HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE

2020

Democracy Divided

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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DELIBERATIVE CIVIC ENGAGEMENT
Campus Experiments in Hong Kong, Israel, Kenya, and South Africa

Lorlene Hoyt and James Garrett

As new technologies have made news, information, and political messaging available at our fingertips, our positions on political and social issues have become more entrenched. Articles, opinion pieces, and online commentaries supporting any side of any issue are easily accessible. Rather than facilitate productive conversation, this abundance of information and opinion seems to have driven us further into our own camps. So often, we respond with ridicule to those with points of view different from our own, cutting off any possibility of conversation or understanding. At the same time, the rise of new technologies and media has also given a voice and platform to activists and those with traditionally marginalized perspectives who have successfully changed the terms of the conversation and pushed politicians, traditional media, and universities to address their concerns, at least rhetorically.

Deliberative civic engagement holds the promise of reprieve from intense partisanship and growing distrust of government, the media, and other long-standing institutions. By exploring examples of how people have productively entered politics and public life through deliberative civic engagement, we aim to share a hopeful message to the next generation of citizens around the world.

We questioned whether the time was right to turn our attention to the topic of deliberative civic engagement. We write this in May of 2020, as the world, our communities, and our own families struggle with the coronavirus pandemic. In

Might deliberation be a relic of a past ?

this time of uncertainty and rapid change, innovation and decisive adaptation are the order of the day in our governments, institutions, and our own lives. Might deliberation be a relic of a past when time and resources were in greater abundance? Is deliberation a luxury that we can no longer afford?

We would like to suggest that in times of crisis, a return to fundamentals, principles, and proven practices holds particular value. In times of crisis, as ever,

we need to practice techniques for discussion and thoughtful decision-making that are based on our lived experiences. This is exactly the right moment to call into question the civic roles of higher education and to elevate civic engagement practices that "incorporate a specifically deliberative concept of democracy"—practices of listening to one another, weighing options, and discovering where our interests and purposes align.[1]

The global pandemic has been a stark reminder of our interconnectedness and our shared responsibilities to one another. At the same time, this crisis has illuminated existing political divisions in communities around the world. The pandemic itself is yet another example of an issue defined by polarization and disagreement. It has only further high-

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lighted current fissures and disparities. We are seeing clearly the disproportionate impact of the virus on communities with inadequate health-care services, as well as the health effects of generations of racism. We are also witnessing distrust in government and polarized political responses to the pandemic as some communities prepare for the worst while others insist the coronavirus issue is a hoax. Responses from leaders in government and the media have varied tremendously. We are only beginning to understand the implications of those responses.

Writing as we are, only weeks into the crisis, our neighborhoods and campuses empty, it is difficult for us to envision how and when this pandemic will reach its conclusion. Still, we know we will all need to participate in extended and painful discussions as we work to remake and revitalize our communities and institutions in the coming months. Over the course of those conversations, we will certainly experience disagreement and polarization of opinions as we address urgent new questions. It is our hope that this work on deliberative civic engagement may offer both inspiration and guidance as we navigate the many challenges and "wicked problems" ahead.

Wicked Problems

At a time when the world desperately needs an alternative to polarization and conflict, we can look back and see the beginnings of a new paradigm emerging in a series of experiments that took place from 2016 to 2018. The

Talloires Network, in partnership with the Kettering Foundation, organized a series of exchanges aimed at addressing the challenges of polarization and disagreement. The Talloires Network is an association of more than 400 universities in 78 countries committed to civic engagement and social responsibility. We saw the exchanges as an avenue to showcase the difficult work of deliberation already occurring within our member institutions and to bring the institutions into conversations about improving their practices. We aimed to learn more about the most innovative university-led public dialogue and deliberation efforts around the world while, at the same time, deepening these efforts through experimentation with Kettering's research on deliberative concepts.

Throughout their weeks together in Dayton, Ohio, workshop participants discussed approaches to deliberative civic engagement and the controversial issues and wicked problems it might address. (Wicked problems are complex, have numerous causes, and rarely have a single technical solution.) The engaged scholars (university faculty, staff, students, and community partners) who were invited to participate shared the belief that universities ought to play a role in the functioning of civil society. Each had an interest in preparing students to become active citizens who contribute to the betterment of their local communities and in producing relevant knowledge to solve societal problems. Participants were selected, in part, for their leadership roles in a university civic engagement program intended to challenge the notion of an ivory tower.

