

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2019

Leadership and Democracy

Articles

Maura Casey

Michaela Grenier

Matthew R. Johnson

William V. Muse and Carol Farquhar Nugent

Mark Wilson

Interviews

Dennis Donovan and Harry C. Boyte

Katrina S. Rogers and Keith Melville

Afterword

David Mathews

Editors: Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit
Managing Editor: Joey Easton
Proofreader: Ellen Dawson-Witt
Formatting: Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

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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CONTENTS

Derek W. M. Barker and Alex Lovit	Leadership Education and the Public Mission of Higher Education (Foreword)	1
Maura Casey	Ralph Nader's Call to Citizenship	5
Matthew R. Johnson	The Role of Student Affairs in Fostering Democratic Engagement	15
Dennis Donovan and Harry C. Boyte	Developing Leaders: The Life and Work of a Citizen-Educator Using Public Achievement (An Interview)	26
Mark Wilson	Living Democracy: Lessons for Leadership Education	34
William V. Muse and Carol Farquhar Nugent	The Power of Public Deliberation: Civic Education for Older Students	44
Michaela Grenier	Building Student Civic Leadership through Sustained Dialogue	50
Katrina S. Rogers and Keith Melville	College and University Presidents Serving Democracy (An Interview)	59
David Mathews	What Kind of Democracy Does Higher Education Support? (Afterword)	68
	Contributors	79

THE ROLE OF STUDENT AFFAIRS IN FOSTERING DEMOCRATIC ENGAGEMENT

Matthew R. Johnson

Higher education's increased focus on civic engagement during the last two decades is well documented. While many have applauded this resurgence, others have criticized the efforts for being too episodic, apolitical, and technocratic. Curiously, the role of Student Affairs—that is, college administrators who foster the learning and development of students outside the formal curriculum—is often left unexplored in the larger civic renewal movement on college campuses. How the Student Affairs profession understands and addresses the democratic mission of higher education remains obscured in a multitude of values and priorities. This makes it difficult to center democratic engagement and preparation of students for public work, including governmental work, through deliberative practice. But Student Affairs holds great promise for preparing college students for democratic engagement, given its embrace of social change leadership models that seek to engage all students, rather than a select group who are considered leaders based on charisma or the position they hold.

I have been on both sides of the often separate worlds of public deliberation and college student leadership development for my entire career. I promoted deliberative practice as a

graduate student in fraternities and sororities and later as a teacher of undergraduate, masters, and doctoral students. I worked to

Curiously, the role of Student Affairs is often left unexplored in the larger civic renewal movement on college campuses.

advance the field of leadership development in Student Affairs through the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership and while working in student leadership offices on college campuses. Although I have always believed in the synergistic overlaps between these movements, I have been mostly unsuccessful in bridging the two. I hope that examining the historical and contemporary commitment—and shortcomings—of Student Affairs to democratic engagement, as well as

identifying the connections between deliberative practice and leadership development, might open more possibilities for integrating deliberative practice into the work of Student Affairs. Doing so would better prepare students to fully exercise leadership in their lives and in the work they may do.

Student Affairs' Historical and Philosophical Commitment to Democratic Engagement

Student Affairs is a relatively young field and is often known by different names: student personnel, student affairs administration, or student services. It began to take shape in the 1920s. Dubbed the “student personnel movement,” Student Affairs is primarily concerned with “educating the whole student” as Michael Hevel explains in his historical account of the field.¹ As administrative responsibilities expanded in the early 20th century, Student Affairs administrators organized by meeting and forming associations. During this time, administrators recognized the importance of establishing a body of scholarship on the student experience and provided strategic direction for the emerging field. In 1937, the *Student Personnel Point of View* was published by the American Council on Education Studies. The primary focus of the document was to shape the philosophy of Student Affairs work. Informed by the views of the philosopher John Dewey on progressive education, the document held educating the whole student as its primary ideal. In expanding upon this idea, the authors cited:

The necessity for conceiving of after-college adjustment as comprehending the total living of college graduates, including not only their occupational success but their active concern with the social, recreational, and cultural interests of the community. Such concern implies their willingness to assume those individual and social responsibilities, which are essential to the common good.²

As evidenced above, the original document was clear in its intent to prepare students for democratic engagement.

