

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2018

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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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A Note of Appreciation

David Brown has not just been an editor of *HEX* since 1994. He is also its cocreator, together with former Kettering Foundation program officer Deborah Witte. The *Higher Education Exchange*, as readers will know, is a publication whose purpose is to facilitate a conversation in higher education about the role of academe in democracy, particularly the role of students as actors and producers.

David was ideal as an editor of the journal because he brought to the work an astonishing breadth of experience, both inside and outside the academy: from serving as deputy mayor of New York City under Mayor Ed Koch to teaching at Yale's School of Management and New School's Milano Graduate School, and serving as president of Blackburn College. His perceptive insights were evident in the interviews he conducted, which were regularly published in *HEX*. And he undoubtedly drew on what he learned from the *Exchange* in his own books, including *The Real Change-Makers: Why Government is Not the Problem or the Solution* and *America's Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects*.

His most recent contribution to Kettering's work has been to help launch a new initiative in higher education to cultivate a greater civic and democratic understanding of professionalism. We are deeply appreciative of David's many contributions to this journal and to Kettering's research. We are pleased to have Derek Barker, who is leading Kettering's studies of democracy and higher education, continue on as coeditor of the journal. And we welcome Alex Lovit as coeditor; he is leading Kettering's research on teaching deliberative democracy through historic decisions.

David Mathews

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REFLECTIONS ON ADVANCING UNIVERSITY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INTERNATIONALLY

Lorlene Hoyt

Increasingly, we are exposed to stories and images of public protest and violence in nations around the world. Political polarization is on the rise, and public discourse is becoming more dysfunctional. Citizens doubt the competencies and motives of their elected officials and the media. As people retreat into their ideological enclaves and lose faith in the notion of self-rule, democracy in the United States and beyond is struggling.

Optimists contend that our democratic institutions will prevail; our young democracy was designed to survive such challenges. At the same time, they acknowledge a discernable decrease in the public's confidence in societal institutions, including institutions of higher education.

In the United States and the world over, universities are scenes for waves of unrest. In South Africa, for example, universities were caught up in the #FeesMustFall movement as students and the South African government tackled issues about affordability and the right to an education. As institutions, universities occupy a conflicted space in the popular imagination. They conjure competing images of elitism and social mobility; ivory tower isolationism and community uplift; places of exclusion and places where diverse people interact and thrive. Recent protests at the world's universities suggest that people recognize the power and potential of institutions of higher education and are holding them accountable. At the same time, there is less awareness of the historic public purpose of universities, and few people view them as institutions capable of strengthening democracy.

This essay reflects a decade of experience with the Kettering Foundation and the ways in which it works with *innovators* and *partners* in higher education to align universities with a democratic citizenry. As an associate professor of urban planning at MIT, working with citizens in Lawrence, Massachusetts, I participated in the foundation's workshops as an innovator in higher education from 2008 to 2011. More recently (2012-2018), I have been a foundation partner while working as executive director of the Talloires Network, a global

coalition of engaged universities. Our shared interest in advancing democracy by strengthening the civic roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions internationally has held steady. And we have worked hand in hand in a variety of ways with campuses and communities around the world that are experimenting with democratic practices and collaborating across cultural, religious, racial, and other differences to make sound decisions and take action.

The Kettering Foundation's focus on strengthening democratic practices presents distinctive challenges. How does an autonomous and well-resourced institution put the citizenry at the center of social problem solving? How can the foundation promote self-rule, demonstrating democratic practices by way of example, without imposing a particular style or type of self-rule?

Convenor. Curator. Coach. While the Kettering Foundation does not necessarily use these words, in my experience, they best characterize its role in working to advance university civic engagement internationally. As convenor,

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the foundation collaborates with its partners to identify innovators in higher education and encourage ongoing face-to-face interactions among innovators. As curator, the foundation

maintains a shared vocabulary and invites participants to explore, challenge, and experiment with ideas outside of and within their home communities. As coach, the foundation demonstrates democratic practices by cultivating an environment for experimenting with democracy (problem solving by self-rule). It meets with partners and innovators in higher education to name problems, exchange experiences (deliberate), and take collective action (experiment).

Convenor

The foundation creates a space for people to empower *themselves*. This is easier said than done. In my experience, collaborative learning and action with the Kettering Foundation begins with an invitation to participate, accompanied by a set of "framing questions." Framing questions help to initiate and guide conversations; they at once challenge prevalent ideas and provoke new ones. For those of us who have been identified as innovators in higher education and invited to a workshop, the experience is, at first, disorienting and, at times, awkward and frustrating. This was the case for me in February 2008 when

the foundation invited me to join a conversation in Dayton, Ohio, entitled, “Democracy and Higher Education: The Future of Engagement.” I was excited and intrigued, but also very confused about how to participate in the workshop conversation.

