CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2022

INNOVATING FOR DEMOCRACY

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On the Formation of Citizens

By Elizabeth Gish and Camryn Wilson

Citizens are made, not born. They are made by the communities where they live; the institutions that shape their lives; their education, careers, and family contexts; the practices into which they are drafted and decide to take on; the identities that are thrust upon them and those that they choose to embrace. This article will consider the ways that community engagement in a higher education context contribute to forming certain kinds of citizens.

SERVICE AS A CITIZEN-FORMATION PROJECT

What we *do* shapes who we *are*. That is, our practices and habits not only shape the world around us but also shape our identities, our understanding of our role in the world, and our ethical and moral commitments. Too often, colleges and universities overemphasize content acquisition, but information transfer is only a small part of education. It is important to pay just as much, if not more, attention to the practices and habits into which institutions of higher education socialize students.

At colleges and universities across the United States, service-learning is the leading model for community engagement. While experts may quibble over the details, in its ideal form service-learning is:

- reflective and engaging;

- undertaken with attention to students' broader educational and professional goals;

- sustainable and has a meaningful impact over the longer term;

- designed to encourage students to learn about and engage with issues of justice, fairness, and equity; and

- not intended to be a one-way provision of services such as cleaning a park or serving soup at a soup kitchen. Instead, students and community members should work together collaboratively to design the intended outcomes of the service program.

Service-learning emphasizes the root causes and broader societal structures that influence social challenges. As is the case with most practices, the ideal form is largely aspirational. As it is carried out, service-learning rarely reflects all of these characteristics.

Although service-learning is an improvement over more paternalistic versions of community service or volunteerism, it is a flawed model for citizenship formation. First, service-learning invites students into practices that highlight divisions between those who have and those who do not have, those who need and those who have something to give, those whose careers and educa-tions are paramount and those whose lives and problems are the topic of a course or focus of a cocurricular activity. Even at its very best, service-learning privileges the education of the students doing the serving rather than the well-being of people and communities that are the objects of such service. While concerted efforts have been made to correct for the underlying xenophobia, sexism, classism, and racism that are often

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woven into traditional forms of service, service-learning cannot help but maintain a framework where more privileged people are doing things to help people who are less privileged and more marginalized, and where the lives and struggles of the less privileged are being used as a text and resource for others' education and growth.

Additionally, in the context of higher education, service-learning forms citizens who see social problems as learning opportunities *for them*. Accounts of the ways in which service-learning initiatives strengthened democratic capacity or contributed more just, equitable systems are few and far between. The focus of service-learning research is on the benefits that it can provide to the students, the professors and administrators who lead the work, and the institutions of higher education that sponsor the service. The literature on how it impacts communities, including if and to what extent it brings about meaningful democratic change or increases community capacity, are, at best, an afterthought, but in most cases completely absent.

The efforts of—and positive outcomes resulting from—the many faculty, students, and community members who design and implement responsible, meaningful, and sustainable service-learning efforts should not be minimized. Service-learning has come a long way from the community service days where (usually) well-intentioned professionals and students entered communities without attention to the power dynamics and potential for harm that can come from service that is not mindful of issues of privilege, history, or culture. Countless studies highlight that there are both short and long-term benefits for students who take part in service-learning, and many communities that have been the targets of such service are, of course, appreciative and receive some measure of benefit, however fraught. Yet, keeping in mind one of

