

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2017

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Formatting: Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

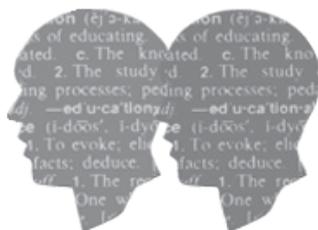
The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

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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ISSN 2469-6293 (print)
ISSN 2471-2280 (online)



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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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HOW CIVIC ENGAGEMENT SPREAD ACROSS SIX COLLEGE CAMPUSES

Maura Casey

While most colleges and universities see themselves as important to our democracy, too often this is understood in terms of academic knowledge. Recently, however, we are starting to see campuses making a serious commitment to using deliberation to help their students develop the skills of working together on divisive issues. Maura Casey documents a notable example at Lone Star College.

Jay Theis had a newly-minted doctorate in political science when he became concerned about the fate of a Methodist church that was closing across the street from his Kansas City home.

It was then, he said, that he truly learned about politics.

He began to ask questions about what would happen to the building, contacting residents and organizing people until he was working with five neighborhood associations. Through the process, Theis got to know both his state senator and state representative.

He was hooked.

“For the first time in my life, I began to see what politics was like. I wanted to bring that to the students I was teaching in political science classes,” Theis said.

He began looking for ways to give students more experience with democracy that went beyond voting. At the request of his department head at the college where he taught, Theis met

with a Minnesota group interested in civic engagement. One person from that group, Harry Boyte, talked about helping people identify issues in their community and getting young people

involved. “I thought, ‘This is exactly the experience I want my students to have.’ So I told them, ‘I’m in. Political science doesn’t teach this stuff. Let’s figure out how to do this.’”

“For the first time in my life, I began to see what politics was like.”

It began a nearly 20-year involvement that, in turn, led to civic engagement and, eventually, the Kettering Foundation. Along the way, Theis discovered that his passion led him to find ways to get more involved, and in turn, helped his students experience hands-on learning. When he left Kansas City and

applied for jobs in Houston, at every juncture he spoke about his desire to help his students get involved in democracy. “When you go through an interview process, every school asks what you do that nobody else does. The thing I did that nobody else did was civic-engagement work,” Theis said. Kingwood, one of six campuses in the Lone Star College system in Texas, responded and hired him.

Katherine Perrson, president of the Kingwood branch of Lone Star College, is a true believer in public engagement. “Like most grand efforts, we started small,” she said. Theis worked with high school juniors and seniors attending Kingwood’s early college program, and matched them with college students who acted as mentors. They picked a project to improve their community and worked on it all year as part of the public achievement program.

“The kids think that this kind of change is simple. But it takes more planning and working with people, even if the aim is just to keep a skating rink open a few more hours,” Perrson said. “What was always fun to hear about is what they did when Plan A didn’t work.”

Theis’s efforts eventually brought him to Dayton, Ohio, for a series of research exchanges on the democratic mission of community colleges and the deliberative role they can play. “I got an invitation to go to the Kettering Foundation around 2011, based on the public achievement program I was involved in. I thought this deliberation stuff looked kind of interesting. Deliberation is an essential democratic skill. The way we talk about politics is so vitriolic sometimes that getting students to just talk about these controversial issues is not only valuable for them as citizens, but I found that other faculty members really gravitated toward it and it became a good way to get them interested in civic engagement,” Theis said.

He introduced deliberation to students using a variety of issue guides, and recruited a speech professor to train a group of student moderators, which grew to include 20 students. He also began to approach other faculty to get involved. “I would tell them, ‘If you let me bring in my students and let your class deliberate on the issues, it could be one day you don’t have to prepare a lecture.’ It was very appealing. So we got into some education and history classes,” Theis said.

Theis became an evangelist for deliberation and civic engagement. He presented his ideas and activities to professors informally and at systemwide events. Using a National Issues Forums issue guide, he conducted a forum on the future of higher education where the president and senior leadership of the college grappled with the issue. Word spread. Theis led a group of faculty that began to invite speakers to evening meetings. The efforts began to change

the campus culture. “Students who are involved with the college are more likely to complete their degree,” he said.

Then-sophomore Prince Winbush couldn’t agree more. “If I didn’t have these activities, I would have dropped out by now. This has been an anchor for me,” he said.

When Winbush first attended Kingwood, he heard about the Center for Civic Engagement, which Theis began with several other faculty members. “I thought it would be amazing to get involved,” Winbush said. After receiving moderator training, he moderated three forums, helped register voters at three different campuses, got involved with collecting food donations for local food pantries, and is looking forward to volunteering for Kingwood’s book festival next year, which brings more than 100 authors to the campus.

The center, which coordinates various activities, also offers six different service-learning or emersion trips on a variety of topics during spring break, two of which are international. One is on the immigrant experience, in which students meet with members of the Border Patrol, talk to documented and undocumented immigrants, and meet with immigrant-advocacy groups. Another is “Civil Rights and the Blues,” which involves going to Mississippi and meeting civil-rights veterans and those who registered African American voters in the Delta during the 1960s.

Through these activities, Perrson said, the college became comfortable with having community-wide dialogue on difficult issues, such as racism. When the public debate concerning guns on campus became heated, Perrson knew what to do. She asked Theis to organize deliberations on the matter. Theis called in all of his student moderators, built on the partnership that had developed with Windy Lawrence at University of Houston-Downtown to involve their moderators (ultimately, he arranged for 30 moderators to help), and wrote an issue guide on the topic. Within two weeks, he had arranged to hold deliberative forums in the biggest area on campus, at tables capable of seating 10 each. Theis assumed 200 people would attend. About 350 showed up, including Congresswoman Sheila Jackson Lee and members of Open Carry Texas, a gun-rights group, whose members not only joined the discussion, but also videotaped it.

When the public debate concerning guns on campus became heated, Perrson knew what to do. She asked Theis to organize deliberations on the matter.

The next day, Open Carry Texas posted the video, praising the event as fair and expressing the opinion that more such forums should take place. Theis considers it his biggest success so far.

Last year, Perrson released Theis from an obligation to teach classes, and the chancellor gave him a budget, appointed him director of the center, and asked him to organize all the college campuses in the system around civic engagement—six different schools, 90,000 students, and 6,000 employees.

So what's next?

"I want to get the community involved in a way that has an impact on politics. I want deliberation to be done in a way that increases community-campus partnerships. There is potential here to broaden the reach of these practices," he said.

"There is a public purpose to education that goes back to the founding of public schools. It helps make our democracy work better. Too often, our

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notion of democracy is voting and going home, and waiting for leaders to fix our problem. But that isn't democracy. Democracy should be working with leaders, working across differences, parties, fixing things in our community. To do that, we have to talk to people, figure out where they are coming from, craft solutions that don't divide people.

"It's simple," Theis said. "Basically, I have taken the skills of organizing the community around the church and the skills I taught in my classes and I applied them to my college."



CONTRIBUTORS

DEREK W. M. BARKER is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. With a background in political theory, he works primarily on research concerning the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, and journalism. Barker is the coeditor (with David W. Brown) of Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange*, and has contributed to other Kettering publications, including the *Kettering Review* and *Connections*. Barker is the author of *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* (SUNY Press, 2009), and articles appearing in *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, and *The Good Society*.

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