The controversial issues and wicked problems of common concern identified by these engaged scholars and their communities included xenophobia, poverty, violence, increased hopelessness and despair, loss of trust in government and institutions, inequality, and distrust of the media. To address such challenges, each workshop participant has created spaces and methods for designing and managing activities among people who are affected by wicked problems to foster a sense of understanding and, in some instances, a common call to action. Many participants readily acknowledged that wicked problems are inextricably intertwined, with each a symptom of another.[2] They also viewed higher education institutions as important players in a larger system and a setting where global citizenship gets constructed.[3]

Workshop participants recognized the potential of universities to support dialogue and deliberation. As relatively stable institutions, theoretically unfettered by any political agenda, participants believed that universities were well positioned to build community capacity for deliberation by convening deliberative forums and providing people with "passionate neutrality" to facilitate the deliberative process.[4]

Deliberative Civic Engagement

In most cases, the participants characterized their university civic engagement in terms such as service learning, volunteerism, and community-based research. We found that some of the university civic engagement programs and initiatives have challenged the hierarchical and decidedly undemocratic internal structure of the university in ways that engage faculty and students with wicked problems while others avoided discussions of wicked problems that would cause disagreement among participants. These approaches risk leaving participants' assumptions unchallenged and unexamined, assuming a consensus or unmanageable disagreement.

We also discovered significant variation with respect to how universities in different contexts around the world understand dialogue and deliberation as an approach to civic engagement. The term "deliberation" is not commonplace, nor is it typically the focal point of an engagement effort. Rather, such concepts and methods are embedded in partnerships and understood implicitly.

At the start of our collaboration, participants commented that deliberative civic engagement is similar to other approaches used by leaders and educators that may go by different names, such as "collaborative problem solving." A number of participants came to understand deliberative civic engagement as deconstruction of the artificial wall between the university and the local community. Their examples included "working with, not for, the community"; "to be in and of the community"; "bringing community members who don't have access to decision-making bodies to the table"; "involving citizens in identifying problems"; and having "power with, not power over." Participants also recognized that engaging communities through deliberation is, in some ways, a wicked problem itself.

Idit Manosevitch, from the Netanya Academic College in Israel, cautioned the group, saying there is no such thing as "one community" or a "proper" relationship between university and community; deliberation is necessary to determine how this relationship will unfold. Carol Ma, who was representing Hong Kong's Lingnan University, stressed that trust between university and community members is an essential prerequisite to a constructive relationship and that building trust takes effort and time. By the end of the first workshop, the sentiments of the group were captured by Ronald Sistek of the Universidad Austral de Chile, who defined deliberative civic engagement as "thriving through tension and collaboration." Sistek also noted that, paradoxically, those concerned with fostering deliberative civic engagement in their communities and universities must start with themselves. An attitudinal shift toward "embracing

complexity and diversity" and "legitimating the other" must take place within the individual before group deliberation may be useful.

In 2017, the group began working to identify issues of concern and to conceptualize experiments to be carried out on their individual campuses. They were exposed, again, to Kettering's approach to deliberation, which takes time to appreciate and understand. The workshop emphasized the ways in which deliberation differs from collaborative problem solving. For example, deliberation does not necessarily lead to action. It can, instead, lead to creativity, increased awareness, and the ability to talk and listen across differences. Throughout the week, participants came to understand deliberation as a process of managing conflicts and tensions associated with complex, divisive issues (wicked problems) and that deliberation exists in a continuum between avoiding conflict (unitary positioning) and embracing conflict (adversarial positioning). It is a civil conversation in which power is negotiated and the range of polarization is reduced.

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By the time we met for the third and final workshop in 2018, the group had learned that not all problems are suited for deliberation and some problems do not yet have names. They practiced the art of naming and framing and discussed the importance of using shared language and staying neutral (such as, "How do we protect our girls from harmful practices?" instead of "How do we protect our girls from female mutilation?").

Together, we discussed and explored examples of the key steps for successful deliberation:

1. Identifying a wicked problem

2. Asking, What should we do?

3. Conducting background research

4. Gathering public concerns

5. Grouping the like concerns, identifying the disagreement/tension among the concerns, and unpacking values

6. Describing the approaches/options—grouping all possible actions and trade-offs

Some poignant comments from the final workshop included:

- "Research is detached from problems in society and [the] public is demanding more from universities that receive public money. Research and scientific facts are under attack. Some community leaders do not want our research."

