

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

By Elizabeth Gish and Camryn Wilson p. 18

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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Reimagining Public Service, Professionalism, and Public Institutions: Fostering Democratic Practices

By Valerie Lemmie and Kara Lindaman

For more than 40 years, the Kettering Foundation has been studying the problems of democracy, including how citizens and public officials learn to work collaboratively to address shared community problems neither can fix alone. Much of this research has been inspired by the work of Elinor Ostrom, Nobel Prize-winning political scientist, and Daniel Yankelovich, a public opinion expert and social

scientist, as well as what we learned from the hundreds of public officials who have convened at the foundation over time and have shared their struggles, experiments, innovations, and the outcome of work with citizens and other aligned institutions to address the intractable, challenging problems their communities faced.

Over the years, a language was developed. And while initially used by adherents to our research findings, as this network of academics and public officials has grown, our language is increasingly reflected in professional nomenclature, especially in the field of public administration. This is important because language has an impact on how mayors, police chiefs, city managers, and the like do their jobs. It has helped public professionals understand democracy as a set of practices, including naming, framing, deliberating, identifying community resources, acting collaboratively with the public, and learning together as a community. An example is the use of the terms *complementary* or *coproduction* when referring to public work between government and citizens that reflects how they leverage the assets of institutions and communities to address shared problems. While citizens may never use a word like *coproduction*, use of the term implies that they and government are working together on

issues, rather than one side holding power over the other. Another example of this shared approach is the movement away from public hearings to deliberative community conversations. Public deliberation is proving to be a powerful tool as it moves beyond public opinion and first impressions to a deeper understanding of complex problems where people can work through their disagreements and tensions, identify the interests and values they share, and build common ground upon which to act.

As an operating foundation with an action research orientation, Kettering's insights are informed by how public officials and citizens work together to address shared community problems. Enduring learning outcomes of the work of the foundation are best found when our research terminology gives voice to the work done in communities. Newer terms, such as *cocreation*, reflect the increasing role citizens are playing in the development of public policies, priority-setting, and problem-solving. This learning loop keeps our research fresh and relevant as well as recognizes the evolving relationship between citizens and public officials in addressing community concerns.

The public officials who join us are often frustrated with business

as usual and have an interest in exploring ways to align their professional routines with the way people in communities work. At times, this frustration comes from public demands or from political expectations. Those who participate in Kettering learning exchanges represent the innovators, thought leaders, and influencers searching for better solutions to problems in their relationship with the public. Other participants teach the next generation of public officials and seek to equip them with the skills they will need to manage public institutions, such as city and county government, in an environment of political polarization, threats to our representative democracy, and demands



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understanding of public service—especially the ways theory and practice are aligned to engage with citizens in democratic and complementary ways to address public problems. Kettering’s research represents a fundamental and significant shift from traditional professional norms and institutional constraints as it advances “democratic practices” over “best practices.”

While we see an increase in community collaborations that are more democratic and complementary, there are threats to democracy that can make these collaborations more challenging for public officials and citizens. In our most recent research with city managers, they report increased political polarization on local councils and in communities, which makes finding common ground and identifying the values that people share more difficult. Over time, public meetings have become more contentious and unruly, and people have become less willing to compromise. Our academics and researchers advise us that young people are demanding an accountability of public institutions for past and present harms and are questioning whether these institutions can be trusted to reform themselves. They are reframing the question of how to make democracy work as it should to how to make public

for institutional accountability. The researchers and scholars seek a better understanding of how public policy, service, and administration can be understood, implemented, and practiced in more innovative, equitable, and relevant ways. For example, one city manager noted that national politics are slowly moving into localities, with social media comments becoming increasingly more partisan and polarized.

In July 2022, we convened several groups that had launched their learning journeys one to two years earlier. Collectively, they sought to create a holistic and comprehensive



institutions more inclusive, just, and equitable. Public professionals are responding by creating more opportunities to work with the public to help strengthen our democracy.

The narrative from these learning exchanges illustrates the intersectionality of the pressing concerns facing public institutions, professionals, and the wealth of shared experiences. But even more important is the acknowledgment of the integral role the public must play if our democratic institutions are to thrive. We highlight two of the learning exchanges convened in July 2022.