The *Student Personnel Point of View* was updated 12 years later during a time when the population of college students was burgeoning and diversifying. While the 1949 document provided direction that went well beyond a focus on democratic engagement, it did highlight Students Affairs' “urgent responsibility for providing experiences which develop in its students a firm and enlightened belief in democracy, a matured understanding of its problems and methods, and a deep responsibility for individual and collective action to achieve its goals.”³ Similar to its predecessor, this version centers on preparing

students for democracy as the primary aim of Student Affairs, arguing for a “fuller realization of democracy in every phase of living.”⁴ Encumbered by scientific management and a managerial ethos, the 1949 authors wanted democratic preparation to be underscored and augmented from the original.

At least 11 additional guiding documents have been drafted since 1949. In the *Journal of College Student Development*, Nancy Evans and Robert Reason analyzed them and found that four broad principles have endured since the inception of Student Affairs:

- a focus on students, including a respect for student differences and holistic development;
- recognition of the role of the environment in students’ collegiate experience and shaping it to benefit student learning;
- acknowledgement of the importance of empirically grounded practice; and
- a belief that Student Affairs professionals are responsible for preparing students for a democratic society.⁵

The authors noted that the final principle, preparing students for a democratic society, was the least consistent throughout the documents. While Student Affairs educators can point to democratic engagement being a central idea in the first two guiding documents of our field—and an enduring value since then—centering democratic engagement becomes a challenge amidst other values and philosophies.

Leadership Development in Student Affairs

One area in Student Affairs that has gained significant traction with proponents of democratic engagement is leadership development, particularly given its proliferation in Student Affairs and demonstrated empirical connection to fostering civic values, attitudes, and behaviors. Almost every campus in the country offers a smattering of leadership classes, programs, retreats, workshops, trainings, and certificates, and most of the cocurricular offerings are housed in Student Affairs. While campuses may adopt differing conceptions or definitions of leadership, the prevailing paradigm depicts leadership as a shared process whereby people work together toward positive change. Early leadership programs focused on leaders and individual traits, but most collegiate leadership programs now employ shared leadership models. A cogently stated philosophy from this model that guides much of the philosophy of contemporary Student

Affairs leadership work is from Alexander and Helen Astin's report that defined leadership in the following manner:

By "leadership" we mean not only what elected and appointed public officials do, but also the critically important civic work performed by those individual citizens who are actively engaged in making a positive difference in the society. A leader, in other words, can be anyone—regardless of formal position—who serves as an effective social change agent.⁶

The Astins' definition of leadership highlighted the importance of work done both inside and outside of formal public government. They believed that Student Affairs (and higher education in general) ought to dedicate its leadership efforts to preparing students for both.

The most common framework used to advance leadership development in higher education and actualize the Astins' definition is the social change model of leadership. The ensemble who created it sought to depict a model that advanced post-industrial leadership and made explicit connections to the end goal of social change. The social change model, which facilitates social change through self-learning and leadership competence, is the most widely used leadership development model in higher education. Embedded in collaborative, positive social change, the model promotes "the eight Cs" as the primary values in leadership development as seen through individual, group, and community or societal lenses. The individual domain contains three values—

"A leader, in other words, can be anyone—regardless of formal position—who serves as an effective social change agent."

consciousness of self, congruence, and commitment—and focuses on the individual values, characteristics, and capacities that one brings to the leadership process. The group domain also contains three values—collaboration, common purpose, and controversy with civility—and posits

necessary attributes for effective group functioning. The last domain, community/society, contains only one value—citizenship—and focuses on the larger attributes necessary for societal change. Change itself is the eighth "C." *Table 1* explains these values in detail. While the first seven values are necessary for social change—with a dynamic interaction among them—the citizenship value forges the most explicit connection between leadership development and democratic engagement as it focuses on acting upon a sense of responsibility to one's community.

The social change model of leadership is unique in that it connects democratic engagement to leadership in specific ways, reflecting an increasing trend in leadership development to recognize inherent connections between shared leadership models and democratic engagement. This trend is perhaps most strongly depicted by the Council for the Advancement of Standards in Higher Education, which connects curricular leadership and civic engagement. The council creates functional areas and program standards to guide Student Affairs practice. Their standards require that leadership programs collaborate with community partners and have learning outcomes in both civic engagement and humanitarian domains.

