

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



Institutions and the Public: A Troubled Relationship

Articles

Byron P. White

John J. Theis

Katie Clark

Jonathan Garlick

Timothy J. Shaffer and David E. Procter

Chris Gilmer

Afterword

David Mathews

Editors: Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit
Managing Editor: Ilse Tebbetts
Formatting: Long's Graphic Design, Inc.
Copy Editors: Ellen Dawson-Witt and Renee Ergazos

The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. *The Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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LEARNING TO BECOME A CIVIC PROFESSIONAL Using Deliberation in Community Engagement

Timothy J. Shaffer and David E. Procter

Introduction

“Community engagement” has become a near ubiquitous term used by higher education to articulate its purpose, impact, and possibilities. It shows up in brochures for interested students and parents, winds its way into job descriptions and titles in faculty and professional roles on campus, and is found in the rhetoric of administrators and others expressing a sense of purpose for students and the institution. The Elective Carnegie Community Engagement Classification, for example, has become a symbol of commitment to such efforts for colleges and universities, requiring extensive documentation of efforts to demonstrate such activities as community partnerships, service-learning opportunities, and the integration of such civic commitments into promotion and tenure expectations.

Traditionally, in higher education circles, community engagement has been defined as a faculty expert bringing knowledge to a community group or, perhaps with students, directly serving a particular community need. These efforts are always well intentioned and can be beneficial. But on the receiving end, this expert advice or activity is often perceived as disconnected from community context for lack of community input and viewed by the people it was intended to serve as having limited applicability.

What might it take to change the approach to this work when so many aspects of it are rooted in an established protocol? This article focuses on one such change—a different conception of community engagement most commonly known as *public deliberation* and loosely defined as a methodology in which groups of citizens are brought together to define their problems and work through the pros and cons of various solutions. Working with trained facilitators utilizing a variety of deliberative techniques, community members become deeply involved in community problem solving and public decision-making. This concept shifts the role of the academic professional from “content expert” to “civic” or “democratic” professional.¹

As a land-grant university, Kansas State University is committed to serving the public in diverse ways. Community engagement practices have taken many

forms but have generally been dominated by traditional outreach and service models of knowledge transmission and transfer. Disciplinary rather than social needs have driven faculty and students into well-defined and increasingly bounded disciplinary units. Research universities have shifted public higher education's focus from attention to social problems to the achievement of scholars within academic disciplines. Moreover, many people shifted from the view that higher education is a valued public good to questioning whether these institutions are engaging in

indoctrination. The community-engagement movement has been a response to this dominating viewpoint. Amidst these discussions, but often on the periphery,

Public deliberation shifts the role of the academic professional from “content expert” to “civic” or “democratic” professional.

is the sense of what different conceptions of “community engagement” mean for faculty members, the central actors in the story of higher education.

Faculty members make possible the teaching, research, and service that most see as the *work* of higher education. Without faculty, students don't complete degree programs or move into multiple domains in order to shape our world. Without faculty, new ideas and experiments don't change how we think about complex issues. Without faculty, conversations about how degree programs meet professional and civic purposes don't exist. The growth of cocurricular programs and associated staff addressing all aspects of student life and well-being could well make it seem as though the “academic side of the house” is not as important as it used to be. If there is to be transformation within higher education, faculty members must be viewed as agents of change and not simply instructors in necessary courses for credentials.

Given this framing, how should community engagement be realized through democratic practices rooted in deliberative politics and dispositions? Specifically, we focus here on how faculty members at Kansas State University, a research-intensive university, have aligned disciplinary goals with principles of democratic engagement. We also highlight the intentional efforts necessary to integrate and embed dialogic and deliberative practices into teaching, research, and engagement.

Establishing a Space for Deliberative Engagement

Scholars and practitioners writing in a 2018 *Higher Education Exchange* article noted the existence of some 110 centers devoted to engaging campuses

with communities; most are at institutions of higher learning.² These centers and institutes are playing crucial roles in shaping their campus cultures and impacting broader communities. The Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy (ICDD) at Kansas State University is counted among these campus-based centers that have committed to public engagement through the use of public deliberation. ICDD was founded in 2004 by a small group of faculty members interested in cultivating civic agency work in all mission areas of the university—research, teaching, and engagement.

