

CONNECTIONS

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Countering Democracy's Challenges

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Recasting the Narratives That Shape Our Public Life

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Being a Civically Engaged College

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Experiments in
**DEMOCRATIC
CITIZENSHIP**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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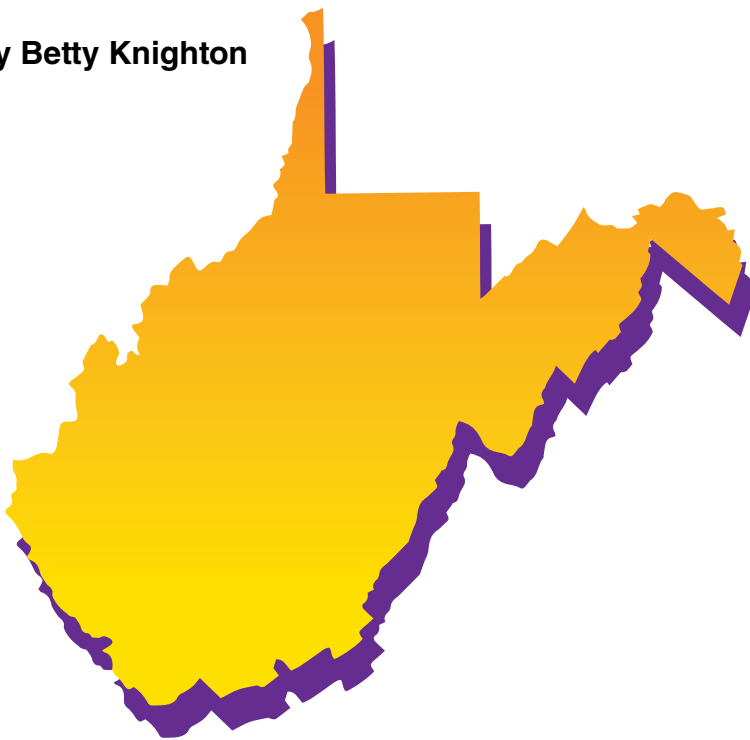


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Becoming a Catalyst for Civic Learning

By Betty Knighton



For more than 20 years—even before its development as a statewide nonprofit organization—the West Virginia Center for Civic Life has engaged in learning exchanges with the Kettering Foundation and the worldwide network of democratic entrepreneurs it helps to connect. The opportunities to glean insights from the multinational research of Kettering and to share

insights from the work of West Virginia residents have been key to our development as an organization that puts ongoing civic learning at the heart of its mission.

TRUE NORTH

As we have charted our course over the years, “true north” has always been the desire to work with West Virginians who want to develop ways to have constructive conversations about shared concerns—conversations that will take them to deeper levels of understanding, sound choices, and more effective public action. We have found many state residents are drawn to the practices of public deliberation because the processes they were using weren’t working—or weren’t working well enough.

In our work, public deliberation refers to ways that people think together to accomplish critical goals: identifying ways an issue affects their lives, talking through the inevitable tensions among ways to move forward, and identifying civic resources that can be put to work in complementary ways. Another term for this work is “democratic citizenship.”

Our role is to be a catalyst for constructive development in these processes of citizenship, without having a partisan stake in any topic or issue. As a catalyst, we work with

“What’s Next is about creating the conversations—and the relationships—that allow communities to decide where they want to go.”

—Kent Spellman
West Virginia Community Development Hub

“Through What’s Next, we talk and work with others who want to make progress that improves lives.”

—Jeff Allen
West Virginia Council of Churches

“The conversations people have away from the politicized environment are very different. It’s not about coal vs. the economy. It’s about their personal struggles.”

—Scott Finn
West Virginia Public Broadcasting

“No community was ever developed based on what it did not have. Through What’s Next, people come together to consider what they can create with the assets they have.”

—Becky Ceperley
Greater Kanawha Valley Foundation

those who want to create environments and opportunities for public dialogue to work more effectively. One aspect of the work is to convene seminars and workshops, such as the annual Civic Life Institute, at which participants can explore the democratic roles of community convenor, dialogue facilitator, and civic engagement networker.

