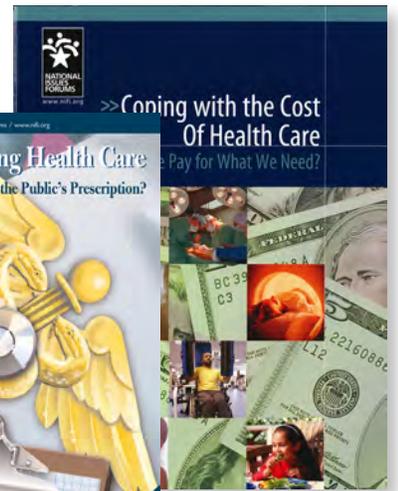


A grant is made to build a science building on Antioch College's campus.

2015



2008



1993



2003

Brad Rourke

Many who have come to know Kettering over the years have been introduced to our work or know us primarily through the issue guides we develop for the National Issues Forums Institute. These guides are meant to support public deliberation on difficult public problems. Kettering coordinates their research and development, and NIFI publishes them for use throughout the NIF network and by others.

1930

1931

The Issue Guide and the Issue Forum: Political Inventions

Kettering sees these guides in two important ways. First, they are themselves research reports—accounts of the way citizens name and frame problems, as well as the options and tensions between the things held deeply valuable. Second, the guides are artifacts designed to support a political act: public deliberation. Public deliberation can both make clear and generate knowledge about the boundaries of political permission. Among all the things we *might* do to address our problems, what *should* we do? This is perhaps the fundamental political question about any wicked problem that society faces, and public deliberation is one way of beginning to answer it.

The NIF experiment was conceived as an effort to make public politics visible to policymakers. But once launched, it became clear that such deliberation can also be used (in fact is potentially more productively used) on a community level. Deliberation supported by NIF issue guides can generate an understanding of the “public voice” or a sense of the public judgment on an issue. And in a community, the same deliberation can generate collective, political responses to the wicked problems that only can be addressed through such means.

Origins

The origin story of NIF issue guides is the story of two figures meeting and creating something wholly understandable to each, but greater than what they might have done alone.

It was 1981, in a conference room of a New York grantmaking foundation. One of the figures was David Mathews, newly minted president of the Kettering Foundation. Mathews was a former president of the University of Alabama; he had also been the youngest cabinet secretary, helping the Department of Health, Education, and Welfare during the Ford administration. The other figure was Daniel Yankelovich, widely regarded as the dean of American public opinion research, and cofounder (with Cyrus Vance) of Public Agenda.

Kettering senior associate Robert J. Kingston worked in the Ford administration and for Public Agenda. He was part of this work from the beginning. In his 2012 book, *Voice and Judgment: The Practice of Public Politics*, he writes of the results of this meeting:

Even in the relatively mild, brief years of the Ford administration in the 1970s, David Mathews reports that . . . he had become more and more concerned about the obvious differences between what government set out to do and what citizens seemed to find important or useful. . . .

Yankelovich . . . revealed his concern about apparent contradictions in individual responses to serious problems in the polity, as recorded in public opinion polls. Simple questions invite simple answers,

but to complex topics, people react in complex ways. . . . To address what he called this “mushiness” in public opinion with respect to policy matters, . . . Yankelovich argued that people need to be presented with just a few—perhaps three or four—recognizable alternative approaches, explained in straightforward

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and accessible fashion. . . . A modicum of significant information, in similarly accessible fashion, with an acknowledgment of the drawbacks that arguably might attend each different approach for citizens under different circumstances, would also be necessary, in effect providing a simple public equivalent of the “decision memo” characteristically prepared for presidents and senior gov-

1932

The Issue Guide and the Issue Forum: Political Inventions

ernment officials faced with actually determining policy.

An underlying sense, however, at least at the Kettering Foundation and Public Agenda, was that this forum process would provide . . . a better handle on where the public was in relation to a given issue than did the over-worked and too often abused public opinion poll; and that “leadership,” advised by the “policy option” that a deliberative

At Kettering, we sometimes talk about issue guides and deliberative forums as a useful “self-starter.” They can spark the insight that we ourselves, singly and severally, are actors.

public had made its own choice, would presumably chart a politically and popularly viable course of action. Clearly, what we had in mind was the production of a documented insight into public concerns that would be helpful, even perhaps persuasive, when it was narrated to those in authority, leaders who had the power of decision and the authority to command action.