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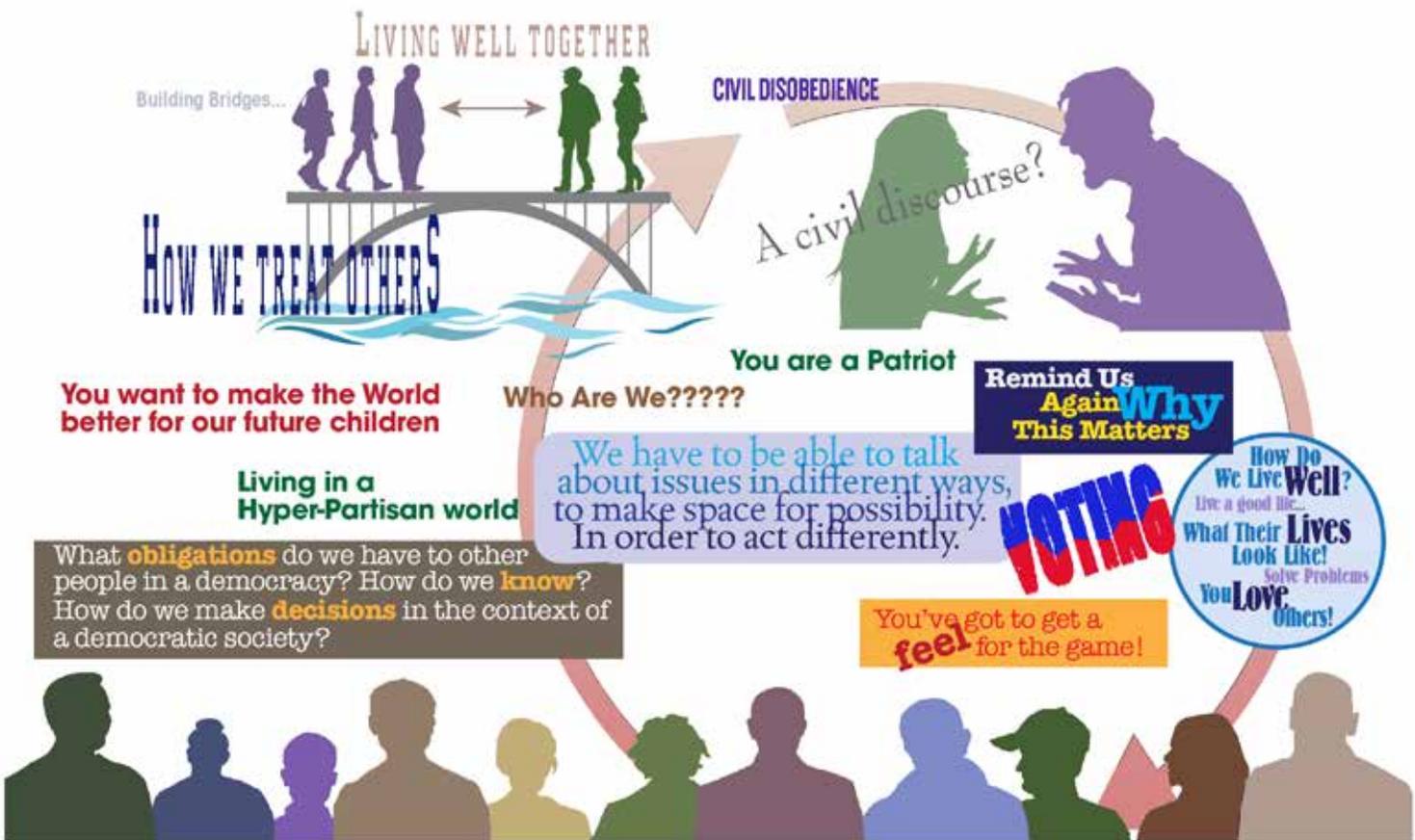
the central insights from Kettering Foundation research, we know that for people to build thriving, healthy communities, they must be able to learn together in a democratic context. John McKnight, cofounder of the Asset-Based Community Development Institute and a Kettering Foundation senior associate, highlights this when he notes, "I have never seen service systems that brought people to well-being, delivered them to citizenship, or made them free." What kind of engagement practices might invite students into processes that move communities toward well-being and freedom?

The benefits of service-learning can be maintained without reliance on a service model. There are models of community engagement that allow for the creation of interactive spaces where people come together to address public problems, as best they can, through collaboration, creation, and shared purpose. Community engagement can be approached through an asset-based

lens and a lens of public work, where engagement is not something done *to* others. In some ways, service-learning theory has sought to rescue service from itself, attempting to create something grounded in equity, collaboration, sustainability, and democratic hope. But this is not what service is. Service requires doing something *to* or *for* someone. Kettering Foundation research done in collaboration with allies and community thought partners repeatedly highlights that democracy does not need more

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An asset-based, public, and democratic approach to community engagement foregrounds collective strengths and possibilities and asks that associations, individuals, and institutions work with one another to recognize what a community already has instead of focusing on what someone else can give them. Such a model corrects the false narratives about marginalized people and communities as being "in need" and "at risk." The time has come to end the practice of treating marginalized communities and people as a real-life textbook for college students' education. In shifting away from service, we can move toward models that are promising in terms of forming citizens who see themselves as part of a community and as part of addressing societal challenges that are neither others' issues nor the issues of "the other." Rather, in non-service-based models, the issues of society can be seen and felt as part of the lifeworld of student-citizens living in an interconnected society.