ICDD’s Public Issues Facilitation Workshop was launched in 2006. Opportunities for professionals to learn about how to create conditions for

“From the beginning, this workshop was about more than simply training individuals to moderate conversations. Consistent with our mission, we wanted to build citizen civic agency.”

deliberative discussion were extended to individuals from across the university in addition to community partners across the state. As noted by Timothy Steffensmeier and David E. Procter, “From the beginning, this workshop was about

more than simply training individuals to moderate conversations. Consistent with our mission, we wanted to build citizen civic agency. Thus, we were intentional about inviting citizen leaders and policymakers to participate.”³ The idea that deliberation is an essential part of being a citizen was and has been at the heart of how ICDD engages different individuals, groups, and communities. When we think about how universities engage with stakeholders and skeptics alike, public deliberation about issues of shared concern presents an opportunity for the institution to be viewed as a partner and not just as a source of information or indoctrination.

Near the end of the 20th century, there were calls for land-grant universities, Kansas State among them, to return to their roots. The original acts of Congress creating these institutions, agricultural experiment stations, and extensions (Morrill in 1862/1890, Hatch in 1887, and Smith-Lever in 1914) created a public system for connecting universities and citizens to build a stronger democratic society. As Nathan Sorber noted in his study of land-grant institutions, “The land-grant college could enroll the public in a democratic experiment of engaged citizenship to partner with people in schools, granges, farms, and homes to produce lasting cultural, social, and material benefits for

communities.”⁴ Yet, this experiment was marginalized as a model for democratic engagement and has only recently been framed as a “prophetic” narrative of the institution’s impact on civic life.⁵

For ICDD, democratic engagement has taken shape through the creation of formal and informal spaces for learning, including a graduate certificate program in dialogue, deliberation, and public engagement and the interdisciplinary doctoral program in leadership communication grounded in community-engaged scholarship, which incorporates the study of models of deliberation into the graduate curriculum. In addition, ICDD offers professional development opportunities for faculty, staff, and community partners. The Civic Engagement Fellows Program has been one such example, bringing together academic professionals from across campus (and beyond) to learn about how deliberative practices complement other public engagement efforts in their scholarship and practice.

The Civic Engagement Fellows Program

The Civic Engagement Fellows Program, developed by the authors, both longtime students of deliberative engagement, was built around four goals:

(1) building a community of practice around community-engaged scholarship, (2) strengthening understanding of and commitment to deliberation as part of community-engaged scholarship, (3) creating a cohort to address significant campus/community challenges, and (4) becoming a campus/community composed of agents of change. Kansas State University has a general institutional commitment to community-engaged practice. Within this generalized commitment, various

departments and individual faculty have demonstrated an interest in engagement. Of these, a small group of faculty members have incorporated deliberative practices

How might the sustained use of deliberative practices transform the way in which faculty members understand “community engagement” and their relationship to citizens?

into their community-engaged work. An attempt to build up this approach was rooted in three core questions:

- How might the sustained use of deliberative practices transform the way in which faculty members understand “community engagement” and their relationship to citizens?

- How might deliberative practices, sustained over time, include cocreative action, relationship-building, and public work under conditions of disagreement?
- How can deliberative practices provide communities with spaces to experience politics in a less adversarial way than “politics as usual”?

We designed a four-part curriculum that explored deliberation as a central form of community engagement. The curriculum was delivered through four face-to-face meetings and a capstone experience during which the fellows presented a research project or a theoretical thought piece at Kansas State’s annual engagement symposium. The face-to-face meetings were characterized by reflection on commonly assigned readings and group discussion highlighting individual faculty experiences and concerns. The four modules of the fellows curriculum are:

Academic Teaching, Research, and Engagement as Public Work. This module includes a discussion of Kansas State University as a land-grant unit and its historical commitment to engaging the state’s residents to address significant challenges they face. The module provides an overview of university/community-engaged work and an overview of deliberation and its central connection, community engagement. At our first fellows meeting, we also explained that the work would culminate in a project or paper to be presented at the engagement symposium.

Dialogue and Deliberation Process Models. The second gathering of the fellows is a daylong retreat, exploring and practicing different models of deliberation. During this session, we brought in associates from ICDD to highlight and lead practice in a variety of deliberative methods. Some of the methods we discussed were deliberative forums modeled on those conducted by the National Issues Forums Institute and approaches such as Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS), Appreciative Inquiry, and Nominal Group Technique.