LEADERSHIP INSTITUTE: CITY MANAGERS ENGAGING CITIZENS TO SOLVE COMMUNITY PROBLEMS

We are working with the International City/County Management Association (ICMA) and the National Civic League on a Leadership Institute to help managers build and strengthen their ability to engage with a public that often feels sidelined, reluctant to get involved, and hesitant to recognize and address issues of race, equity, and inclusion. A dozen local government officials and fellows met at the Kettering Foundation for one day in May and one day in

July to work on these issues and to develop their capstone research projects for the annual ICMA meetings in October.

Key to the work of the Leadership Institute is shared learning and the development of innovative professional practices. Representing communities across the country—including California, Colorado, Maine, Minnesota, North Carolina, Tennessee, and Washington—this diverse group of public officials developed a cultural competency while exploring ways to create greater access and responsiveness to marginalized communities and more equitable processes to engage citizens in democratic and complementary work.

The role of government, power, and equal access was a common theme of the week, especially with Institute fellows. They struggled with moving to or achieving judgment

when there are multiple stories, perspectives, and truths, and how government and public policy, despite its best intentions, has unintended consequences. Rather than focusing on the costs of public participation and the time democratic engagement takes, they considered the costs of *not* addressing inequities. They used a mountain metaphor to illustrate what they were doing and what they were learning.

The mountain metaphor encouraged reflection by public officials when collaborating with citizens to foster a more diverse, equitable, and inclusive community. All agreed this is sometimes frustrating and often-times messy. The progress made “up the mountain” may often be “stomping back the switchbacks” to make the path more accessible for subsequent travelers and change agents. Progress becomes hopeful and shared with a collective stake in the climb, rather than the individualistic and personal, as problem solvers and fixers, in the archaic and academic public service model of specialization and technical expertise.

PUBLIC SERVICE WITH DEMOCRATIC PRACTICES

The theme of the mountain metaphor transcended the research of multiple learning exchanges on public institu-





tions and citizens acting in complementary ways. Faculty, teachers, and scholars in programs and schools of public policy and public administration struggled with the pedagogical approach to engage citizens differently and more inclusively. In other words, how may academics in higher education harness resources and creativity to move away from a single narrative about what is happening in the community to reflect how to collaborate with community differently?

In the fields of public policy and public administration, being neutral, professional, and impartial is paramount. However, the enrollment cliff facing higher education has increased pressure to increase recruitment and retention and to reduce barriers to student success while there is growing distrust in the democratic institutions of colleges and universities. The lack of urgency and responsiveness in teaching and

learning about “best practices” and “professional public service” as non-political or apolitical seem unaware and irrelevant when the threats to democracy are very real.

In other words, how is theory best put into actions and practice? What should be the purpose-driven definition of professionalism, which upholds shared community values on significant issues and local decisions? There was consensus to move away from the teaching and learning of “best practices” to the “sense of belonging” and “what works.” Once



students as citizens discover what works, they can adapt it to their own communities and own it as their practice. Whether this becomes an advocacy or deliberative process underscores the tensions and the interests involved: where community and citizen priorities are reconciled and aligned with the real and relevant work of the public administrator.

SHARED PURPOSE AND VALUE IN PUBLIC SERVICE

Many of the exchanges held in July strengthened the networks and connections between and with public

servants and underscored the value of these ordinary citizens doing extraordinary work to build the democratic capacity and civic muscle of their communities. For example, the research exchange, “Public Safety Officials Engaging with Citizens in Democratic and Complementary Ways to Create Safe Communities,” expanded the table to thoughtfully include police chiefs and officers, community organizers, prosecutors, and professional associations. From their experiences on the streets and in their communities, we learned how to recruit and retain public

servants (police officers) as citizens who create trust and improve quality of life equitably. Participants agreed there is a desperate and shared need for the cultivation and socialization of “people with a heart for service,” which they saw as a prerequisite for the recruitment of police officers and the reform of public safety.

The experiences and perspectives of public safety officials are not too different from those of city managers and county executives and mirror many in public service and public institutions, whether on the front lines or in front of a classroom of students. The heart of democracy resides in the everyday work and daily lives of citizens in our communities.

The enduring lessons of this work are expressed in real action by public servants. If democracy is to represent and to respond to the urgent concerns of the day, the interaction and relationships between public organizations, agencies, and institutions need to be restored to healthy levels of deliberation and resilience. These fellows, who come to the foundation, demonstrate their commitment.

The relationships and connections nurtured throughout these research exchanges exemplify the good work of our research. They remain critical to the health and well-being of our democracy. And while the tensions in the trek up the mountain and



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“stomping back the switchbacks” are real and ever-present, so, too, is the democratic promise. ■

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