- "Knowledge is something that is co-constructed (not something that someone has). It is fundamentally relational and implies practice. If we take the practice of deliberation into the community, and you have different modes of knowing, then deliberation itself will evolve."

- "Problems are not technical. They are political. On some issues, people have very strong opinions. . . . There are climate [change] deniers, for example. Data will not work. Sometimes there are only two patterns: adversarial or avoidance."

- "Giving voice to and acknowledging people who are 'irrational' is very threatening to the academy; such processes are needed to validate people and open up the conversation."

- "Deliberation can help with the listening—it provides structured listening. This is vital because contemporary culture emphasizes voicing above listening. Deliberation might help people see the value of listening."

Experiments in Deliberative Civic Engagement

> Deliberative pedagogy is a democratic educational process and a way of thinking that encourages students to encounter and consider multiple perspectives, weigh trade-offs and tensions, and move toward action through informed judgment. It is simultaneously a way of teaching that is itself deliberative and a process for developing the skills, behaviors, and values that support deliberative practice.[5]

Despite intensive outreach efforts to our network members over a period of several years, we did not find many examples of deliberative pedagogy under way. At the same time, many of our member universities are actively involved in transforming their curriculum to prepare ethical and engaged citizens. Interestingly, workshop participants rather quickly began to value the practice of

deliberation and took a sincere interest in introducing deliberation in the classroom setting.

The following section describes campus experiments in deliberative pedagogy at universities located in Hong Kong, Israel, Kenya, and South Africa. It also highlights the ways in which these experiments influenced the students who took part.

Hong Kong: Stan Hok-Wui Wong, Hong Kong Polytechnic University

In planning his deliberative experiment for a class, Stan Hok-Wui Wong consulted the resources available on Kettering's website as well as the safety and justice issue guide entitled *How Should Communities Reduce Violence?* published by the National Issues Forums Institute.

He conducted his experiment in March 2019. According to Wong, "It went quite well. The students actively engaged in discussions for about three hours."

The deliberative pedagogy experiment was held in his introduction to politics course with a group of 20 freshmen. This course provided the first opportunity for students to focus on politics as a subject at Hong Kong Polytechnic University. Wong began the exercise by introducing students to the idea of deliberative civic engagement and then asked the students to identify a problem in Hong Kong. Ultimately, they selected *the deterioration of high-quality governance.*

During the experiment, Wong expressed some concern over the lack of different perspectives represented in the classroom. That is, the students appeared to be in agreement. He asked them, "What if the government cannot improve or fix problems? What are some other options? Is there anything we can do at the personal level?" This was a turning point in the experiment. This was when the students discovered a deeper problem—the problem behind the problem.

The students discovered a generation gap. One student said that his parents needed to change the newspaper they read because the news seemed to be generated by the government. Several students said their parents were brainwashed. Students also started questioning information they were getting.

Wong will run the experiment again and plans to make deliberation a permanent feature of this course. For him, there were three big takeaways. First, by altering his pedagogy, he created an opportunity for students to exchange ideas among themselves. Second, he believes students benefited from learning about deliberation and practicing deliberation in the classroom. Lastly, he believes his students were highly engaged because they were sharing their personal experiences with real-world problems.

Wong also noted that the students in this course had to complete a final group project that was unrelated to the deliberation experiment. One group, however, chose deliberative democracy as a focus. They also created a video presentation about deliberative democracy.

Israel: Hadassa (Dassi) Postan-Aizik, University of Haifa and Max Stern Yezreel Valley College

Hadassa Postan-Aizik's first experiment in deliberative pedagogy focused on the issue of sexual harassment in Israel. She introduced Kettering's model of deliberation into a social work course—a required course with about 50 students, the majority female. Before introducing this model into the course, she asked herself:

- How do deliberative principles fit with or relate to social work theory?

- How can deliberative principles fit into social work practice?

- How can teaching deliberation benefit social work students?