Connecting Deliberative Practice to Academic Disciplines. At our third fellows meeting, we identified (as best we could) examples of community-engaged scholarship integrating deliberative practices into the specific disciplines represented by the fellows cohort. For many fellows, this was often a time when they were introduced to on-the-ground examples of deliberative work as it aligned with specific disciplines.

Reflecting and Looking Ahead. This meeting served as a time of reflection on the Civic Engagement Fellows Program. The fellows talked about what

they had learned and how they saw their own work incorporating deliberative practices into community-engaged scholarship moving forward.

Moving Forward: Strategies to Expand Deliberative Practices into Academic, Community-Engaged Work

The Civic Engagement Fellows Program was an invited, yearlong, professional development and peer-learning community for university faculty and professional staff interested in deliberative practices and community-engaged scholarship. Fellows were intentionally drawn from a variety of disciplines and campus units where we identified interest or history with some form of deliberative practice. Certain familiar disciplines such as communication and leadership studies, as well as more diverse fields such as architecture, drama therapy, biology, and family studies, have been represented. Some participants have been somewhat familiar with the language of community engagement and deliberation, while others have found the alignment of these concepts new and more challenging.

Katie Kingery-Page is associate dean for research in the College of Architecture, Planning, and Design (APDesign) at Kansas State University where she also leads the office

of Student Academic Services. As a previous member of the Civic Engagement Fellows Program, Kingery-Page has embraced the idea of deliberation as a form of community engagement. While trained in a field that is rooted in participatory practices, the deliberative civic

The Civic Engagement Fellows Program was an invited, yearlong, professional development and peer-learning community for university faculty and professional staff interested in deliberative practices and community-engaged scholarship.

engagement literature and associated practices were unfamiliar to her. But through her experience of learning about deliberative civic engagement, she added it to her professional role in the College of APDesign. Building on landscape architecture's interest in participatory design processes, Kingery-Page brought deliberative democracy concepts such as "enclave" deliberation to the table, developing ways in which these smaller groups of otherwise

marginalized voices could engage in dialogue prior to involvement with the broader community.⁶

Another civic engagement fellow was Bonnie Lynn-Sherow, now retired as an associate professor of history and former executive director of the Chapman Center for Rural Studies. She successfully integrated deliberative practices into the training of graduate research assistants working with local museums and

“To a certain extent, I think inertia sets in. We’re not used to doing it that [new] way, and it’s hard to change.”

historical societies across Kansas. She taught these graduate history students to engage with rural communities not as experts *from* the university but as civic professionals, using

what they had learned about public deliberation to engage in dialogue *with* the community. The Chapman Center continues to utilize deliberative practices in its community-based work.

Katherine Schlageck, associate curator of education of the Beach Museum of Art, has developed connections between dialogue—particularly Visual Thinking Strategies (VTS)—deliberation, and the use of visual arts. As a structured way of facilitating discussions around images, VTS offers the opportunity to explore a shared experience. Kansas State University colleagues Saya Kakim and Kerry Priest describe it as “an advanced form of mediated dialogue . . . [that] offers an innovative way to engage participants in dialogue and sense-making.”⁷ The wedding of dialogue and imagery that isn’t clearly defined creates an environment in which people listen, learn, and consider how their interpretations or experiences stand alongside many others. Schlageck’s experience with the Civic Engagement Fellows Program has strengthened her commitment to the integration of dialogic and deliberative practices in the public education work she does for youth and adults through the Beach Museum. While not explicitly about deliberation on a public issue, VTS has been paired *with* deliberative dialogue as a beneficial starting point because it helps individuals and groups open up thinking about something that isn’t immediately clear. We have found that VTS greases the deliberative wheels for a smoother discussion.

These are just three of the examples from civic engagement fellows but they highlight some of the distinct approaches individuals have taken in using deliberation in their public engagement, teaching, and research.