ALTERNATIVE APPROACHES TO CITIZEN-FORMATION

The approach discussed here offers the potential for retaining the positive outcomes of service-based community engagement for faculty,

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students, universities, and communities while avoiding some of the challenges that come with service-oriented models. The following example is but one among many where communities, colleges and universities, faculty, and students are rethinking possibilities for community engagement. The example we discuss promotes strong democratic citizenship habits among students and in the communities where they live and emphasizes the formational aspect of the engagement. This approach was used at Western Kentucky University over the course of seven years with more than one thousand students in a class called Citizen and Self, which focused on citizenship and civic life.

One of the central assignments of the course was a community deliberation project where students researched a local issue of their choosing and designed a National Issues Forums-style deliberation guide about the issue. Teams of students researched and wrote a 20-page background paper and developed a 3-5 page deliberation guide. They then hosted and facilitated a democratic public deliberation that was attended by members of the community, including students and faculty. The deliberation involved weighing different framings of a local

issue and discussing how the issue might be collectively addressed.

To carry out the assignment, students engaged in conversations with community members and spent time in the community to learn more about the issue. If they did a project on green space, they visited parks and spoke to the people there. If they studied homelessness, they spoke with a range of people in the community who were connected to this issue: nonprofit leaders, housed people, churches, unhoused people, teachers, and police. In class, the students reflected together about their own experiences with the issues they sought to understand: How did this issue impact them? People they know? The community where they were currently living? The place where they grew up?

The assignment emphasized the six democratic practices that have emerged from Kettering Foundation research over the previous decades. This includes collaboratively naming, framing, and deliberating about public issues. A central focus in this class was that naming, framing, and deliberating could be meaningful practices in and of themselves; there was no requirement to develop an initiative or project. A community nonprofit leader noted, "It was so helpful for us to work with others to understand how they understood the issue of hunger in our community. We realized that we had been framing the issue in ways that didn't really resonate with the community, or, I guess, resonated differently with different groups. Like we were just doing it from our perspective." Of the naming, framing, and deliberation process a student noted, "I always thought of this issue as a black and white issue. Like there was right and wrong. I guess that is just how it seems like if you hear about [it] in the news and stuff. And like from my parents. But by talking to people who, you know, are actually, like living this situation, I see that it is a lot more complicated and the way we talked about it . . . it is kind of part of my own issue, too. I don't really know what to do about it, but I can see that there are a lot of different ways to approach it and think about it. I never really dealt with that before in my other classes or in high school."

While some initiatives and changes did emerge from the deliberations, a central outcome of the assignment was the invitation and initiation into practices of citizenship that were collaborative and deliberative. We learn how to be citizens by practicing how to be citizens. There was an emphasis both rhetorically and practically on the inclusion of a range of voices, perspectives, and experiences, and a strong emphasis

on understanding that issues are complex, multifaceted, and rarely black and white. Finally (and centrally), marginalized communities and people were not the central subjects of the students' research nor were they the target of services or projects. While everyday practical changes in communities that come from democratic processes are important, it is equally important to pay attention to the ways that practices shape the people who are taking part in them. Whose voices are heard and elevated? Are certain groups either explicitly or implicitly highlighted as a problem? Who are the "experts?" Whose learning is prioritized?

Service-learning is popular for institutions of higher education, and giving it up will be a challenge. In one discussion at a Kettering Foundation research exchange, a faculty member noted, "There is no reason to even suggest an engagement project that doesn't have service-learning in the title. This is what the administration knows, it is what they want. Even if that is not the bulk of what we are doing, we need to find a way to call it service-learning." Advocates who have invested substantial resources into reforming service as a pedagogy grounded in principles of justice and equality will find it hard to give it up. But it is time for a new model. When

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service is eliminated from community engagement, we create space for new and creative ways to conceptualize approaches to citizen formation with an eye toward a democracy that is more deliberative, pluralistic, just, multiracial, and equitable. Such an approach is long overdue. ∎

Elizabeth Gish is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at egish@kettering.org.

Camryn Wilson is a former Kettering Foundation research assistant. In September, she started graduate school at the University of Connecticut Neag School of Education, working toward a master of arts in higher education and student affairs. She can be reached at camryn.gi.wilson@ gmail.com.

Kettering Foundation
200 Commons Road
Dayton, OH 45459

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