She began by asking the students to choose an issue and explained to them, "We will talk in a special way about a problem." The students decided to focus on sexual harassment and the MeToo movement. Each student wrote and submitted a one-page paper on the issue. Postan-Aizik collected and reviewed the opinion papers and used them to create the three options for the deliberation. In the classroom, students used Postan-Aizik's two-page issue guide entitled *How Do We Deal with Sexual Harassment?* The options were: (1) Educate for change, (2) Justice/enforcement, and (3) It's not a problem.

Postan-Aizik structured the experiment thoughtfully, gathering extensive feedback from student participants by way of a questionnaire. She found that a majority (60 percent) of students believed the conversation reshaped their thoughts about the issue. A majority of students (54 percent) also reported that they learned more about the issue, and (80 percent) learned a lot about the feelings of others. Students were also asked whether there was a moment when they thought they might change their mind on the issue. A majority (65 percent) said "no," however, some (17 percent) said "yes." Students commented that the experience was unlike any they have had before, that they had never talked about an issue with such intensity, and that the discussion allowed for many different perspectives. They found deliberation helpful insofar as it encouraged a respectful conversation, which enabled learning.

After completing her deliberative work at the University of Haifa, Postan-Aizik conducted an experiment in deliberative pedagogy at Max Stern Yezreel Valley College, centered on Israel's newly passed nation-state law (in July 2018).

This time, the deliberative session focused on the question, How does Israel as a democratic country that protects the rights of all groups also recognize Jewish identity? Nearly 50 students participated in the deliberation, which was embedded in a critical sociology course given in the department of social

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work. Using an analysis of content generated by way of student writing assignments, Postan-Aizik created an issue guide with the following options: (1) Recognize the importance of Israel as a national country of the Jewish people; (2) Keep individual rights and fight racism as individuals; and (3) Recognize rights for all groups.

Postan-Aizik asked the students to self-organize into 3 groups of approximately 15-16 participants. The students decided to make an effort to divide themselves equally—that is, to ensure that each group had a mix of Jews (of diverse ethnicities) and Arabs, men and women. "Some students were afraid to deal with the issue," she said. "I was afraid, too." She explained, "Students were afraid the conversation would be loud, become explosive, and they might lose friendships as a result."

Prior to the session, she trained six student facilitators (two for each of the three groups), who guided the participants and took notes throughout the session. The facilitators kept time as students went through the options (for a total of 90 minutes). Spending an equal amount of time on each option was part of a larger strategy for being sensitive to student perspectives and managing a difficult conversation. "I focused on the protocol—trusted the process. It does work," Postan-Aizik said. The experiment went very well. Students had "a quiet, intelligent conversation."

Kenya: Martin Ocholi, University of Nairobi

Ocholi's first experiment in deliberative pedagogy focused on the issue of student protest and violence in Kenya. During our summer workshop, Ocholi described incidents on campus involving police brutality toward students. The violence he witnessed had erupted as a result of a publicly contested political election.

Ocholi views deliberation as a valuable teaching method—a way to engage students in a productive conversation. He began this experiment by asking students to share their concerns. In addition, he produced a short issue guide to facilitate the discussion. Together, and after some rigorous dialogue and exchange, they developed a shared understanding of why students resort to protest and violence on campus.

When I asked him to reflect on the experience, Ocholi described the problem behind the problem as an absence of clear communication channels between the university administration and the student body:

> It is a constitutional right to protest. But, why destroy property? Students have learned that no one listens if they do not destroy property. They don't know how or why decisions are being made. When they write letters, there is no response. They protest to draw attention. When they demonstrate peacefully, the administration calls the police, then words are exchanged, then the violence comes. There are many political agendas at the university; there are external forces placing pressures on the students, they are not aware of the issues, and they get caught in the middle. Also, students engage in protest because it is macho—it is good, they believe, to draw blood. There is an absence of clear communication channels.

Following this deliberation experiment, students provided feedback. Their participation in dialogue and deliberation directly influenced ideas they had about themselves and about local issues. Their comments included, "There is a problem, and we can solve it"; "I felt important. I felt powerful"; and "I now understand the complexity of the issue, and I am thinking about how my actions impact others."

After completing his deliberative work on issues of student violence in protests, Ocholi conducted an experiment in deliberative pedagogy. This time, the session focused on a pressing issue in Kenya: ethnicity and national cohesion.

Approximately 30 students participated in the deliberation. Using student writing assignments and information he had collected about Kenya, Ocholi presented several options in response to the question How do we achieve national cohesion while respecting ethnic diversity?