Challenges to Incorporating Deliberative Practices into Higher Education Work

In the three years of this experience, we have found great enthusiasm for participating in the Civic Engagement Fellows Program from the faculty and staff whom we have invited to join. Faculty who heard of the program sometimes asked why they had not yet been invited; others told us they hoped they would soon be invited to join. In fact, over the three years of the program, only one faculty member declined our invitation. Later that year, this same faculty member expressed regret over that decision and hoped to receive another invitation (which occurred and was accepted). Still, as we met with our civic engagement fellows and encouraged them to consider incorporating deliberation into their community-engaged scholarship, we heard several concerns and challenges to integrating deliberative practice into their teaching, research, and outreach.

Disciplinary Resistance. Faculty members have spent years in graduate school and then working in academic departments with an embedded tradition of how to teach and conduct research. Often these disciplinary epistemologies and methodologies are not receptive to community engagement and deliberate practice. As one fellow from political science stated:

I direct a program here in public administration, and there has been a wealth of information that's been written about the importance of engaging people. I mean we're teaching practitioners about things like how to go out and manage a crisis. But here are people (in the department) who have built an impressive career in peer-reviewed research; they don't really know how to think about engaged research and how it can contribute to the literature, our base of knowledge. [Engaged research] is something different [from] what is in that research category. That's the pushback I've seen.

This civic engagement fellow saw value in deliberation as part of scholarly work, indeed, saw it as fundamental to the knowledge she needed to teach her students. However, her challenge was that her program is located within a broader discipline—political science—where its history and the culture is very much focused on conducting experimental design research and producing books and juried, peer-reviewed essays.

Inertia and Fear. As faculty spend years in graduate school and in the academy learning pedagogies and research methodologies, they become “efficient” in their scholarly endeavors. Using what they have learned and

on their mentors' examples, they tend to develop certain routines. In conducting research, for example, they know and understand the literature of their research area, develop and refine research questions, know the number of subjects needed, and become efficient in the methods necessary to carry out their scholarly activity. According to a fellow from geography, "To a certain extent, I think inertia sets in. We're not used to doing it that [new] way, and it's hard to change." Another fellow from leadership studies said that doing community-engaged work and adding a deliberative piece to that work initially "can be a cumbersome process, and it's just an extra thing."

Many faculty who might be interested in this form of scholarship have not had any experiences or training in community engaged methods or deliberative models. These faculty members may be interested in these modes of scholarly inquiry but unsure how to do this work—even a bit fearful of venturing onto unknown ground.

Lack of Resources. K-State's Teaching and Learning Center offers a variety of resources in support of the university's teaching mission. That same kind of institutional and budgetary support was limited for community-engaged scholarship generally and deliberative practices in particular, according to the fellows. One fellow specifically called out the lack of resources for community-engaged work, while another spoke of lacking the language to articulate the work and the need for a community of interest that could support faculty conducting this kind of scholarship. Still another fellow argued that this form of research and teaching "is not heavily advertised." So, while there are institutional structures through which community engagement and deliberation are recognized and supported—among them, K-State Research and Extension, Global Campus, and some individual academic departments—few campus-wide offices or centers focus on community engagement or deliberation education. There is need for a much broader institutional effort to educate for and support community-engaged scholarship and deliberative practices.

What we learned from the fellows is that the use of deliberation aligns with the efforts of the land-grant mission to educate and engage diverse populations. A notable challenge, however, is the tension between the use of deliberation and the "go-go-go" approach of engagement, one fellow pointed out. In some circumstances, the introduction of and commitment to deliberative practices that invite individuals and communities to step back, listen, and consider actions—often a slow and intentional process—can, at times, lose out to more traditional modes of engagement that lead to immediate or near-term changes.

A further challenge to deliberation is the continued marginalization of this practice within the academy both in terms of promotion and tenure as well as in embedded norms about the ways higher education engages with the public. One way to respond to this is to vigorously promote deliberative civic engagement within departments, colleges, and the university. The provision of multiple opportunities to learn about deliberation is a critical component of advancing the institution's commitment to viewing teaching, learning, and engagement through a deliberative lens.