Table 1: Social Change Model Values and Definitions⁷

Value	Definition
Consciousness of Self	Consciousness of self focuses on an awareness of one's values, beliefs, and emotions. Knowing oneself is foundational for engaging in leadership.
Congruence	Congruence is the process of aligning one's values, beliefs, and emotions with one's actions.
Commitment	Commitment requires a sustained investment toward action. Continued involvement and purposeful engagement are key elements of exercising one's commitment.
Collaboration	Collaboration requires fostering and maintaining relationships and developing shared responsibility and accountability.
Common Purpose	Common purpose focuses on developing a shared set of expectations, values, and goals as part of working together toward social change.
Controversy with Civility	Controversy with civility means working productively across and through differences that inevitably arise as part of working toward social change.
Citizenship	Citizenship is not tied to national immigration status; rather, it is the sense of responsibility to the communities that one acts upon.
Change	Change is depicted as the transformation of individuals, processes, or communities that ultimately improve quality of life.

Student Affairs professionals teach the social change model of leadership in a variety of venues, including undergraduate leadership courses that either

stand alone or are part of a major, minor, or certificate program; one-day workshops; multi-week leadership programs; weekend retreats; positional leader training (such as resident assistant training); and short-term service immersion programs (sometimes called alternative breaks). These experiences employ a wide array of pedagogical strategies to teach the model and foster growth in college students' leadership capacities. The extent to which these experiences meaningfully engage students in democratic processes, as opposed to those that marginalize the communities they purport to help or encourage "savior" practices, is contentious and under-studied. In 2014, I examined 77 introduction to leadership courses at a variety of campuses to see how they explored civic engagement. The results were not encouraging. Only seven of these courses had any ongoing relationships with community partners or an established project. The others simply asked students to find volunteer or civic opportunities on their own to engage in as part of an experiential component for the course. None used deliberation as a pedagogy for teaching leadership.

The Connections between the Social Change Model of Leadership and Democratic Engagement

The social change model of leadership has been studied rigorously in the last two decades as part of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership, an annual national study that examines the development of college students' leadership capacities and other related constructs. I have worked on the national study team since 2012. As of the summer of 2019, nearly 500,000 college students have completed seven iterations of the study. We have noted two consistent findings over the years as they have implications for how democratic engagement could be strengthened through leadership development.

Finding #1: Individual Leadership Capacities Are Easier to Build Than Group or Societal

The study data show that students self-report higher capacities at the individual level than they do at the group or societal levels. Students report building capacities for self-awareness, clarification of values, integrity, and commitment to espoused values at higher rates than the larger work of democracy that involves engaging across differences, making shared decisions, and taking collective action. In other words, students feel more efficacious in things like clarifying their values and expressing themselves than in working toward the common good in their communities. This suggests that leadership experiences at the college level and perhaps beyond tend to focus on individual attributes

at the expense of group or societal attributes. What's more, citizenship, the only capacity measured in the societal domain, is consistently the lowest capacity that students report.

These results may reflect the way in which many leadership programs at the college level are structured. A leadership curriculum for a weekend retreat, for instance, would likely begin by building rapport among members through ice-breakers and team-building exercises such as challenge courses and simulations. Next, students would explore their leadership styles, possibly through guided reflection activities or self-assessment instruments. After exploring individual attributes, the curriculum would likely move on to more group-oriented activities, possibly working through larger and more complex simulations or helping students channel their individual interests and strengths to their respective student organizations, majors, or careers. In some cases, students are encouraged to leverage their leadership learning to address campus or community issues. In these instances, students may be connected with campus or community leaders who work on related issues and encouraged to work on proposals to address these issues. Students are often asked to prepare individual action plans rather than collective ones. Rather than "What should we do together?" the focus is on "What should I do about the issue during my time on campus and beyond?" Data from the study lend at least some corroborating evidence of this phenomenon and is a limitation for democratic engagement in Student Affairs.

One approach to this problem may be to shift the predominant method of teaching leadership, addressing leadership through group or societal levels first and moving to the individual level later. Rather than the conventional approach to teaching leadership of spending time helping students identify strengths and weaknesses, clarify their values, and find ways to align those values with their actions, a better starting place might be in the work of public deliberation or community decision-making structures. In this way, students engage in democratic work first and then learn and build individual leadership capacities through the group or community experiences. This reimagined approach may also help strengthen connections to public government as it would move students closer to the work that government does.

