

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2017

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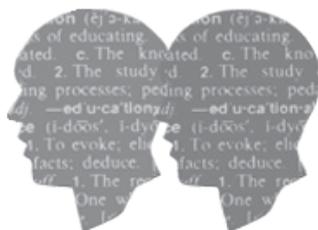
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

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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We dedicate this issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* to Dan Yankelovich, who just passed away. His writing about public judgment has been critical to Kettering's understanding of deliberation. His seminal book *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* is required reading for thoughtful scholars of democracy.

He was not only an emeritus board member of the Kettering Foundation; he was also a great friend. We will all miss him.

David Mathews

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Foreword

DELIBERATION AS PUBLIC JUDGMENT

Recovering the Political Roots of a Democratic Practice

Derek W. M. Barker

This volume, along with our allied publications *Connections* and the *Kettering Review*, is part of Kettering’s annual review of its research. It focuses on how our research programs relate to current trends in democracy in the United States and around the world. In view of recent challenges within our public life, our democracy is increasingly in need of public discourse that transcends partisan divides. A movement for “dialogue and deliberation,” informed in part by academic research, has grown in popularity and positioned itself to meet these challenges. However, upon closer scrutiny, our review has revealed a sense of confusion about what these related terms and practices mean. This issue of *HEX* brings together key writings that have influenced Kettering’s concept of deliberation, understood as a practice of judgment under conditions of disagreement, and an alternative to the politics of division and polarization. We then reflect on the implications of this concept of deliberation for higher education in general, and specifically for those in colleges and universities working with Kettering to make our democracy work as it should. As an incubator for this movement, higher education can lead the way in recovering the political roots of deliberation, but only if it conceives its civic role in larger terms, beyond the reproduction and dissemination of academic knowledge.

Of course, our democracy has faced ongoing challenges that have been of long-term concern to Kettering: polarizing public discourse, partisan gridlock, and the ongoing loss of confidence in government. Without a doubt, the recent election—not the result, but the process—has exacerbated and intensified many of these trends. A degree of polarization has been built into our political system. To that extent, the current climate is nothing new. The dominant theory of American politics, laid out in the *Federalist Papers*, has always seen politics as a balance of power among competing “factions,” rooted in free elections and an institutional system of complex checks and balances. Political and social theorists, from Tocqueville to Robert Putnam and Jürgen Habermas, have

recognized the importance of a healthy civic sphere to moderate the competitive dynamic of electoral politics.

However, our current climate seems to go beyond the founders' vision of healthy competition. While elected officials have always had their disagreements, research has confirmed partisanship in Washington has grown to new levels. Media polarization is also on the rise. According to one recent discourse analysis of cable news television, the polarization of mainstream news shows is almost indistinguishable from satirical shows like *The Colbert Report*. Not only are we confronted with ongoing socioeconomic and geographical divides; now social media further enables segmentation into bubbles of like-minded groups. Ironically, information is now easily accessible to anyone with a cell phone, but now the citizenry cannot even agree upon what constitutes factual information, much less how to interpret its implications.

This climate of tension and divisiveness is at the center of a cluster of related challenges. In addition to the usual gridlock, the discourse of “winners” and “losers” raises the stakes of politics. Each side fears that the other seeks power to impose its will, further increasing the sense of tension and mistrust. As politics comes to be seen exclusively as a competition for power, the outcomes have less claim to be regarded as the expression of a deliberative process that represents the common good. While traditional theories of electoral systems thought that adequate checks and balances could be enough to maintain the confidence of the citizenry, we have observed a continuing loss of confidence in the political system. Indeed, approval ratings of Congress continue to set new record lows, and this lack of confidence has spread to other public institutions. (Kettering has recently heard first-hand from both philanthropy CEOs and university presidents that their institutions have increasing difficulty articulating their public benefits in the highly politicized environment). The project of restoring our capacity for constructive public discourse on complex issues—what we have called “deliberation”—is as urgent now as it ever has been.