Conclusion

At this writing, the institutional home for the Civic Engagement Fellows Program has been on hiatus because of staffing changes and the dramatic impacts of COVID-19. The location of the Center for Engagement and Community Development, previously home to programs such as ICDD and this work, is now within the Staley School for Leadership Studies. The future of such professional development learning opportunities remains in question.⁸ The impact of such uncertainty has paused the fellows program, but there is hope that this professional development opportunity will go on. ICDD, now housed within the Department of Communication Studies, affords an opportunity for much of the work of the program to continue. As we seek a new path on what we hope is the back end of a global pandemic, Kansas State University continues to explore how best to

fulfill its land-grant mission and prepare faculty, staff, and students to engage as civic professionals. But rhetoric and reality must align. Similar to community engagement more generally,

What we learned from the fellows is that the use of deliberation aligns with the efforts of the land-grant mission to educate and engage diverse populations.

deliberative civic engagement requires investment not just to make it possible but to enable it to flourish.

Continuing to introduce faculty members and academic professionals to deliberative civic engagement through the Civic Engagement Fellows Program is one important way to build a culture of public engagement rooted in democratic practices. Continued opportunities for formal and informal learning are essential components of fostering deliberation within the campus community so that it can be utilized in a variety of ways through teaching, research,

and engagement. Democracy requires us all to advance its cause. Civic professionalism affords a language and a practice for those with institutional and positional power to engage with others seeking to make democracy work as it should through deliberative community engagement.



NOTES

- ¹ On the concept of deliberative civic engagement, see Derek Wai Ming Barker, “Deliberative Civic Engagement: Toward a Public Politics in Higher Education,” in *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education*, ed. Nicholas V. Longo and Timothy J. Shaffer (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2019), 57-68. On the concept of civic professionalism, see Timothy J. Shaffer, “Democratic Professionals in Civic Life: Cultivating Civil Discourse in Community Development,” *Community Development* 51, no. 3 (2020), 196-211, and Albert W. Dzur, “What Is a Democratic Professional?,” *Kettering Review* (Winter 2019), 12-18.
- ² Joni Doherty and Alice Diebel, with Joseph Hoereth, David Hoffman, Marla Kanengiter-Wildeson, Windy Lawrence, David E. Procter, Norma Ramos, and Lisa Strahley, “Centers for Democratic Public Life: Learning as a Deliberative Democratic Practice,” *Higher Education Exchange* (2018), 17-28.
- ³ Timothy Steffensmeier and David E. Procter, “Kansas State University’s Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy: Developing Civic Agency,” in *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*, ed. Timothy J. Shaffer, et al. (East Lansing, MI: Michigan State University Press, 2017), 137.
- ⁴ Nathan M. Sorber, *Land-Grant Colleges and Popular Revolt: The Origins of the Morrill Act and the Reform of Higher Education* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2018), 12.
- ⁵ On the prophetic work within land-grant universities and higher education more broadly, see Scott J. Peters, “Recovering a Forgotten Lineage of Democratic Engagement: Agricultural and Extension Programs in the United States,” in *The Cambridge Handbook of Service Learning and Community Engagement*, ed. Corey Dolgon, Tania D. Mitchell, and Timothy K. Eatman (New York: Cambridge University Press, 2017), 71-80, and “Afterword: The Prophetic Aspiration of the Scholar as Human,” in *The Scholar as Human: Research and Teaching for Public Impact*, ed. Anna Sims Bartel and Debra A. Castillo (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2021), 248-265.
- ⁶ Katie Kingery-Page, “Local Participation and Lived Experience: Dialogue and Deliberation through Participatory Processes in Landscape Architecture,” in *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education*, ed. Nicholas V. Longo and Timothy J. Shaffer (Sterling, VA: Stylus, 2019), 240.
- ⁷ Saya Kakim and Kerry L. Priest. “Developing Leadership Capacity Using Visual Thinking Strategies,” *Journal of Leadership Education* 19, no. 3 (2020): 84.
- ⁸ Charles S. Taber, “Advancing Leadership, Engagement and Honors to Build a Signature Land-Grant Experience,” news release, August 19, 2021, <https://www.k-state.edu/today/announcement/?id=76324> (accessed October 7, 2021).

CONTRIBUTORS

DEREK W. M. BARKER is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation and coeditor (with Alex Lovit) of the *Higher Education Exchange*. With a background in political theory, his research focuses on the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy, and nonprofit organizations, journalism, and the professions. Barker is the author of *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* (SUNY Press, 2009) and articles appearing in the academic journals *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, *Journal of Higher Education Outreach and Engagement*, and the *Good Society*.