Equally important are the deeper interactions with people and organizations that want to develop dialogue initiatives on particular public issues. In our early exchanges with Kettering, we experienced the potential and the possibility of working with others through learning exchanges. In our work in West Virginia, we continue to learn how to provide practical resources and also to elicit networks of people who are learning from and with each other. We have found that the mutual benefits gained from learning together are what creates and strengthens networks that continue to grow over time.

SHAREABLE INTERESTS

Our most fruitful partnerships involve intersections of the diverse but interrelated interests of citizens, their civic associations, and formal organizations in communities. These partnerships often occur in the context of a specific project, where community-based or state-level

organizations bring their experience in working to address an issue, and we bring experience with the practices people use to make dialogue constructive.

Over the past 20 years, as we have partnered with organizations that have organized community initiatives throughout the state, our distinct focus has been on developing sustainable democratic practices. Our assumption has been that we need to intentionally and strategically work in ways that support growing networks of learning partnerships with people and organizations in communities. We have seen that democratic practices continue over time as new issues emerge when networks of learning are in place.

What are we learning about how to work in this way? As I reflect, I find myself returning to a concept that had a powerful impact on me many years ago: “shareable interests.” I was introduced to the concept by David Mathews in his “All of Politics” essay:

Common ground often has to be created. . . . There has to be a more creative integration of people’s motivations to create new interests that did not exist before. The ability to integrate a variety of different interests, to transform them into shareable interests, is the ability to have a stronger and

more inclusive sense of what is common than any conceivable aggregating of particular interests.

Our initial understanding of shareable interests related to the ways community members set directions through deliberative discussions of political issues. The concept recognizes that encouraging complementary acting on such issues is not a matter



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of finding a consensus regarding some particular action or policy. The *political* challenge of democratic public acting is in recognizing that there are myriad interrelations among different actions by different people and organizations.

Over the years, however, the notion of shareable interests has taken on an even more powerful and practical meaning for our center. It has become a foundational insight for considering how to build working relationships with others as they recognize their own interests in promoting constructive nonpartisan public dialogue.

The range of organizations that we have worked with is wide, but very

few have organizational missions that mirror our particular focus on democratic citizenship. We have learned that the key is to work with others in ways that reveal our different but shareable interests in making democracy work. Much of the challenge—and the satisfaction—in our work is in discovering with others how the development of democratic citizenship can enhance the missions of their organizations.

We have learned how the emergence of the idea of shareable interests can occur. And we have seen how the insight can allow advocacy organizations to promote neutral facilitation, can allow overburdened social service organizations to devote precious time to open dialogue practices, and can allow government agencies to try new, less certain practices under the public spotlight.

DEMOCRATIC ECONOMIC CHANGE

In 2014, we entered into a learning exchange with Kettering regarding ways to develop active citizenship in the governance of economic change. Given the fundamental changes facing West Virginians, it was an opportune time to explore insights from Kettering's research in this area. A key focus of the exchange has become a statewide initiative called *What's Next, West Virginia?* The



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initiative is designed to encourage community-based practices through which citizens set directions and act toward positive economic futures for their communities—and for the state.

The initiative provides fertile ground to examine Kettering's research into what it takes for democracy to work as it should: citizens who make sound decisions about their future, communities that work together to address common concerns, and institutions that work with others in communities to strengthen society.

WHY WHAT'S NEXT?

We could see that throughout the state many people were working to build strong communities with local economies that meet the needs of their residents. They were identifying local assets as they dealt with difficult challenges: changing job markets, shifts in demographics, and competition with a global economy.

But while much work was underway in West Virginia, it was also apparent that there were few opportunities for constructive discussions that examine different points of view across sectors and geographical boundaries. Believing that the time was right and the need was great, we and many partnering organizations formed a planning coalition to consider ways to foster opportunities



for our residents to think deeply and to set directions for addressing public issues important to their own community's well-being. This broad—and growing—coalition includes nonprofit, philanthropic, economic, governmental, educational, and faith-based organizations.

The goal behind these community discussions is not merely to

draw a crowd and fill a room with opinionated people. The purpose is much bigger and more powerful. When people talk together about common concerns, they begin to see themselves as public actors. They talk about what *they* can do, not just what *others* ought to do. *What's Next, West Virginia?* is based on the belief that communities in a democracy are healthier when citizens are doing the work of citizens.