The connection between NIF and the world of policymakers is clear from

the outset. Issue guides and deliberative forums using them are seen as a way of bringing the public voice to the policy world. In this respect, the idea of a public “decision memo” makes sense—policy-makers need to know how the public sees the trade-offs with which they must wrestle.

Community of Actors

But the distinctive knowledge produced by deliberative forums is not just knowledge about how the public relates to certain issues. In deliberating, citizens do more than simply express opinions. They struggle with the issues and what we should do. A report on public deliberation thus is not just a report on what the public is thinking, like a survey or focus group analysis. Public deliberation *generates public knowledge*.

Citizens who deliberate together develop an understanding of how they themselves should collectively act on problems they face.

At Kettering, we sometimes talk about issue guides and deliberative forums as a useful “self-starter.” They can spark the insight that we ourselves, singly and severally, are actors. And once we have that insight in relation to one problem, we may then begin to see ourselves as actors in relation to a range of other problems.

Deliberating together, we may see ourselves acting in community, not just on our own.

And so the research purpose of NIF issue guides evolved: making a public voice visible to policymakers *and also* supporting community politics.

Program officer Randall Nielsen, writing for *Connections* in 2005, describes the latter strand this way:

The foundation has learned a great deal about the nature of deliberative forums. Public deliberation can be an essential part of the development of a *shared sense of direction* on an issue. What that means in terms of the practical nature of decisions has been difficult to pin down, in part because of variance in the nature of issues. However, we have learned more about how that shared recognition can result in the *political will* necessary to bring what often seems to be a cacophony of activities into more harmonious concert. It can also facilitate the identification of actions that might otherwise have gone unrecognized. This is a key element of what has come to be termed “public knowledge.” We can thus show that politics is not merely a matter of organizing or allocating existing resources; it can be a generative, creative force.

The practices of public deliberation are thus conceived not as an abstract normative ideal, but as a functional form of human interaction that makes dealing with political issues more effective. Public deliberation is not the end; it is a necessary means of making democracy work as it should.

Note that Kettering is not saying here that *NIF forums* are necessary to democ-

1933

1934

The Issue Guide and the Issue Forum: Political Inventions

racy, but that a *deliberating public* is. NIF forums are simply one place to see public deliberation—and to spark it.

Kettering continues to develop issue guides for NIF because of the rich areas of research such public deliberation continues to provide.

Things Held Valuable

The way issues typically get presented on a policy level are manifestly different from how citizens see those same issues. Citizens name issues differently, and these re-namings give rise to different options for action—re-framings. For example, citizens may not think about an “achievement gap” that professional educators must address, but may instead worry about why different kids seem to get different results for reasons that don’t seem fair. The latter formulation of the problem is one in which citizens may see themselves having a role. The options for addressing the problem will be different and are likely to contain much more that can be done on the level of community as opposed to institutionally. And so a barber may think to provide haircuts free of charge to children, if they will read aloud while he cuts. A community-level institution thus can be seen as one of the many actors that can productively be involved in the shared enterprise of educating local young people.

Kettering research increasingly shows that citizens see issues in terms of things that are deeply valuable to them and that wicked problems involve tensions



between these things. Evolution has wired humans to seek security, for instance, and has also wired them to seek freedom to act. The more of one that we pursue, the less we have of the other. An effective issue framework will make these tensions clear.

This way of framing issues is sometimes (often) at odds with the way these same issues are framed in policy discourse. It is disruptive. This can pose difficulties when it comes time to demonstrate the value of public deliberation to policymakers. Kettering is experimenting with various ways of doing this as a part of its A Public Voice initiatives, an experiment to see how we might productively involve policymakers in developing issue frameworks that are rooted in public research and conducive to public deliberation.

Another, newer experiment with issue guides is just beginning. NIF issue guides

are national in scope and, even though they are intended for use in communities, there can be problems getting community-based traction to hold forums. The facts on the ground or the potential actors may be slightly different. Or there may be other differences between how an issue looks locally and how it might look on a more national basis. We are beginning to experiment with changes in how we present issue guides to make them more easily “customizable” to local communities while at the same time maintaining the aspects that make them useful as self-starters.

If you are interested in such experiments, we look forward to hearing from you and possibly learning with you about ways to do this.

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