Our small group grappled with a set of framing questions, sharing experiences and trying to figure out what we might plan to do together during the week and in the future. At the same time that I was feeling very confused and uncertain about the

foundation’s approach to convening, another person new to the foundation said aloud what I was thinking:

We take the time to learn and grow, individually and collectively.

“Where is this conversation going? What are we trying to achieve?” I did not realize at the time that she had, in a way, highlighted the very genius of the foundation—stepping back. Putting people, problems, and the power of decision-making in the hands of a small group of people is an invention in the making.

Though the group discussion felt somewhat unsatisfying to me at the time, my notes from this and subsequent workshops reveal multiple benefits. By meeting with and getting to know innovators in higher education from near and far, I rediscovered my love of learning and renewed my sense of purpose as a member of the higher education community. Some excerpts from the notes I took at that first meeting include “I can contribute more than expertise”; “Academics are not apolitical”; and “Blending expert knowledge and public knowledge requires a capacity to learn and unlearn in collaboration with others.” Importantly, the foundation, as convenor, affords scholar-practitioners like myself an opportunity to focus their time and energies on the exchange of experiences and ideas. This is a gift. For those of us in—and working to reform—ivory towers, the foundation assumes a host of responsibilities (scheduling flights, making hotel reservations, providing meals), while we take the time to learn and grow, individually and collectively.

My relationship with the Kettering Foundation has evolved over time. In 2012, as then-incoming director of programs and research for the Talloires Network, my involvement shifted from innovator to partner. Natural allies, the Talloires Network and the Kettering Foundation launched a multi-year research and writing collaboration and have, for several years, jointly explored how universities around the world understand their democratic mission and engage their students in the civic life of their communities.

Together, we engaged a variety of innovators (university faculty, staff, students, and community partners from seven countries on six continents), crafted framing questions and workshop agendas, and facilitated discussions, exposing innovators in higher education to Kettering Foundation and Talloires Network research. The foundation encouraged this series of exchanges, known as “Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement.” Rather than providing services or expert knowledge to communities, we asked participants to reflect on their experiences working *with* communities to strengthen their civic capacities. They articulated their practices and visions in writing, and decided to produce a book to inspire new perspectives on how higher education understands civic engagement. The book was their idea and project—the foundation served a vital role as convenor, with assistance from the network. In a way, the book itself reflects the democratic practices it espouses.

Curator

Institutional barriers that undermine and deter efforts to engage citizens in problem solving frustrate many innovators in higher education. Their experience is similar to the lack of control over problems that citizens feel and face in their communities. The foundation, it seems, attempts to address such barriers by functioning as a curator. In other words, it focuses attention on listening to people, naming problems, and maintaining a vocabulary for people to use as they exchange ideas and determine avenues for action. Its approach is slow, subtle, and persistent. Shaped with its innovators and partners, and discernable upon reflection, the fundamental building blocks of the foundation’s vocabulary include *research, experiment, deliberation, naming, framing,* and *democracy*. Importantly, “democracy” is understood as the power of people to shape their future; it is not a formula, a technique, or a formal system of government institutions. In caring for these ideas, the foundation and its partners and innovators build and steward a cultural heritage.

The shared vocabulary is useful. The foundation invites innovators in higher education to engage with one another for several years at a time. Newcomers are added to the mix regularly. A foundational, yet malleable, vocabulary provides people from different walks of life a common set of ideas to consider, explore, challenge, and take home.

In my experience, engagement among innovators takes place primarily in semi-structured group discussions or workshops. The foundation works hand in hand with its partners to craft workshop agendas, which are loosely bound by a set of framing questions. To help ground an exchange of experiences

and encourage new interpretations, the foundation often embeds the evolving vocabulary in the framing questions.

The following quotes from an exchange (“Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement,” December 2013) may bring these and earlier points to life. The framing question, What problems of democracy and civic life are you attempting to address in your regions through efforts to better engage students in communities? prompted the following exchanges:

Maria Fernanda Pacheco Bravo (university student from Mexico): “People don’t believe in themselves. They think they don’t have agency; we focus on empowerment.”

Thabo Putu (community partner from South Africa): “People expect the government to do things for them; we say you don’t have to leave politics to the politician—everyone is a politician.”

