

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2018

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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.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the *Higher Education Exchange*, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.

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A Note of Appreciation

David Brown has not just been an editor of *HEX* since 1994. He is also its cocreator, together with former Kettering Foundation program officer Deborah Witte. The *Higher Education Exchange*, as readers will know, is a publication whose purpose is to facilitate a conversation in higher education about the role of academe in democracy, particularly the role of students as actors and producers.

David was ideal as an editor of the journal because he brought to the work an astonishing breadth of experience, both inside and outside the academy: from serving as deputy mayor of New York City under Mayor Ed Koch to teaching at Yale's School of Management and New School's Milano Graduate School, and serving as president of Blackburn College. His perceptive insights were evident in the interviews he conducted, which were regularly published in *HEX*. And he undoubtedly drew on what he learned from the *Exchange* in his own books, including *The Real Change-Makers: Why Government is Not the Problem or the Solution* and *America's Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects*.

His most recent contribution to Kettering's work has been to help launch a new initiative in higher education to cultivate a greater civic and democratic understanding of professionalism. We are deeply appreciative of David's many contributions to this journal and to Kettering's research. We are pleased to have Derek Barker, who is leading Kettering's studies of democracy and higher education, continue on as coeditor of the journal. And we welcome Alex Lovit as coeditor; he is leading Kettering's research on teaching deliberative democracy through historic decisions.

David Mathews

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Foreword

LEARNING TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY, DEMOCRATICALLY

Derek W. M. Barker

When visiting the United States in the early 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that the success of our institutions depended upon the richness of our civic life. Similarly, John Dewey described democracy as a “way of life,” rather than a set of discrete institutions. In the 21st century, many of the social tasks once performed by the citizenry have been taken over by impersonal institutions and organizations that are disconnected from our civic life. Kettering is a research organization with a stated mission to help make democracy work as it should. However, it is an organization that works with other organizations and professionals without intervening directly in particular communities. This year, as we have reviewed our research, we have asked ourselves, If democracy is understood as a civic culture or way of life, how can institutions and organizations, including Kettering and its network, hope to relate to democracy in a positive way?

In this year’s annual review of our research, we have focused not only on what we study but also how we at Kettering approach collaborative research. While Kettering is, itself, an organization composed of professionals, it aims to strengthen democracy that is understood as the civic life of the citizenry. The prospect of Kettering “creating” or “transforming” our democracy would be a contradiction in terms. Thus, we have asked, How can we work in a way that is consistent with the goals and substance of our work? How can an organization come to align itself with a democratic citizenry?

There are good reasons for the professionalization and bureaucratization of the civic sphere. The most efficient way to address large-scale and complex social problems is through social engineering, whether by authoritarian governments or by powerful nongovernmental funders. Indeed, social engineering can accomplish great things. Just look at the emergence of China’s market economy or efforts by international NGOs to eradicate malaria. Citizens working together, without a central authority, is a messier proposition and more difficult. Harry Boyte likens democracy to a form of *work*, and work is neither easy nor simple. The norms and habits of a citizenry may take centuries to develop.

It would seem that the world of institutions and professions simply has no role to play in strengthening our civic life. While these entities may be the most efficient in addressing the technical and policy dimensions of social problems, can they create a democratic culture? Prevailing models of social change may even be counterproductive from a democratic point of view, with any attempt to “serve” or “impact” society further displacing the work of the citizenry. Indeed, nothing could be more antidemocratic than creating democracy through social engineering. It is not apparent how professionals, working in organizations and institutions, can strengthen civic life without shutting down or destroying civic life at the same time.

Kettering’s annual review of its research focuses on this paradox. To avoid the pitfalls of the social-engineering approach, we have had to develop our own ways of working. These ways may, at first, seem unusual and counterintuitive in a world that tends to work through social engineering. In trying to align our work with the kind of democracy we hope to achieve, we have been led to work in ways that are perhaps more decentered than direct, more incremental than dramatic, more horizontal than vertical, and more facilitative than controlling. Kettering’s approach runs counter to the conventional logic of “scaling up,” “social transformation,” and so on. As a result, our approach needs some explanation.

In the process of this annual review, we have discovered just how different our way of working is from the social-engineering approach. At a fundamental level, institutions generally seek to use their power and resources to accomplish their agenda. Their impulse is to make a difference and demonstrate their impact. This can be tremendously effective at solving discrete technical problems with known solutions. However, different approaches may be needed when the problem is political in nature, involving inherent trade-offs among conflicting values. Moreover, social-engineering approaches also risk taking power away from the citizenry or creating dependency on funding and technical expertise. By contrast, as an operating foundation, Kettering does its own research, exchanging ideas and concepts with organizations and innovators. We do not fund programs of other organizations. Instead, we partner with other organizations as they become aligned with Kettering’s values, so, in a sense, they are doing Kettering’s work. While our partners always come with their own self-interests and professional perspectives, they come to have an overlap of interests as they are exposed to Kettering concepts and research. Of course, Kettering seeks to have impact, like any other organization with a mission, but we hope to work in a way that is impactful without creating dependency and power imbalance.