As a public institution, higher education would seem to be ideally placed to build bridges across these political divides. However, at least since the rise of the modern university, higher education has construed its neutrality narrowly, attempting to steer clear of politics rather than actively bridge political divides. At least since the advent of the modern research university, higher education has focused largely on the production and transmission of expert knowledge, conceiving its democratic role as informing the public. Higher education institutions are thus built around an epistemology that separates “facts” from “values,” and, understandably, the historical focus has been on the former rather than

the latter. However, if our current dysfunctions have more to do with political divisions than informational deficits, the question becomes what more expansive civic role is higher education capable of playing?

In recent years, higher education has begun to talk more actively about its civic role. As part of this civic renewal, the word “deliberation” has also enjoyed a resurgence, and higher education has played a key role in nurturing a field of practice across professional domains now ostensibly devoted to deliberative democracy. Academic research on deliberation can be found in numerous academic fields, including political theory, communication studies, public policy, and psychology. Related terms, such as dialogue, conflict resolution, visioning, and public engagement, are also on the rise, and are used in ways that overlap with deliberation. Moreover, campuses around the US have begun to move beyond the study of deliberation to actively incorporate deliberation and related approaches into their curriculum and civic programs.

In part because of all this attention, what deliberation means may be more varied and obscure than ever. Depending on their purposes and contexts, practices referred to under the rubric of “deliberation” may have various and even contradictory effects. Superficially, most uses of deliberation share certain similarities. They all use public meetings structured in some way to address conflicts and accomplish certain political outcomes. They all involve dialogue and deliberation practitioners that see themselves as part of a common professional network. At the same time, deliberation is used for strikingly different purposes, including civic education, conflict resolution, input into government policy and administration, and social justice, and sponsoring organizations make a variety of design choices to suit their purposes. Deliberations may serve purely consultative purposes, or may result in binding decisions. Topics may range from the most controversial issues of the day to narrow technical issues. Participants may be asked to consider varying degrees of factual information, or simply brainstorm ideas, with varying roles for experts and moderators (of course, in higher education, in particular, we would expect a natural tendency toward informational approaches with experts playing a stronger role). Despite such differences, the same word, “deliberation,” is used to describe the varied practices and examples taking place.

As a research foundation committed to a particular understanding of deliberation, our challenge is to be clear about what we mean when we use the term. This volume of *HEX* attempts to distill Kettering’s understanding of deliberation, based on 30 years of experience using the distinctive approach now known as National Issues Forums (NIF).

At least two important themes define Kettering's approach. First, this approach to deliberation is *political*. It aims to address dysfunctions of our political system, particularly the polarization of our public discourse and resulting loss of confidence in institutions. Rather than downplaying or avoiding disagreement, the focus of deliberation is squarely on divisive issues, but the idea is to *name* these issues in a public way that includes all concerns, while *framing* multiple options and their trade-offs. Our hope has been that the experience of deliberation could provide a positive political alternative to conventional adversarial politics. We refer to deliberation as a form of *public politics*, distinct from, but no less political than, *politics as usual*.

Second, at the center of our approach to deliberation is the exercise of the human faculty of *judgment*. That is, rather than technical or instrumental problems, we seek to apply deliberation primarily to the complex value questions that most divide our country. Because such questions cannot be answered objectively, no amount of technical knowledge can resolve them. Nor do we expect a unanimous consensus to resolve divisive issues. Rather, a process of public talking and thinking across differences can provide a larger shared understanding of the issues at stake, while reducing the gap between the extremes. While judgment lacks the certainty of scientific knowledge as well as the romantic appeal of a unanimous consensus, we think it is precisely the virtue that is needed to address the communicative dysfunctions of our current political climate.

To recover the political roots of deliberation, we begin with an excerpt from Jane Mansbridge's seminal book *Beyond Adversary Democracy*, an important precursor to the deliberative democracy movement. Mansbridge highlights the inherent adversarial nature of electoral systems, warning against our current challenges and dysfunctions if these tendencies were left unchecked.