The options were:

- Raise public awareness of national cohesion and ethnic diversity;

- Establish a system of meritocracy and standards of competence for employment (i.e., do not use ethnic diversity as a factor);

- Create institutions that promote national cohesion; and

- Ethnicity is a political issue that must be addressed through political solutions.

To begin, each student was asked to talk about being discriminated against or being favored in a given situation. Those who were denied access to opportunity told their stories, which were painful. Some students were excluded from soccer teams, internships, and other social and professional activities due to their ethnicity. In other cases, they were granted privileges or special opportunities *because* of their ethnicity. Ocholi reported, "You could feel the tension in the room."

The students struggled with the choices that should be made to achieve national cohesion in an ethnically diverse society such as Kenya. During the deliberation, students realized that they represented at least five different ethnicities. They discovered together that each student was guilty of discrimination and each had been a victim of it and that the biggest perpetrator is the individual.

The conversation included some discussion of the "individual as the solution" and a general agreement that people needed to take personal responsibility. According to Ocholi, it was challenging to manage the emotions of a large group and to prevent the discussion from degenerating into a debate.

After the deliberation, students noted that the experience affected their outlook on the issues and introduced them to a new way of dealing with conflict. Specifically, students said they "never really thought about the issue that deeply" and that the session was "an opportunity to discuss issues without finger-pointing and emotion."

South Africa: Hlekani Kabiti, Walter Sisulu University

Hlekani Kabiti initially considered drafting an issue guide on violent student protest in democratic South Africa. She decided to change direction. The new direction aimed to align with her new role in the Risk and Vulnerability Science Centre at Walter Sisulu University. The issue of concern was solid-waste management on campus. She wanted to use deliberation as an approach for understanding the variety of perspectives on the issue at the Mthatha Campus. Her draft proposal was as follows:

Deliberative Community Engagement for Waste Management Action

The university campus environment is home to diverse individuals drawn from different backgrounds, cultures, attitudes, and social realities. The diverse sociocultural context of the stakeholders contributes to behavior toward waste generation, disposal, handling, and minimization. A lot of

solid waste is generated in the process of running day-to-day business and, consequently, a proper waste management strategy is crucial for university environmental sustainability.

This study was necessitated by the visible waste management challenge at Walter Sisulu University, Mthatha campus. Though the challenge is visible, not much progress has been made in addressing it and tapping into the potential benefits brought [about] by proper waste management practices. In order to develop a waste management strategy, there is a need to unpack the underlying attitudes, perceptions, and misconceptions around waste management.

This paper presents a deliberation model for engaging the various university stakeholders in better waste management practices, targeting perception and behavioral change, and reaching common ground. The model, as guided by the Kettering Foundation's approach to deliberation, encompasses problem naming and framing by different stakeholders, addressing and challenging perceptions, identifying possible solutions to the challenge, making decisions based on sound judgments, identifying resources and stakeholders, organizing action, and [enabling] collective continuous reflective learning. The process will provide baseline information, which is vital for the crafting of a Walter Sisulu University waste management plan.[6]

Kabiti had difficulty in launching the experiment on campus; however, she moved forward with the idea in a courageous and creative manner. In the format of a poster, she presented a framework and methods for deliberation on the issue at the National Conference for Global Change held in Polokwane, South Africa, in December 2018. Her poster depicted the methodological linkage between waste management and deliberative engagement.

During the conference, which was focused primarily on the hard science of climate change, Kabiti talked with conference participants about the issues surrounding integrated waste management and the importance of stakeholder engagement with regard to implementation. She relied on the poster to illuminate how such a deliberation might use different stages of the naming and framing process. She is pleased that she moved forward with the experiment, commenting, "When I first interacted with conference participants, they seemed a bit lost. The poster did help me to share the deliberative approach with a new and wide audience. There was an interest in learning more about deliberative methods." Though a modest experiment in scope, she accomplished the primary goal of introducing concepts and methods of deliberative civic engagement to colleagues in South Africa.

South Africa: Janice McMillan, University of Cape Town

Janice McMillan used deliberative civic engagement in an engineering course at the University of Cape Town between July and November 2019. The course was entitled Citizen Professionals in Engineering and the Built Environment, or C/Prof. The C/Prof course aimed to provide engineering and built-environment students with new lenses with which to make sense of the broader social context into which they will apply their technical skills as professionals.