Social-engineering approaches often take already proven solutions (known as “best practices”) and replicate them on a larger scale. All that is needed is “training” in the best practices and the resources to spread them. While this is an efficient way of accomplishing change, our concern is that replicating existing practices may weaken the initiative and capacities of communities to develop their own solutions. By contrast, Kettering seeks to work through small experiments, tailored to specific circumstances and without any predetermined outcome. Kettering often plays a questioning role, rather than providing answers or “toolkits.” Our research exchanges tend to take place on a conceptual level, leaving questions of application and technical details to our partners (sometimes to their frustration). We are usually most effective in small, face-to-face groups in which we attempt to provoke deep scrutiny of our own concepts, as well as our partners’ experiences.

When assessing their impact, organizations often take a scientific approach using standardized metrics. While this ensures that they are objective about their own programs and can make the most efficient use of their resources, metrics-based assessment can have perverse effects, creating pressure on grantees to produce measurable results and shutting down innovation, as when educators “teach to the test.” We attempt to rigorously analyze experiments in our network, but more by asking questions and conceptualizing experiences.

Finally, when it comes to communications, organizations typically prefer to disseminate information from a centralized, authoritative source. They often seek to “leverage” networks as a way of expanding their control. Kettering is more interested to see members of our network communicating with one another, even when the interpretations and applications of our research are not what we intended.

None of this is to say that social engineering is bad, and democratic practices are good. Expert knowledge has a positive role to play in our society and can be tremendously effective at addressing certain groups of problems. Rather, the question, is How can expertise be aligned with a democratic citizenry, to recognize its limitations without colonizing the work and responsibilities of the citizenry?

This issue of *HEX* brings together a few examples from the field of higher education that have either informed or reflected Kettering’s approach to research. Whatever these stories lack in terms of measurable impacts, we hope you will find them rich in learning and collaboration. These experiments may appear frustratingly local and incremental, but we think these pieces at least capture the spirit and democratic energy of our network.

We begin with Harry Boyte's reflections on Public Achievement, a youth civic-engagement network that creates opportunities for college students to organize action projects with K-12 students in local schools. We asked Boyte to reflect on how Public Achievement maintained its grassroots character and managed to grow its network while resisting the pitfalls of the social-engineering approach.

An essay by Joni Doherty and Alice Diebel describes the evolution of a network of campus centers, united by a central focus on the principles and values of deliberative democracy through a series of research exchanges that have taken place over three decades at Kettering. As our research with these centers has evolved, Kettering has consciously eschewed a "training" model to allow learning and experimentation to take place within the network itself.

Similarly, the next two pieces illustrate the type of learning and network building that has taken place in Kettering partnerships with other organizations. Lorlene Hoyt recounts her experience representing the Talloires Network, a consortium of universities around the world that have committed to civic engagement, while Jay Theis, Carrie Kisker, and Alberto Olivas reflect on their work spreading dialogue and deliberation to The Democracy Commitment, a network of community colleges around the United States.

In an interview with *HEX*, Nicholas Longo and Marshalita Peterson talk about their learning process as they have come to practice and champion "deliberative pedagogy" as a democratic approach to the art of teaching. Built upon prior interests and experiences, interaction with Kettering and its network deepened their interest in and understanding of this important democratic practice.

Coeditor Alex Lovit considers three books that focus in large part on the question of whether higher education's benefits are primarily for private consumers or for the public good. The American higher education system has often portrayed itself as serving community needs and promoting democracy. However, if democracy is understood as rooted in the norms and habits of the citizenry, higher education cannot create its own public purpose. The recent literature on higher education's struggles for a sense of purpose may be understood as a reflection of this difficulty, suggesting that a new way of relating to the citizenry is needed.

Finally, David Mathews concludes with his reflections on the overarching challenge of realigning the way institutions and professions work to reflect the values of a democracy with citizens at the center and on Kettering's own experience in learning to strengthen democracy, democratically.



CONTRIBUTORS

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HARRY C. BOYTE is a public intellectual and organizer. He founded Public Achievement and cofounded with Marie Ström the Public Work Academy. He holds the title of Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg University. Boyte is the author of 11 books, including *Awakening Democracy through Public Work* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2018). His articles have appeared in more than 150 publications, including the *New York Times*, *Political Theory*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In the 1960s, Boyte was a field secretary for SCLC, organized by Martin Luther King Jr., and subsequently did community organizing among low-income white residents in Durham, North Carolina.

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DAVID MATHEWS, president of the Kettering Foundation, was secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration and, before that, president of the University of Alabama. Mathews has written extensively on Southern history, public policy, education, and international problem solving. His books include *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice, Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, and *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*.

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