Eric Brace (community partner from Australia): “There are some in government who are intent on determining where aboriginal people live and people are becoming cynical about policy. Nearly three hundred indigenous languages in Australia are endangered or dormant. Culture is under attack, yet the issue isn’t given the urgency it deserves.”

Loshini Naidoo (university faculty from Australia): “We encourage teachers in training to value the knowledge of refugees. Teachers aren’t prepared to work with these communities, and racism is built into the larger schooling system.”

(University faculty from Scotland): “We look at the whole community and schools; we reconnect people with civic life and let them know they can influence and change things.”

Joseph Francis (university faculty from South Africa): “The young generation is disinterested and leaves decisions to elders. We need to reconnect different groups. Students need to see value in productive engagement; we need to develop leaders.”

Nelly Corbel (university staff from Egypt): “We want civic leaders to discover their values, to discover what is inside.”

Margaret Fraser (community partner from Scotland): “The perception is that the community is disadvantaged. People are convinced that their misfortune is their fault as “bad mothers.” We must get to the root causes—get people beyond accepting how things are.”

James Koh (university faculty from Malaysia): “There has been a lot of land grabbing from the government and private corporations. Villagers have become very dependent. We found a high level of apathy and distrust. We would like to see them take charge of their health. We are hoping students will become policymakers and leaders [if] they are exposed to the villages.”

On the surface, this may look like a lot of talk with no structure or purpose. Admittedly, it is a lot of information to make sense of in real time. However, this dynamic, messy, and honest exchange illuminates the ways in which the group discussion is an exercise in strengthening democratic practices. Participants experience and learn about their own power by stepping forward, naming problems, and listening to others. And despite differences in geopolitical context, universal themes emerge: apathy among the citizenry, citizenry’s distrust of institutions, and hope that another way is possible.

Coach

As coach, the foundation poses questions more frequently than it answers them; it listens and observes more than it speaks; it provides spaces for people to gather, to talk, and to decide; it values and welcomes public knowledge as well as expert knowledge. In large part, the foundation demonstrates democratic practices by example.

To bring this point to life, I have excavated the following from another conversation the Talloires Network recorded and transcribed. This is different from the prior example because the conversation itself required coaching. As I recall, the morning conversation started with the framing question, What practices have you used to more successfully build democratic relationships between the university and community partners, and what differences have these practices made in the civic life of communities? After more than an hour of discussion, several people in the room had not yet spoken, or had said very little. In this instance, the foundation’s ability to function as coach contributed to increased participation and learning:

Derek Barker (foundation program officer): “We want to make sure that we hear from everyone on questions of practices you’re using as universities and communities develop relationships and what differences that’s making in civic life. We can also weave in challenges. I heard James (university

faculty from Malaysia) say something about the community taking charge of their health. Could you say more about this?”

James Koh (university faculty from Malaysia): “Malaysians are pretty apathetic when it comes to health. Most citizens are very ignorant about health. There is no agency to go [to] for a yearly check up. Our university is a medical university—almost every class has teaching and learning activities for students.

The community we work with is indigent, but the people ruling the country are not from this group.

This can be frustrating, especially when participants desire and seek direction.

There is a lot of distrust. Back to taking charge of their health, we discovered that most villagers were unaware of health issues. Some people go through their entire life without seeing a doctor, and most deliveries are done in the village by midwives. If they are sick, they wait it out unless they are really, really sick. The first task was to find out their needs—teenage pregnancy and drug and alcohol abuse were big problems. Hygiene is a huge problem—hair lice, scabies. This was a big culture shock for the students. The key issue in our work is dialogue—we have to tread very carefully because there are a lot of sensitive issues. Now the community is prepared, they come on their own accord, they ask about their health.”

Joseph Francis (university faculty from South Africa): “What is the role of traditional medicine?”

James Koh (university faculty from Malaysia): “They have their own traditional medicine. The university learns from them as well. The university has difficulty with traditional medicine and the villagers can help us. We want to know what they know.”

Nelly Corbel (university staff from Egypt): “I am curious to know—in your case, where does lack of trust come from?”

James Koh (university faculty from Malaysia): “Most of the people in the village are Catholic, but 10 percent are Muslim. They are the ones with the power in the village. They think that the university is part of the 90 percent and trying to organize against them.”¹

Interestingly, this exchange illustrates two points. First, the foundation’s role as a coach helps to ensure that all voices are heard. Perhaps more importantly, skillful coaching also creates an environment that encourages others to

take part in coaching. In this way, everyone is a coach, a teacher, and a student. By working in a way that is more horizontal than vertical, the foundation actively welcomes different ways of knowing—both expert knowledge and public knowledge.