The course explored the inner city of Cape Town as an important physical arena of citizenship and as a place to bring the idea of the "citizen professional" more concretely into the classroom. Students explored the complexities of the inner city, including the history and issues that have led to deeply rooted inequality and injustice. By visiting key historical and present-day sites, students considered such issues as: (1) For whom is the city easily accessible? (2) What statues and memorials represent the history of the city? (3) Whose history do the memorials show? and (4) How does the city's physical layout represent Apartheid history?

The second part of the course explored how to engage in conversation around issues of social justice, citizenship, and power by considering different identities and lived experiences. Working in small groups of three to four people, the course required students to plan, design, and facilitate a deliberation. This approach was intended to offer students the experience of developing facilitation and moderation skills, thereby connecting theory and practice, as well as to get them to reflect on what it means to be a professional who thinks about citizenship and community engagement as a core part of his or her professional identity and role.

McMillan drew on the materials from the Kettering Foundation to support students in the various aspects of the deliberation process (such as understanding deliberation as something different from dialogue and debate and how to structure a deliberation). However, while they drew from these materials, they believed they needed to adapt them to a South African context. In particular, they wanted students to understand the centrality of power relations in this work. In addition, as a teaching team invested in social justice teaching and learning, they were also very aware of their own positions as privileged White scholars teaching a class that consisted predominantly of Black students.

They invited a colleague in the University of Cape Town's Office for Inclusivity and Change to run a series of sessions on Freirean ideology and methods. The aim was to help student facilitators think about issues of unequal

power, voice, and agency. One of the key issues that stood out for students was the notion of allowing learners to bring their own knowledge and experience to the event. This caused some discomfort for some students, which is not surprising given that the majority of higher education—particularly in engineering courses—reflected very traditional modes of teaching that position the lecturer as the expert.

In the end, McMillan and her colleagues concluded that "We need to ensure that our work in the higher education classroom—more than ever before—equips students as young citizens to understand the complex social context in which they will one day work." As they move their work forward, they will ask and explore several vital questions: Who is at the table (for the deliberation process)? What falls outside our political imagination and why? What are the consequences of asking these questions?

Lessons Learned

It is not necessary to transform the curriculum in order to expose students to deliberation. Introducing methods of deliberation into existing courses can be very effective, as demonstrated by these experiments.

Student feedback on campus experiments was generally very positive. Participating in structured conversation on a difficult issue left some students feeling they had greater agency in understanding and solving problems. In addition, students enjoyed thinking through the complexity of the issues from multiple perspectives and gained new insights from their peers. Though difficult and messy, these conversations released some of the unspoken tensions in the room. Faculty played a major role in facilitating the

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experiments to ensure students stayed focused on the issues and the discussion led to greater understanding rather than confrontation. Student feedback suggests that opportunities for deliberations in these societies are rare, but vital and welcomed. Generally, students enjoyed exploring important issues, learning from their peers, and considering alternative perspectives.

The faculty who ran these experiments created spaces for students from diverse backgrounds and experiences to practice democratic principles by discussing the multiple dimensions of a relevant social issue. They ensured that the student participants were central to the process of identifying as well

as naming and framing issues. Once an issue was chosen for discussion, the group worked together to identify the tension underlying the issue as well as the values associated with the tension.

Conclusion

Universities occupy a conflicted space in the popular imagination. They conjure competing images of elitism and social mobility, ivory tower isolationism and community uplift, and places of exclusion and places where diverse people interact and thrive. From one angle, elitist universities perpetuate systems in which voices are systematically disenfranchised. Despite the collective brainpower within university walls, they are often out of touch with the knowledge, experience, and assets of their surrounding communities.

However, we know that universities have an opportunity—and, perhaps, an obligation—to create an environment for communities to discuss their differences and devise their own solutions. Universities can create, nurture, and protect environments where ideas can be discussed between people of different beliefs and backgrounds. Such environments may play a vital role in advancing tolerance of differences and understanding between people with divergent values and ideologies. Campus and community environments represent important opportunities to discover self-rule by working through difficult questions with community members, forming networks, and using human and other resources to address local problems.[7]

As a result of the Talloires Network's collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, faculty from universities in different parts of the world have learned about and applied deliberation in their classrooms and hundreds of students have participated in deliberative discussions and benefited from the experience. As societal polarization continues to increase in countries around the world, the need for deliberation grows. The world needs more activities designed to bring people together, to talk, to listen, and to understand one another. At the heart of deliberative practice, we rebuild public trust and democratic institutions. Universities hold tremendous potential with regard to achieving this proposition.

