

CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2022

The Work of the Kettering Foundation: Challenges and Changes Ahead

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On the Formation of Citizens

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Breaking the Mold: Journalism Reimagined

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INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY

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.

Connections is published by the Kettering Foundation, 200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459. The articles in *Connections* reflect the views of the authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its directors, or its officers.

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ISSN 2470-8003

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Humanities Councils: Working For and With the Public

By Joni Doherty and Melinda Gilmore

A Kettering Foundation research exchange with six state humanities councils started with a wall of whiteboards and a bunch of multicolored dry-erase markers. We talked—and argued, and laughed, and talked some more—as we filled the whiteboards, searching for a question that would guide our work together over the next three years.

State humanities councils are well-positioned to bring people together around ideas and questions. They evolved from the National Foundation on the Arts and Humanities Act, a law passed as part of President Lyndon Johnson's Great Society. The act defines the humanities as a set of disciplines that include archaeology, language, linguistics, history,

philosophy, ethics, comparative religion, jurisprudence, literature, arts theory, and criticism, and it prioritized academic research and writing. With 56 councils in all US states and jurisdictions, these councils work to bring the humanities to people in a variety of ways, including where they live and work. In that early meeting, our discussion focused on what we could learn together as we co-developed the following core questions:

- What can we—our communities, our states, our nation—do to decrease the likelihood that real and significant differences and divides damage our capacity to live and work well together?
 - How can humanities councils work with citizens, communities, and each other to invite and explore different perspectives on shared challenges?
 - How can we work together across differences to make thoughtful decisions about how to address these problems?

At first we considered applying the questions to a shared program, but because of the many differences among the states in terms of population, diversity, density, geography, and culture, each state decided to apply the questions to different programs, with each program designed for their particular states.



What can we—our communities, our states, our nation—do to decrease the likelihood that real and significant differences and divides damage our capacity to live and work well together?

TWO COUNCILS, DIFFERENT APPROACHES

Two of the programs are representative of the richness of the work of all six councils. A reading and discussion program organized by the Maine Humanities Council involved professionals working in a hospital. Participants engaged in a monthly scholar-facilitated discussion to explore works of fiction, poetry, drama, and nonfiction that illuminated issues central to their professional contexts. The Maine Humanities Council described these discussions as “taking humanities into the heart of the workplace, making a direct impact on the way work is performed and how colleagues interact.” Planning for the program

included individuals who know “where the shoe pinches.” To ensure an “inclusive and humanizing” health-care community, participants included everyone who supports the work of a hospital. This includes not only doctors and nurses, but also lab technicians, hospital administrators, billing specialists, and orderlies. All have important roles in patient care and had an equal voice in the group. The themes explored in the readings selected for the program included “access to care; different understandings of what ‘wellness’ means; the distinction between the diagnosis of disease and the patient’s experience of illness; [and] how different people experience the dying process.”

Many of the Maine programs cultivate individual knowledge and skills in small group settings. The impact of these small group discussions extends to the public sphere as participants explore the ethical and democratic implications of their professions. The Maine Humanities Council’s experience with this kind of public work has taught them that “people use ideas to understand the world. These ways of thinking are both informed by others and by their own experiences.” Text-based discussions lead to “reworking how [people] understand the world and their own role in the world around them.” The Maine programs are designed for

particular places or situations where participants are invited “to read things carefully, to think about them, to discuss them with people they don’t yet know very well, and with people they do.” From the Maine Humanities Council’s perspective, “the larger gain is that often people get *practice* exploring different perspectives on the shared challenge of understanding a text, something clearly low-stakes and without urgency—building their ability, just a little, to explore perspectives when a higher stakes, more urgent shared challenge presents itself.”

The Mississippi Humanities Council decided to create a program

“to address, very frankly, our state’s (and our nation’s) most vexing and ongoing dilemma: our racial divide.” They learned that when conditions are right, “Mississippians are very willing to talk through their differences and listen to one another’s personal perspectives.” In contrast to Maine, this problem-based approach focused on communities rather than on individuals. It was also a new approach for Mississippi, since in the past the council worked primarily as a grantmaker. As planning progressed, the original plan of convening state-wide dialogues on race was discarded. Instead, the council focused on identifying community



partners willing to work on a local problem related to race. The council assisted by providing sensitive and skilled facilitation. As the council noted, “our facilitators had to be people the participants trusted, who had a deep understanding of the issue and who were sensitive to the underlying pain participants felt because of the racial disparities they live with. . . . In both of the series we coordinated, participants could tend to dwell on the pain and anger they felt. Our facilitators had to use great skill to acknowledge the pain and allow expression, but to also urge participants forward and to find a shared vision for resolution.”



During this three-year period of innovation and reflection, some councils began thinking differently about how they conducted programs that were already in place, and some experimented with new approaches.