In addition to cofacilitating conversations with partners in ways that are democratic, the foundation consistently resists the temptation to impose its desires upon its partners and innovators. Admittedly, this can be frustrating, especially when participants desire and seek direction from those who they assume are in charge. This approach is also more time-consuming and can be difficult to accept as so many of us have adapted to a fast-paced culture that prioritizes immediate gratification.

The foundation reminds people to slow down, to talk about problems that concern them. It reminds us to listen and to reflect. It places the power of decision-making and the task of moving forward together productively in the hands of workshop participants. In this way, the foundation provides fertile ground for deliberation in its many manifestations. The following notes (from “Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement,” July 2014, with narrative added by the author) aims to illustrate this point:

Joseph Francis (university faculty from South Africa): “I would like to play a game to deliver the point.” (*He arranges the tables in the room into a closed circle, with the workshop participants seated in chairs outside the circle, facing the center of the room.*) “I am inviting four people into the center of the circle.” (*He does not tell them how to get to the center; each chooses how they want to enter. He takes a piece of paper with four sides, draws a curved line on it, and places it on the floor in the center of the circle. He asks each volunteer to stand on one side of the paper.*) “Now, what do you see? What is the reality?”

Nelly Corbel (university staff from Egypt): “I see a 3.”

(University faculty from Scotland): “I see a *W*.”

(University partner from Egypt): “I see the Arabic letter *ayn*.”

Mark Wilson (university faculty from the United States): “I see a MacDonald’s sign.”

Joseph Francis (university faculty from South Africa): “Who is right? They are all right because they have different perspectives. We focus on the same thing from different angles. [We] see things from our own perspective. Communities are fighting for resources and no one wins. We build bridges between people. Solutions to social problems do not lie within us at the

University of Venda, but rather within the community. We create a platform to discover solutions as villagers engage one another. We are outsiders building on what already exists, not creating something new. Our approach is cross-generational—a platform where anyone, any age or background, can contribute to solutions. This is critical because communities are becoming more uncomfortable with the service they are getting from the public sphere. South Africa has good policies around public participation. The reality on the ground is that only a few people are connected to leadership and participating. Our Constitution (South Africa, 1996) says the people should govern, but they can only govern through making decisions collectively.”²

This is a vivid example of the Kettering Foundation’s approach to community building. Rather than impose its interests, it yields. In this example, an innovator in higher education felt empowered to physically rearrange the room and teach a lesson about democratic practice. Significantly, in doing so, he conveyed his knowledge of practice while also highlighting the urgency and relevance of democratic engagement in his community.

Summary

Foundation “insiders” are more likely to agree with the characterization of “Convenor-Curator-Coach” that I have set forth. Understandably, foundation “outsiders” may be wondering, How are so-called innovators in higher education identified and selected to receive an invitation to participate in a workshop? How does someone become a foundation partner? In what ways are these processes and decisions democratic? These are reasonable questions that I have not attempted to answer.

Those readers who self-identify as “in-between” (neither “insiders” nor “outsiders”), who have had limited exposure to the foundation’s practices, may also resist or otherwise challenge my characterization. Perhaps their own experience with the foundation’s open-ended structure made them uneasy and unsure. Perhaps they were part of an exchange and did not appreciate the foundation’s approach—instead, they felt that the people in their group pontificated too much, indulged in personal stories, or made extraneous statements.³ Perhaps they did not find value in discussing ideas (democracy, research, experimentation, deliberation) and taking action with others, deciding that their experience with the foundation was not relevant to their interests and goals.

Every organization is subject to criticism and falls short on occasion. What matters is that the foundation’s mission aligns with its practices, and,

by and large, they are a fit. The foundation sees citizens as leaders. It provides some encouragement—it convenes, curates, and coaches—while people make decisions through their relationships with each other. The foundation’s efforts to advance democracy internationally are, in effect, experiments in collective responsibility.

In a world where so many societies are coping with political conflict and division, dysfunctional public discourse, cultural and religious differences, and differences of race, class, and polarized ideologies, the work of Kettering and its partners has become more vital than ever before. Directly and indirectly, it has nurtured an ever-expanding network of people who are working together to reinvigorate the civic roles and legitimacy of higher education institutions in their communities around the world. Together, they are naming problems, engaging in experiments, and learning from failure, while reinventing the university as a democratic institution.

I am grateful to the foundation for the many invitations I have received, the risks we have taken, relationships and projects we have built, and for this opportunity to reflect on my experience.



NOTES

- ¹ Notes from “Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement,” meeting, December, 2013, in possession of author.
- ² Ibid.
- ³ David Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*, Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014, 79.

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