At the heart of deliberative practice, we rebuild public trust and democratic institutions.

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NOTES

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CONTRIBUTORS

DIANA ALI (she/her/hers) is currently the associate director of policy research and advocacy at NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education. Through her service at NASPA, Ali provides timely analysis of emerging policy issues at state and federal levels, creates tools for student affairs professionals to understand and respond to these issues, and organizes and supports NASPA advocacy and civic engagement efforts. Ali has been a nonprofit advocate and avid volunteer in the Chicagoland community for over a decade. She holds a bachelor's degree in cultural anthropology with minors in gender and Asian American studies from Northwestern University and master's degrees in both social work and public policy from the University of Chicago.

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, he works primarily on research concerning the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, journalism, and the professions. He has contributed to other Kettering publications, including the *Kettering Review* and *Connections*. 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*, and *The Good Society*.

FLANNERY BURKE is an associate professor in the departments of history and American studies at Saint Louis University, where she specializes in regional culture and environmental humanities. She is the author of *From Greenwich Village to Taos* (University Press of Kansas, 2008) and *A Land Apart: The Southwest and the Nation in the Twentieth Century* (University of Arizona Press, 2017). She served on the writers' team for the *C3 Framework for the Social Studies* (National Council for the Social Studies, 2013) and is a board member of the Missouri Council for History Education.

JAMES E. (JED) DONELAN is an associate professor of philosophy and humanities and the director of the New England Center for Civic Life (NECCL) at Franklin Pierce University. In his more than 20 years with NECCL, he has conducted dozens of workshops on deliberative dialogue, moderated or facilitated hundreds of structured forums and conversations, and presented widely on these practices and experiences. His research interests are in deliberative ethics, deliberative democracy, and the teaching of philosophy.

MARIE C. DOWNEY is a senior at Saint Louis University. She is a member of the Saint Louis University Honors Program, studying psychology and bioethics as well as health studies. Downey most recently received top honors for her psychology capstone on the topic of task complexity, indirect peer-influenced stress, and persistence.

LEILANI (LANI) FROST is a communication major with a focus on journalism and media and a minor in Chinese at Saint Louis University. She is a member of the Asian American Association, KSLU College Radio, and the University Honors Program and serves as the social media and graphic design chair for the university's Korean Student Association. After taking Flannery Burke's Origins of the Modern World course, she had the opportunity to complete the courses History of China and Japan After 1600 and History of the Saint Louis Region. Frost hopes to use the knowledge that she has gained through all these classes to better understand and advocate for her community.

JAMES GARRETT is the program administrator for the Talloires Network. Before beginning his work at Tufts University, he was program manager for Tulane University's Mellon Graduate Program in Community-Engaged Scholarship and senior program coordinator for internships and international programs at the Center for Public Service. He holds a bachelor's degree from Davidson College and a master's degree from the University of Louisville. He is a student in the MFA Program for Writers at Warren Wilson College.

TERI LYN HINDS (she/her/hers) is the senior director for strategic initiatives-equity 2030 at Minnesota State, the third largest system of state colleges and universities in the United States and the largest in Minnesota with 30 colleges, 7 universities, and 54 campuses. With over 15 years of experience in higher education institutional research, assessment, and project management, including 8 years in Washington, DC, Hinds brings a broad perspective to higher education conversations. She holds a bachelor's degree in government from Cornell University and a master's degree in social service administration with a concentration in health administration and policy from the University of Chicago.

LORLENE M. HOYT is the executive director of the Talloires Network. While teaching at MIT, she founded MIT@Lawrence, an award-winning city-campus partnership. Her book *Regional Perspectives on Learning-by-Doing: Stories from Engaged Universities around the World* (Michigan State University Press, 2017) illustrates how universities can mobilize their resources to create more equitable and prosperous communities while also educating civic leaders. Hoyt is a research professor in urban and environmental policy and planning and faculty member of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, as well as a visiting scholar at Brown University. She holds a PhD in city and regional planning from the University of Pennsylvania.