We then turn to an excerpt from Ronald Beiner's *Political Judgement* to better articulate the sort of public thinking that is necessary under conditions of disagreement. Beiner distinguishes judgment from expert knowledge by locating judgment within the domain of *phronesis*, or practical reason, a general faculty for making decisions when scientific reasoning is insufficient. As Beiner argues, political judgment is compatible with deep-seated disagreement, on the one hand, and over-arching commonality, on the other, and is thus ideally suited for moderating between adversarial and unitary democracy.

An excerpt from *Coming to Public Judgment* by Dan Yankelovich further helps distinguish public judgment from unreflective public opinion. Most importantly, Yankelovich illustrates how public judgment involves "working through" the perspectives at stake in a contested issue, as well as their trade-offs.

In a new interview, we ask philosopher Noëlle McAfee and political theorist David McIvor to reflect on the democratic importance of judgment and its implications for the deliberative democracy movement. We ask whether practical efforts to promote deliberation may unwittingly emphasize narrow technical questions or minimize deep-seated moral disagreement. A renewed focus on judgment may help these efforts recover their political roots.

To further illustrate Kettering's approach to judgment-centered deliberation, Lori Britt reflects on her analysis of deliberative forum guides used to name and frame issues over years of collaboration with the National Issues Forums Institute.

As I have suggested, the focus of deliberation on judgment across differences stands in contrast to the traditional focus of higher education on technical knowledge. Even when talking about "civic engagement," universities typically mean either extending technical knowledge of experts to the community or engaging students in voluntary service activities. Kettering's research in higher education has focused on bringing deliberation to higher education civic engagement. Maura Casey provides a glimpse of such efforts taking root at Kingwood College under the leadership of Jay Theis, including forums to address the locally controversial issue of guns on campus. Harry Boyte reports on a national experiment that includes dozens of campuses around the country that are using deliberation to engage students and local communities on the mission of higher education and its role in educating young people for the changing world of work.

As our public discourse becomes increasingly adversarial, higher education and other expert professions may be tempted to double down on "informing" the public with expert knowledge. Kettering's research suggests that we are in need of something different, what the Greeks referred to as an *ethos*—a set of skills, norms, and habits for civic discourse in circumstances of conflict. Furthermore, if colleges and universities could help bridge our divides, as David Mathews argues, citizens might better recognize the public importance of these institutions. While higher education is in a position to help bridge our differences, its overwhelming tendency has been to prioritize technical knowledge at the expense of civic *ethos*. Proponents of deliberation may unwittingly compound the problem by confusing the two. We hope this collection will help practitioners of deliberation, as well as higher education as a whole, return their focus to the human faculty of judgment, and recover the political roots of deliberation.



CONTRIBUTORS

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DANIEL YANKELOVICH (1924–2017) was an American public opinion research pioneer and renowned social scientist who studied social change and public opinion in America for more than 40 years. In 1958, he established the marketing and research firm Daniel Yankelovich Inc., which was later renamed Yankelovich, Skelly, and White. In 1975, Yankelovich founded the nonprofit Public Agenda with former US Secretary of State Cyrus Vance. More recently, he founded Viewpoint Learning, as well as the Yankelovich Center for Social Science Research at the University of California, San Diego. A former trustee at the Carnegie Foundation for the Advancement of Education, the Charles F. Kettering Foundation, and Brown University, he was author or coauthor of 12 books, including *Toward Wiser Judgment* (with Will Friedman, Public Agenda, 2010), *Profit With Honor: The New Stage of Market Capitalism* (Yale University Press, 2006), and *The Magic of Dialogue: Transforming Conflict into Cooperation* (Simon and Schuster, 2001), which was awarded the 1999 Common Ground Book Award for Achievement in Conflict Resolution.



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