

# CONNECTIONS

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**THE PUBLIC AND INSTITUTIONS:**  
Fractured or United?

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](http://www.kettering.org).

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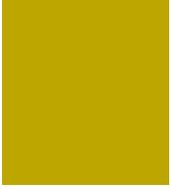
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# Libraries as Islands of Trust

By Ellen Knutson

**T**he decline of trust between citizens and institutions is a long-standing concern and serious issue in democracy. Despite this problem, libraries in the United States remain islands of trust in a sea of suspicion. Polls back this up: according to Pew Research Center, about 8 out of 10 people trust libraries and librarians. This report discusses a series of Kettering Foundation learning exchanges that began in 2015 with librarians who have explored this relationship and investigated ways that libraries could help communities address pressing problems.

Libraries' track records of exchanges, community meetings, and deliberations came in handy throughout the tumult of 2020–21. To explore the unprecedented pressures that occurred, the foundation first convened librarians in July 2020

on Zoom to hear how they were coping with the COVID-19 pandemic and with social uprisings in the wake of the police murder of George Floyd. We listened as they discussed how to capitalize on existing relationships to learn what was troubling their communities, how to decide and how to act, and to learn what was contributing to an atmosphere of divisiveness.

The following themes emerged from that initial exchange:

- People were feeling overwhelmed. The librarians reported this about themselves, but they also saw this in their communities.
- Mental health was a primary concern, though this was layered with other pressures that people were feeling due to COVID-19, racial injustice, and economic disparities.
- There was a sense that people were acting and reacting out of fear and defensiveness, and librarians questioned how to get people to a different state without minimizing the emotions that may have led them there.
- Youth leadership gave reasons for optimism.
- Early in the pandemic, people came together to give mutual aid. But as time went on, this diminished in some communities.



*Libraries and the Public research exchange, Kettering Foundation, Dayton, Ohio, November 2017*

- Local polarization seemed to be more centered around Black Lives Matter and on mask wearing.
- People acknowledged that libraries are a good place for community conversations, but many had questions about next steps after the conversations ended.
- Participants recognized the ease in which libraries can partner with other institutions and expressed familiarity with the ways in which business can be conducted (through memoranda of understanding, for instance); however, these actions are not necessarily the same as partnering with people in the community.



**The decline of trust between citizens and institutions is a long-standing concern and serious issue in democracy. Despite this problem, libraries in the United States remain islands of trust in a sea of suspicion.**



**Over many years, libraries have been moving toward becoming more open to the community and more democratic. The trust that people have in libraries plays an important role in this continuing movement.**

After this initial virtual exchange, we met two additional times over Zoom and homed in on the question, “How can libraries engage people beyond the usual suspects to begin to address pressing community issues?” We focused on the ways in which libraries can be boundary-spanning institutions. One challenge we might face is when the people who need to be engaged are the 2 out of 10 who don’t have trust in the library.

After one exchange, Erica Fruedenberger from the Southern Adirondack Library System reflected, “To do this work requires a realignment of perspective. Instead of seeing our community as something to be served or empowered, we recognize it as comprised of individuals with talent and expertise. [If we] invite

people to take an active role in our organizations, we can move toward becoming the democratic bastions we claim we are.”

### **BUILDING ON A HISTORY OF COMMUNITY WORK**

Over many years, libraries have been moving toward becoming more open to the community and more democratic. The trust that people have in libraries plays an important role in this continuing movement.

That trust places libraries in a strong position to shift from primarily providing services to offering programs in which libraries work with citizens and communities on a public problem. For example, in a learning exchange that ran from 2015 to 2017, five libraries experimented with using the deliberative democratic practices described in David Mathews’ book, *The Ecology of Democracy*.

In Portland, Oregon, the team from Multnomah County Library brought together patrons who are experiencing homelessness and library staff for regular sessions of coffee and conversation at the central library. These informal gatherings challenged the typical patterns of interaction (which often focused on behavior modification) and led to changes in how these two groups relate to each other. The experiment garnered interest from both man-

agement and librarians in other branches who also wanted to shift the way in which they relate to this group of patrons.