Finding #2: Conversations about and across Differences Are the Single Greatest Contributor to Leadership Development

Another compelling finding from several iterations of the Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership is that sociocultural discussions—conversations about and across differences that occur among students outside the classroom—

are consistently the greatest predictors of socially responsible leadership capacities. In other words, the more students participate in conversations about and across differences, the greater the likelihood that they will report higher capacities for leadership. Despite the importance of sociocultural discussions, the data show that approximately 10 percent of students report “never” having these conversations, 33 percent report “sometimes” having these conversations, 43 percent report having them “often,” and 15 percent report having them “very

Just under half of college students report either “never” or “sometimes” having had conversations about and across differences.

often.” This means that just under half of college students report either “never” or “sometimes” having had conversations about and across differences. Involving students in the collective work of

democratic engagement has the potential to increase the frequency with which these conversations occur. Prior research has shown that experiences with the “diverse other” need to be positive experiences for significant learning to occur. Deliberation holds great potential for exposing students to differing views, thus providing a key link in developing their leadership capacities.

Strategies for Incorporating Deliberation in Leadership Development

In examining the social change model of leadership, public deliberation is philosophically aligned with the model’s stated goals. Public deliberation, of course, also is philosophically aligned with the core of Student Affairs work, namely experiential education and the work of Dewey, from which Student Affairs practice draws its philosophy. The challenge is in finding practical ways to persuade leadership development to incorporate deliberative practice. To aid in this endeavor, I have identified two ways in which deliberation could be incorporated into leadership development work within Student Affairs. Although there are undoubtedly more than two ways, and many are likely in practice in pockets of different campuses, the following two seem to be the most promising practices.

Practice #1: Using Public Deliberation to Foster Group and Societal Leadership Capacities

Given that the social change model of leadership is the dominant model of teaching leadership to undergraduate students in Student Affairs, public

deliberation could be used as a pedagogy for fostering growth in the group and societal domains. In both of these domains, Multi-Institutional Study of Leadership research confirms that students report lower capacities, thus highlighting a limitation in current approaches to leadership development work. Public deliberation is an intentional process whereby groups of people come together to make joint decisions about how to address public problems by weighing trade-offs associated with different approaches. Student Affairs professionals looking for ways to strengthen the group and societal applications of their leadership programs would be well served by incorporating public deliberations into their curricula. With many leadership programs incorporating civic engagement components, public deliberation offers an established and robust model for strengthening those components. Public deliberation could be incorporated into one-time leadership programs, leadership courses, weekend retreats, or weekly leadership programs. Student Affairs educators could also partner with local government entities to engage in deliberative work on various initiatives that require the public to work together to make difficult decisions.

Student Affairs educators might need to reconsider the dominant model of beginning with building individual capacities and then moving into group activities in their sequencing of leadership development experiences. It may be the case that these individual capacities, such as greater awareness of self and recognition of strengths, may be developed simultaneously with group or societal capacities during experiences such as public deliberation. As the social change model depicts, there is no starting point for the model and each level influences the others. Starting with group or societal experiences using public deliberation or similar practices may be a useful and more successful practice. Such an experiment would also provide a fruitful line of inquiry for others to learn from, especially if government partnerships were fostered. A study of the Democracy Fellows at Wake Forest University provides robust evidence that experiments with using deliberation among college students led to a greater likelihood of developing the group and societal capacities for leadership as depicted in the social change model, including an increased capacity for collaboration, working across differences, and recognizing nuanced perspectives about citizenship.⁸

Practice #2: Incorporating Deliberation in Leadership Programs That Focus on Social Issues

As noted earlier, many leadership programs on college campuses seek to engage students in addressing social and community problems, such as

poverty, homelessness, and low educational attainment. In these leadership programs, students engage with social issues in a variety of ways, including raising awareness through guest speakers, talking with community leaders, and connecting with campus resources working on the issues. Less frequently used, however, is an intentional pedagogical strategy for engaging students in this public work. Public deliberation can provide the necessary framework for doing so. I hesitate to be overly prescriptive in what such applications should look like, but providing these pedagogical strategies to leadership educators would be the first step. In my years of doing leadership work on college campuses, I have never met a leadership educator who was not struggling with finding better and more intentional ways to engage students in community work. While so many leadership programs attempt to engage students “in the community,” the default pedagogical strategy has been community service and service learning, which are replete with limitations. Public deliberation would likely be a welcomed pedagogical innovation for their current practices.