WHAT'S IN A NAME?

In the early stage of the initiative, the planning team talked to hundreds of West Virginians to understand how they saw the economic chal-

lenges and opportunities facing their communities. We quickly discovered just how significantly the naming of economic issues affects how and whether people see themselves as public actors.

In initiatives on other issues, we had conducted similar group interviews and informal individual conversations with residents to gather concerns and understand diverse points of view. The practice served us well. It has led to the development of issue frameworks effective in helping communities talk and work together on a wide range of issues, such as substance abuse, domestic violence, the needs of young children, dropout prevention, and childhood obesity. In each of those initiatives, residents gave full-throated responses to these basic questions and connected the issue quite automatically to their own experiences.

Such full-throated, personal responses were much less common during our first round of interviews to gather West Virginian's insights about the economic future of the state. Often, when we asked "What concerns you about West Virginia's economy?" or "What could be done to improve your community's economy?" we were met with perplexed looks, sometimes with silence, and sometimes with the explanation: "I



WHAT'S NEXT, *West Virginia?*

don't really know much about the economy.”

Clearly our questions were not allowing many West Virginians to connect the reality of their own experiences, hopes, and concerns with “the economy” of the state—certainly not in a way that revealed a role for themselves in shaping it. We reconsidered the kind of questions that would allow such associations to be made and headed back into West Virginia communities with a new list: What would it take for you and your family to thrive in West Virginia? What could allow your community to prosper? What concerns you about your family's future? What would make you feel more secure?

The new questions allowed the floodgates to open—as West Virginians articulated concerns and hopes about improved health and education, cultural attitudes and mind-sets, the quality of leadership and community relations, and yes, job opportunities and workforce development. Many people saw these issues as inextricably linked, such as the small business owners who worried about their ability to hire workers who were healthy enough to provide the labor they needed to remain a viable part of their local economy.

As the discussions unfolded across the state, it became clear that “our



A strong future will require economic entrepreneurs, but it will also require civic entrepreneurs. It will require an ever-evolving and growing body of insights about constructive public practices and how they can be implemented to strengthen democracy and improve lives.

economic future” is not *an* issue, but rather a wide range of interconnected issues impossible for any sector to address alone. This broad constellation of concerns has remained at the forefront of subsequent *What's Next* community-based initiatives as each community determines which issues to prioritize based on their own local needs and opportunities. We have seen communities talking and acting together on issues they choose to name as key to their economic well-being: mentoring of young entrepreneurs in one commu-

nity, enhancing systems to help the homeless in another, and addressing substance abuse in yet another.

POLYCENTRIC ISSUES

What are we learning about how West Virginians can interact as citizens in their economy? One of the most powerful insights we have gleaned is that what our residents call “the economy” is fundamentally about people—people who teach the community’s children, mine the region’s coal, run a small business, operate a large hospital, pastor a local church, or serve on the county commission or in the state legislature. Everyone is a player in the economy, with the right and responsibility to help shape it. It follows, then, that improving the economy requires strengthening connections, relationships, and decision-making practices to get things done.

Or, as a community member in Fayetteville recently put it: “If everyone is having a separate conversation, we all just get tired and worn out, and we feel like we’re spinning our wheels or beating our heads against the wall. The *What’s Next* discussion is so important because it’s in this relationship building that we can begin to help each other find answers.”

With relationship building in mind, we are focusing on how people in their own communities can build coalitions of organizations

and citizens that create an environment in which people can practice active citizenship. Communities, in turn, are creating “civic space” in which multiple opportunities for interactions among people with diverse perspectives can set directions together as a decision-making public.

MOVING FORWARD

A strong future for West Virginia will include new economic opportunities. Identifying them will require new relationships, new connections, and new ways of talking and working together. A strong future will require economic entrepreneurs, but it will also require civic entrepreneurs. It will require an ever-evolving and growing body of insights about constructive public practices and how they can be implemented to strengthen democracy and improve lives.

Our evolution as a center for civic life that learns and grows will also depend on that spirit of entrepreneurship. Along with our ongoing exchanges with the Kettering Foundation’s growing networks of innovators, our center will continue to learn with the many West Virginians dedicated to creating the kind of democratic interactions they want and need. ■

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