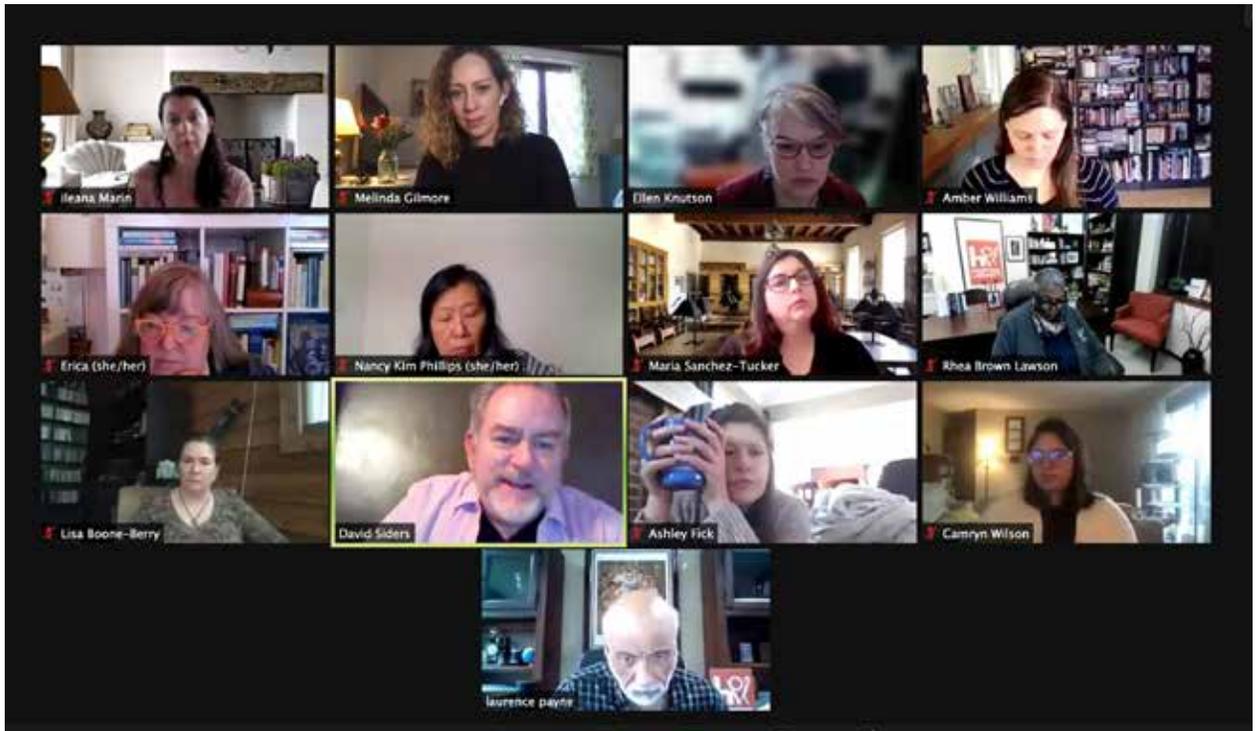
The Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library developed a planning advisory team that worked with other city and community organizations to organize forums around the problem of how a downtown public park should be used. Originally, the team framed the issue as one of homelessness, but as they worked with the community, the team came to understand this public problem more broadly as park usage cut across multiple issues facing the community.

At the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Kansas, the team responsible for the library's new learn-and-play bus adapted its standard decision-making procedures to include 15-minute concern-collecting sessions with children's caregivers. Earlier efforts to get community input focused on conversations with educational experts and other professionals, but they did not necessarily reveal what mattered most to the community. Putting children and their caregivers at the center significantly changed how the bus was being utilized. Goals now extend beyond academic success to include children's social and emotional readiness for kindergarten and

developing a learning community composed of caregivers to share expertise and experiences. Staff training now includes active listening and shifting the teacher role to a learning facilitator.

Similarly, in New Jersey, academics from Rutgers University working with the New Brunswick Free Public Library found that starting with conversations with members of an underserved population revealed a mismatch in a model for delivering consumer health information through libraries. Public health professionals developed the initial model but did not center on the actual health needs and concerns of an already marginalized community.

Finally, at the Houston Public Library, librarians partnered with a grassroots literacy organization housed in a church, a school, and parents to support the learning needs of elementary students. Unfortunately, during the project, Hurricane Harvey devastated the city in 2017. The neighborhood in which librarians were working was hit particularly hard, so the library and community shifted their focus to support residents' most basic needs (housing, food, clothing, and disaster recovery resources). Library staff reported that the efforts resulted in stronger relations, which "demonstrated what is possible when community members



*Libraries as Boundary-Spanning Institutions research exchange, February 2021*

come together . . . We are Houston Strong.”

Over two years, librarians gained insights from direct experience with sustained experiments that shifted their professional routines, even in small ways. Although libraries benefited from strong public trust, that did not always mean there were strong relationships throughout the community. The nature of the work requires a good deal of trust between the library and the community, and between individual librarians and specific community members. The librarians needed to change their mindsets from providing services for the community to becoming

convenors and connectors, sometimes outside of library walls. It also called for community members to think of themselves not just as consumers of library services but as active participants in the public life of their regions, and to see the way the library can go beyond providing them books and information by facilitating their engagement in public life.