Conclusion

In seeking to educate the whole student, Student Affairs is concerned with preparing students to live in a diverse democracy. Democratic engagement was the predominant ideal in the founding of the student personnel movement but has since become one of many ideals within the field. The challenge is in centering the work of democratic engagement in higher education and within Student Affairs specifically. Student Affairs creates contexts for learning outside the classroom in order to develop students holistically; it would be well served to center democratic practice more fully. Making stronger connections between deliberation and leadership development is one way to strengthen those inherent relationships and better prepare students for living in a diverse democracy.



NOTES

- ¹ Michael S. Hevel, “Toward a History of Student Affairs: A Synthesis of Research, 1996–2015,” *Journal of College Student Development* 57, no. 7 (October 2016): 844–862.
- ² American Council on Education Studies, *The Student Personnel Point of View* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education Studies, 1937): 9, <http://www.myacpa.org/sites/default/files/student-personnel-point-of-view-1937.pdf> (accessed June 12, 2019).
- ³ E. G. Williamson et al., *The Student Personnel Point of View* (Washington, DC: American Council on Education Studies, 1949): 4, https://www.naspa.org/images/uploads/main/Student_Personnel_Point_of_View_1949.pdf (accessed June 12, 2019).

- 4 Williamson et al., *The Student Personnel Point of View*: 4.
- 5 Nancy J. Evans and Robert D. Reason, "Guiding Principles: A Review and Analysis of Student Affairs Philosophical Statements," *Journal of College Student Development* 42, no. 4 (2001): 359-377.
- 6 Helen S. and Alexander W. Astin, *A Social Change Model of Leadership Development: Guidebook Version III* (Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, 1996): 2.
- 7 Adapted from Helen S. and Alexander W. Astin, *A Social Change Model of Leadership Development: Guidebook Version III* (Los Angeles, CA: Higher Education Research Institute, University of California, 1996).
- 8 Katy Harriger et al., *The Long-Term Impact of Learning to Deliberate* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2017).

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CONTRIBUTORS

DEREK W. M. BARKER is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. 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. Barker is the coeditor of Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange* and has contributed to other Kettering publications, including the *Kettering Review* and *Connections*. He is the author of *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Habel* (SUNY Press, 2009) and articles appearing in the academic journals *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, and *The Good Society*.

HARRY C. BOYTE is a public intellectual and organizer. He founded Public Achievement and cofounded with Marie Ström the Public Work Academy. He holds the title of Senior Scholar in Public Work Philosophy at Augsburg University. Boyte is the author of 11 books, including *Awakening Democracy through Public Work* (Vanderbilt University Press, 2018). His articles have appeared in more than 150 publications, including the *New York Times*, *Political Theory*, and the *Chronicle of Higher Education*. In the 1960s, Boyte was a field secretary for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference, Martin Luther King's organization, and subsequently did community organizing among low-income white residents in Durham, North Carolina.

MAURA CASEY is a senior associate with the Kettering Foundation. Her 35-year journalism career encompasses work as an editor and opinion writer for four newspapers, including the *Hartford Courant* and the *New York Times*. She has won 45 national and regional awards for journalism, including a shared Pulitzer Prize for reporting. She owns a Connecticut communications firm, CaseyInk, LLC. Casey holds a BA in political science from Buffalo State College and an MA in journalism and public affairs from American University. In her spare time, Casey sails her boat on Long Island Sound and helps her husband of 36 years, Peter J. Panzarella, harvest and sell the vegetables he grows on their farm.

DENNIS DONOVAN is the national organizer of Public Achievement at the Sabo Center for Democracy and Citizenship at Augsburg University in Minneapolis, Minnesota. Along with Harry Boyte, Donovan was a key architect of Public Achievement, which is a theory-based practice of citizens organizing to do public work to improve the common good. Since 1997, Donovan has worked with K-12 schools, colleges, universities, and community groups as a speaker, trainer, consultant, and educator. Before joining the center, Donovan worked in K-12 education for 24 years as a teacher and school principal. He was a founder and education chair of the St. Paul Ecumenical Alliance of Congregations, which grew into a statewide organization known as ISAIAH. Donovan received the 2008 University of Minnesota Community Service Award.

CAROL FARQUHAR NUGENT is vice president of the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) and a senior associate with the Kettering Foundation, where she was a program officer for many years. Farquhar Nugent served for 12 years as the executive director of Grantmakers in Aging (GIA), a national membership organization of philanthropies that address issues of aging. In her work with NIFI, she led the development of the Osher Lifelong Learning Institute program at the University of Dayton.