While the dialogues invited the sharing and reflecting of individual experiences, they were also informed by historically accurate facts, literature, and philosophy. This offered participants insight into the role of race with respect to the problem. In Tupelo, for example, local partners identified an enrollment disparity in Advanced Placement (AP) courses. According to Tupelo Public School District data, in 2019 only 14 percent of Black students at the high school were enrolled in AP courses, yet they made up 51.46 percent of students. Parents, educators, and community leaders met regularly to consider the role race plays in perceptions and barriers about AP coursework. In another project with Delta State University, administrators initially wanted to focus on improving donor relations with their Black alumni. As the planning evolved, the focus shifted to engaging with current students and community members. The new goals included building an appreciation for diversity, bringing together diverse Delta communities through sharing ideas and building cooperation, and reducing racial disparities in those communities. Another outcome was that college administrators became more aware of current challenges faced by Black students and committed to addressing them.

HUMANITIES COUNCILS: ORIGIN AND EVOLVING MISSION

The Voting Rights Act and the Medicare and Medicaid Act, each passed by Congress in 1965, are widely recognized as significant for democracy. The National Foundation on the Arts and the Humanities Act is less well known. It led to the establishment of the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH), which has funded grants for scholarly and educational projects, including the papers of both Booker T. Washington and George Washington, a multivolume biography of Thomas Jefferson, and archaeological expeditions.

During hearings for the act's reauthorization in 1970, Rhode Island Senator Claiborne Pell, the "legislative father of NEH," reaffirmed his desire for the establishment of state councils. While the NEH effectively supported scholarship at the national level, Pell believed creating organizations that operated at the grassroots level would more effectively connect the humanities with people. Pell's vision for a public humanities seems to match Johnson's. In a speech at Brown University in 1964, a year before the NEH was established, Johnson noted, "There just simply must be no neglect of humanities. The values of our free and compassionate society are as vital to our



On September 29, 1965, President Lyndon Johnson signed legislation creating the National Endowment for the Humanities (NEH) and the National Endowment for the Arts (NEA) as separate and independent federal agencies to promote and support the arts and the humanities to all Americans.

national success as the skills of our technical and scientific age."

This view envisions a public humanities that cultivates the kinds of values essential for democracy. During the NEH's 50th anniversary, Darren Walker, president of the Ford Foundation, reflected, "I think that President Johnson believed that the human experience needed to be nourished by face-to-face engagement and by bringing together people of different backgrounds and different races." The councils that have participated in this exchange would agree.

In 1971, the NEH created six state-based programs to explore how to do grassroots humanities, which led to the formation of the 56 humanities councils that exist today. The ways the councils do their work has evolved over the decades. Alongside traditional humanities, in which experts share their scholarship with the public, is an emerging sense of the value of partnering with individuals and organizations to cooperatively develop programs that address local concerns and challenges. Another characteristic of this new approach is that these kinds of programs foster the disposition and skills individuals need in a democracy.

THE HUMANITIES EXCHANGE: INNOVATION, COLLABORATION

What are some of the takeaways from bringing together these six councils? The executive directors and program officers who participated think of themselves as innovators. They are committed to developing or cocreating programs where diverse individuals and groups might apply humanities perspectives and skills to contemporary challenges. Pennsylvania Humanities put it this way: “It feels like the divides among Americans are greater than ever. I don’t need national surveys to prove

it—or expert pundits to opine about it. . . . We see how the resulting hostility and distrust undermines our happiness and emotional well-being, the quality of our relationships, our sense that we can act and make meaningful contributions, and even the integrity of our institutions.”

During this three-year period of innovation and reflection, some councils began thinking differently about how they conducted programs that were already in place, and some experimented with new approaches. Each time we met, the councils discussed the many challenges associated with developing close working relationships with individuals, communities, and other organizations in their states. But they also affirmed the value of doing so. For example, instead of doing outreach to get people to come to “their” event, they reached out to the residents of their states to imagine, develop, and implement programs. In other words, programs intended to address the challenges of democracy were developed in ways that affirmed democracy. This led to programs that were more relevant for communities, fostered the development of democratic disposition and skills, and in some cases, led to immediate concrete actions.

Every council agreed that they learned things they would not

have learned without a sustained engagement with each other and with Kettering. Oregon Humanities described the experience in this way: “Talking regularly with colleagues from these other states has helped us understand their decisions and their reasons for their decisions, which has helped us with our own choices and with understanding the larger context of this work. . . . The focused and sustained time with other state council program staff and executive directors has been very valuable. It’s a space that’s hard to create or justify, but its value is clear, both for how it impacts the work and for how it impacts the people doing the work and their relationships.” And Indiana Humanities expressed a similar viewpoint: “Because our staffs are small and we’re very busy, it is hard to get away for this kind of deep-dive learning, especially for the full programs team, at the same time.”

Future research may lead to more insight into the ways in which the disposition, knowledge, and skills associated with the humanities enhance democracy during these tenuous times. The councils that participated in this series of exchanges might form the kernel of a network that includes other councils, writers, artists, and public humanities scholars. For example, how can the humanities be both action-oriented



Future research may lead to more insight into the ways in which the disposition, knowledge, and skills associated with the humanities enhance democracy during these tenuous times.

and reflective? What additional discoveries might be made about what the humanities can do to address the real and significant differences and divides that damage our capacity to live and work well together? To make our country more fair? More compassionate? Less violent? Shifting the focus from the original mission of the humanities councils—how the humanities can be shared with the public—to how the humanities can advance democracy is a question that deserves consideration. ■

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