Each library team commented on the slow nature of developing relationships with community members with whom they intended to work. Some described the process of moving from working with other institutions, organizations, or experts that

already work with the community to working directly with community members. Recall the earlier example of how Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library librarians started having short concern-gathering conversations with caregivers on their new learn-and-play bus. In another example, Houston librarians reached out to library patrons and partners in an attempt to reach nonlibrary users. They first connected with a pastor who led the grassroots literacy group, who then connected them to families who were not yet library users.

Moving from typical outreach activities to relationship building was a struggle and involved going to where the community members are, rather than waiting for people to come to the library. Making initial contact was just a start. The challenges of building and maintaining relationships so people come back—and perhaps even more important, take some ownership over both the process and programs—is ongoing.

### **CRITICAL CONVERSATIONS AND DELIBERATIVE DIALOGUE**

In the next round of library learning exchanges, we further explored ways in which libraries capitalize on public trust to build relationships that support community deliberative decision-making. Librarians participating in the learning exchanges focused on creating spaces and part-



**Moving from typical outreach activities to relationship building was a struggle and involved going to where the community members are, rather than waiting for people to come to the library.**

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nerships for critical conversation and deliberative dialogue.

Librarians at Virginia Beach Public Library held open-ended community conversations to learn the concerns and aspirations of area residents. Community members said they wanted the library to convene more such gatherings and to ensure that more people would be invited to participate. According to their final report, “[Virginia Beach Public Library] is seen as a safe space for conversation and a kind of neutral ground . . . [Participants] expressed trust, comfort, and gratitude to the library for being the place that continually provides them these opportunities.”

Larry Payne at Houston Public Library convened forums using an issue guide for public deliberation. The issue guide *Bridging and Bonding: How Can We Create Engaged Communities in a Time of Rapid Change?* provided a framework for engaging the community on Houston's changing demographics. The city's bicentennial will be in 2036, and librarians wanted to start convening community members to discuss what needs to happen for Houston to continue to grow and perhaps become a less divided

city. As Payne said, "The value expressed from participants was that the conversations were focused on improving understanding and future decision-making."

In her role as health information librarian at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library, Lissa Staley worked with the health equity workgroup of Heartland Healthy Neighborhoods. Together, they decided to use National Issues Forums issue guides for the community deliberations on issues that affect health outcomes (social determinants of health). Staley noted that a lot of their work goes beyond the library perspective as they continue to develop a sustainable network of partners and develop issue guides. Debbie Stanton wrote in a library board report, "I had the opportunity to attend [a deliberative forum] in November and can attest to the profound impact these types of discussions can have in our community—the discussion was thoughtful and focused. Just the practice of talking about difficult subjects in this way can positively impact other discussions the community is having."

The Ohio State University Libraries used the National Issues Forums issue guide on mental health to bring together various groups on campus. One of their librarians noted, "We learned that providing a reason and



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place for people who care about a common issue to meet one another does help to bring people together . . . [Deliberation] can also be a tool for networking, building, and strengthening relationships.”

David Siders and Holbrook Sample at Cincinnati and Hamilton County Public Library shared that in one recent community conversation, residents stated that the library needed to convene community dialogue. Siders and Sample went on to say that the library is perhaps the best place—a natural fit—because it’s a neutral zone, serves a diversity of people, and is a space for people to talk. As the library’s civic engagement coordinator (a position created due to the library’s experience with the previous learning exchange), Siders has continued to build out the role of the public library as an essential place for this work.

Amy Honisett and Rachael Short at Multnomah County Library worked with staff at a branch that serves several disparate populations that do not have similar needs. Those involved tried to figure out how to best make the library comfortable for everyone. After working through several ideas, they settled on a community conversation about the hopes of community members and how changes in the neighborhood have affected them.

A point of learning from their final report was this insight: “I think that these conversations are most needed when the community is going through a difficult time. However, we cannot nimbly react to a sudden event unless we have laid the foundation of trust building, connections, and skills. Through experiments like this we can lower barriers, within the community and within our organization, so that we can be ready to react when the community is longing to come together.”

The work librarians across the country have done in reaching out and deliberating with patrons and nonpatrons alike have helped to strengthen their communities even when a pandemic, racial strife, and economic hardship strained our democracy in ways not seen for decades. Libraries are more than sources of information: they are the trusted gathering places for their towns and neighborhoods. We look forward to further exploring the potential of how librarians can work with communities to help citizens seek and find hope in one another, while strengthening each other—and libraries themselves—in the process. ■

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