KATHLEEN (KATIE) CLARK is an assistant professor of nursing and the executive director of the Augsburg Health Commons at Augsburg University. She has over 13 years' experience working in higher education, where she teaches primarily in graduate nursing studies focused on transcultural nursing and caring for marginalized populations. Prior to her role in academia, Clark worked as an acute care nurse for eight years. During that time, she also volunteered working with homeless youth in Minneapolis and in various countries such as Haiti, Tanzania, and Peru. She holds a Doctorate of Nursing Practice in Transcultural Leadership.

JONATHAN GARLICK is a professor at Tufts University School of Dental Medicine, School of Medicine, and School of Engineering, and director of Science Communications at Tufts Clinical Translational Sciences Institute. His research team uses stem cells and human tissue engineering to pioneer "lab-made skin" to advance new treatments for cancer, scleroderma, and complications of diabetes. He is the founder and leader of the Tufts Initiative in Civic Science to explore human health and science through an equity lens, humanize public discourse on polarizing science issues, and foster more inclusion in science.

CHRIS GILMER is president and tenured professor of humanities at West Virginia University at Parkersburg and founder of the National Institutes for Historically Underserved Students. He earned a PhD in English from the University of Southern Mississippi. He is the founding co-convenor of the Research Alliance on Post-Secondary Success at Historically Black Colleges and Universities (HBCUs) and has served three HBCUs, one Hispanic-Serving Institution, and an Appalachian college. He is a national commissioner on college readiness for the American Association of Community Colleges and a member of the board of directors of the Community Colleges of Appalachia. His teaching focuses primarily on the intersections of literature and culture and the literature of marginalized people.

ALEX LOVIT is a program officer with the Kettering Foundation. He holds a PhD in history from the University of Michigan, where he studied 19th-century political history. He provides historical research for Kettering's Cousins Research Group, helps manage the foundation's research into democratic education both in K-12 schools and in higher education, and is the coeditor (with Derek W.M. Barker) of *Higher Education Exchange*.

DAVID MATHEWS, president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, was secretary of Health, Education, and Welfare in the Ford administration and, before that, president of the University of Alabama. Mathews has written extensively on Southern history, public policy, education, and international problem solving. His books include *Politics for People: Finding a Responsible Public Voice*, *Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy*, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*, and *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea*.

DAVID E. PROCTER is professor of communication studies at Kansas State University (KSU). In 2004, he helped establish the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy to provide citizens with a stronger voice in local, state, and national politics and to build capacity for civil deliberation on important and controversial issues. Procter served as coeditor of the *Journal of Public Deliberation* and helped create a graduate certificate in dialogue, deliberation, and public engagement at KSU. He received his PhD from the University of Nebraska.

TIMOTHY J. SHAFFER is associate professor of communication studies and director of the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy at Kansas State University. He is also director of civic engagement and deliberative democracy with the National Institute for Civil Discourse. Shaffer has edited four books, including *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement* (Michigan State University Press, 2017), *Jumping into Civic Life: Stories of Public Work from Extension Professionals* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2018), *A Crisis of Civility? Political Discourse and Its Discontents* (Routledge, 2019), and *Creating Space for Democracy: A Primer on Dialogue and Deliberation in Higher Education* (Stylus, 2019). He earned his PhD at Cornell University.

JOHN J. THEIS, a professor of political science at Lone Star College-Kingwood, is a founder and director of the college's Center for Civic Engagement. He also served as chair of the steering committee of the Democracy Commitment and was a member of the board of directors for the National Issues Forum Institute from 2017 to 2020. He has been involved in civic engagement work for over 20 years and started the LSC-Kingwood Public Achievement program in 2010. Theis holds his PhD from the University of Arizona.

BYRON P. WHITE is associate provost for Urban Research and Community Engagement at the University of North Carolina Charlotte where he oversees a new office charged with mobilizing, assessing, and advancing efforts that connect the university's interdisciplinary, urban research resources to community assets. He has spent his career as a journalist and administrator in academic, corporate, non-profit, and public sectors facilitating mutually beneficial engagement between institutions and urban communities. White has a doctorate in higher education management from the University of Pennsylvania, is a research associate at the Kettering Foundation, and serves on the advisory board of the E.W. Scripps School of Journalism at Ohio University.

Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459 (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 434, Washington, DC 20001 (202) 393-4478
www.kettering.org