SYDNEY JOHNSON is a recent graduate of Saint Louis University with a degree in neuroscience. She served as a teaching assistant and tutor during her undergraduate career. In addition, she volunteered at the front desk at Saint Mary's Hospital and participated in the Emergency Medicine Research Associates Program in Saint Louis University Hospital's emergency department. She will be attending Saint Louis University School of Medicine to become a physician.

STEPHANIE KING is the director of strategic initiatives for ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge. As the previous director for civic engagement and knowledge community initiatives at NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education, she directed its LEAD Initiative and comanaged/cocreated the Voter Friendly Campus program. King's work in higher education since 2009 includes the areas of student activities, orientation, residence life, and civic learning and democratic engagement. She earned her MA in psychology from Chatham University and her BS in biology from Walsh University. She contributed to the 2018 NASPA publications *Effective Strategies for Supporting Student Civic Engagement* and *Higher Education's Role in Enacting a Thriving Democracy*.

KARA LINDAMAN is a professor of political science and public administration at Winona State University, where she teaches courses in public service, public budgeting and finance, and public policy and advises student-citizens about joining public service. Since 2009, she has been the Winona State University coordinator for the American Democracy Project of the Association of American State Colleges and Universities. Lindaman earned her PhD from the University of Kansas. She is a proud ambassador of the National Issues Forum Institute, and through her work with the Kettering Foundation, she focuses on democratic practices for thinking and talking across differences.

ALEX LOVIT is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. With an academic background in the study of history, he assists with Kettering's experiments in deliberating about historical issues through Historic Decisions issue guides. He also works for Kettering's research with both K-12 and higher education and provides historical research for the foundation. Lovit is the coeditor (with Derek W. M. Barker) of Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange*.

BRENT A. MARSH is assistant vice chancellor for student affairs and dean of students at the University of Mississippi. With more than 20 years of experience serving in student affairs across a variety of institutional settings, Marsh has presented numerous sessions at national and regional conferences and has published on a variety of topics, including Esports and personal finance. Marsh joined the group of authors for this publication via his role as director of the NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education Public Policy Division. Previously, he served NASPA as the Region IV-West coordinator of regional finances and as chair of the Student-Athlete Knowledge Community.

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*.

ALLISON MISPAGEL is a senior at Saint Louis University, majoring in accounting with a minor in business analytics. Allison did not have much interest in history before taking Flannery Burke's Origins of the Modern World course but afterward gained a new interest in the subject. She is a member of Saint Louis University's Honors Program and through this program had the opportunity to be a teaching assistant for an introduction to honors course. After college, Allison hopes to get a master's degree in accounting and sit for the Certified Public Accountant exam.

ERIN PAYSEUR OETH is interested in exploring the public square—how we develop civic learning, skills, and practices to thrive together in community. As a research fellow with the Kettering Foundation, she serves on several national research exchanges. Payseur Oeth has presented nationally with colleagues, including recent sessions on exploring faith groups as civic actors and using public deliberation in church and community decision-making. She holds a BA in religion/philosophy from Presbyterian College and an MEd in higher education and student affairs from the University of South Carolina. Before joining the University of Mississippi as a project manager in community engagement, she held positions at Baylor University and Columbia College.

VERDIS L. ROBINSON (he/him/his) is an associate of the Kettering Foundation with a focus on the democratic practices of community colleges. He has previously served as Campus Compact's director for community college engagement and as the national director for The Democracy Commitment. Prior to his national leadership, Robinson served as a tenured professor of history and African American studies at Monroe Community College, fellow for the Aspen Institute's Wye Faculty Seminar on Citizenship in the American and Global Polity, and fellow for the National Endowment for the Humanities' Faculty Seminar on Rethinking Black Freedom Studies: The Jim Crow North and West.

ANDREW SWEESO is a senior at Saint Louis University, majoring in English with minors in Catholic studies and philosophy. His academic work includes analysis of the intersection of Catholic liturgy and social media and projects published in the university's journal *The Kiln Project*. He has served as a writing consultant for undergraduate students at the university and as leader of the Labre Ministry with the Homeless. Much of his work focuses on radical relational ministry with Saint Louis' unhoused community, including training and educating undergraduate students on issues of poverty and homelessness and working with local nonprofits to provide shelter, develop resources, and promote collaboration with unhoused individuals and families.

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