MICHAELA GRENIER is a program director for the Sustained Dialogue Campus Network (SDCN), where she spends much of her time helping campuses build capacity for dialogue and collaborative problem solving. Grenier supports campuses in building and sustaining dialogue initiatives by working with campus teams to apply the Sustained Dialogue model to retreat-based, course-based, and extracurricular settings. Before joining SDCN, Grenier served in other roles within the fields of higher education and conflict resolution, including supporting student

retention on a college campus, designing student civic leadership programming, and working in conflict resolution programs for teenagers.

MATTHEW R. JOHNSON is an associate professor in the department of educational leadership at Central Michigan University. An associate editor for the *Journal of College and Character*, he also sits on the editorial boards for *Oracle: The Research Journal of Fraternity/Sorority Advisors* and the *Journal of College Student Development*. He received the Sigma Alpha Pi teaching award in 2015. Johnson holds a PhD from the University of Maryland and an MS from Miami University of Ohio. His research focuses on the intersections of leadership, civic engagement, and social justice, as well as how college experiences help students learn and develop into civically engaged citizens who work effectively 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*.

DAVID MATHEWS, president 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*, and *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*.

KEITH MELVILLE is a senior associate with the Kettering Foundation and a member of the National Issues Forums (NIF) advisory group. He served as the first executive editor and author of 18 NIF issue guides and has written numerous reports for the Kettering Foundation, including *Beyond the Clash: How a Deliberative Public Talks about Immigration* (2019). Previously, Melville was senior vice president of Public Agenda and a White House staff writer. His experience in applied social research encompassed conceptual work for Sesame Street and studies of the impact of school desegregation strategies. He is the author of four books, including *A Passion for Adult Learning* (Fielding University Press, 2016). A professor at the Fielding Graduate University, Melville completed his doctoral studies at Columbia University.

WILLIAM V. MUSE is president of the National Issues Forums Institute and a senior associate with the Kettering Foundation. During his tenure at NIFI, he helped to establish the Taylor Willingham Legacy Fund, the NIFI Ambassadors program, the Moderators Circle, and an Osher Lifelong Learning Institute (OLLI) program of courses for senior citizens that NIFI hopes to develop at universities around the country. He holds a PhD in management from the University of Arkansas. Muse worked in higher education for 40 years, including 20 years as president or chancellor of the University of Akron, Auburn University, and East Carolina University.

RALPH NADER is one of America's most effective social critics. His analyses and advocacy have enhanced public awareness and increased government and corporate accountability. His book *Unsafe at Any Speed* led to the passage of a series of automobile safety laws. Nader founded or inspired a wide variety of organizations, including the Princeton Alumni Corps and the Applesseed Foundation, a nonprofit network of 17 public-interest justice centers. An author, lecturer, attorney, and political activist, Nader's life-long work and advocacy has led to safer cars, healthier food, safer drugs, cleaner air and drinking water, and safer work environments. In 2006, the *Atlantic* named him one of the hundred most influential figures in American history. Nader continues his work to advance meaningful civic institutions and citizen participation.

KATRINA S. ROGERS is president of Fielding Graduate University. In the course of her career, she has served international nongovernmental and educational sectors in many roles, including leadership of the European campus for the Thunderbird School of Global Management in Geneva, Switzerland. Rogers holds doctorates in political science and history. In addition to many articles and books focused on organizational leadership in sustainability, Rogers serves on the boards of Prescott College, the Toda Institute for Global Policy and Peace Research and the Public Dialogue Consortium. She received a presidential postdoctoral fellowship from the Humboldt Foundation and was a Fulbright scholar to Germany, where she taught environmental politics and history.

MARK WILSON is the director of Community Engagement and the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts and Humanities at Auburn University. He is the coauthor of *Living Democracy: Communities as Classrooms, Students as Citizens* (Kettering Foundation Press, 2017) and author of *William Owen Carver's Controversies in the Baptist South* (Mercer University Press, 2010). Wilson is an Appalachian Teaching Fellow with the Appalachian Regional Commission, secretary of the Alabama Historical Association, and a former member of the board of directors for the National Issues Forums Institute. Wilson has coordinated contracts and grants with the National Endowment for the Arts, National Endowment for the Humanities, Appalachian Regional Commission, Kettering Foundation, David Mathews Center for Civic Life, and the Alabama Humanities Foundation. He holds degrees from the University of Mobile, McAfee School of Theology at Mercer University, and Auburn 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
