

# CONNECTIONS

An Annual Journal of the Kettering Foundation | 2020

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The Work of  
**DEMOCRATIC CITIZENSHIP**

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering's primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering's research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at [www.kettering.org](http://www.kettering.org).

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# With the People: Connecting Campuses and Communities across the Country

By Betty Knighton and Kara Lindaman

In the summer of 2020, a nation dealing with a global pandemic faced the related challenge of an uncertain and changing landscape of public life. At the same time, an approaching election highlighted the complex and divisive issues facing the country and the dearth of opportunities to talk together and to set directions for addressing them. With the backdrop of these dual challenges, the With the People initiative was born.

With the People is based on the idea that democracy is strengthened when citizens, institutions, and governments find ways to talk and work with one another. Deliberative discussions of the public issues that impact our lives make a profound contribution to our capacity to do just that.

Using Constitution Week in September of 2020 as a kickoff point, With the People is an initiative of the National Issues Forums Institute



## With the People



**Conceived and designed as an ongoing national initiative, With the People encourages sustained public deliberation practices on campuses and in communities across the country.**

(NIFI) and a dynamic—and growing—network of partners. Conceived and designed as an ongoing national initiative, With the People encourages sustained public deliberation practices on campuses and in communities across the country.

In imagining With the People as a national effort that could launch in the fall of 2020, it was clear that materials to support campus and community deliberation were needed on some of the most pressing and salient issues of the day—voting, policing, free speech, economic recovery, and immigration. Kettering developed nonpartisan, multi-perspective issue guides and videos for NIFI, which supplemented them with a wide range of support materials for moderators and convenors.

For the kickoff week, “Constitutional Connectors” were developed to help convenors and moderators tie contemporary issues to the study of the US Constitution.

### **ALIGNED MISSIONS AMONG A GROWING NETWORK OF NATIONAL PARTNERS**

Higher education institutions and associations have long contributed significantly to the civic education of the students they serve and to the civic life of the communities in which they are located. Such organizations work to strengthen the democratic capacity of communities across the nation. While each works in unique ways to enhance the efforts of the networks they connect, many share a common goal: to strengthen democracy through encouraging opportunities for Americans to talk together about public issues and to set directions for addressing them. This connective tissue forms the heart of the partnership that is With the People.

The With the People national partners to-date include:

- ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge of Civic Nation
- The American Democracy Project (ADP)
- Campus Compact
- Kettering Foundation
- NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education

- National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation
- National Institutes for Historically-Underserved Students
- National Issues Forums Institute
- Project Pericles
- Up to Us

### WITH THE PEOPLE: WHAT A DIFFERENCE A PREPOSITION MAKES

Inspired by the research of the Kettering Foundation and the recent publication of *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea* by David Mathews, president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, the idea of “with” undergirds the concepts and practices that drive the With the People initiative. According to Mathews:

The idea behind a *with* strategy was inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s ideal of a government *of, by, and for* the people in the Gettysburg Address. Today, do Americans think our government as “of” the people? That’s debatable. “By” the people? Doubtful. “For” the people? Perhaps for some, sometimes. So why not add another preposition—governing *with* the people? Maybe that would help bridge the divide separating the people of the United States from their government and from many of the country’s major institutions.

### HIGHER EDUCATION FULFILLING ITS CIVIC MISSION

The challenges that arrived in the months preceding the fall 2020 semester weighed heavily on many college faculty and staff. They revised and reorganized courses and curriculum to meet the demands for flexibility and fluidity. Along with the economic uncertainty from the pandemic and the social unrest from racial and ethnic tensions, colleges and universities faced an unprecedented presidential election. Many were charged with introducing students as first-time voters. Given the significant pressures of the changing landscape and the upcoming presidential election, the introduction of With the People at the start of the semester provided the institutional support and recognition to launch a national initiative in deliberation on college campuses and in communities. At such a challenging time, college administrations and personnel were investing in their civic mission in a drastically different university landscape.

To help Americans prepare for the November election through deep examination of public issues, several With the People partners offered national webinars and workshops showing the importance of public deliberation, digital literacy, and

voter engagement. Through broad outreach to their national networks, the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, the American Democracy Project, and NASPA encouraged participants to access the wide range of resources offered by the With the People initiative to support deliberation on issues of concern during the election and to integrate ongoing deliberative practices into academic disciplines and campus-community connections.

### **NATIONWIDE INITIATIVES CROSSING LOCAL, STATE, AND REGIONAL BORDERS**

The need during the pandemic for continued connections when in-person interactions have not been feasible has spurred the greater use of online deliberative forums. Using face-to-face platforms such as Zoom, the chat-based Common Ground for Action platform, or a combination of both, deliberative NIF forums are being held across the country and in ways that cross geographic barriers. Organizers are finding that the current necessity for online interactions is providing an ongoing opportunity for people to talk to those whom they never would have met otherwise. The following are just a few snapshots of a growing body of work:

- On Constitution Day, September 17, 2020, the State University of

New York (SUNY) system held a statewide online deliberative forum on voting. Across the state of New York, 187 students and faculty from 36 campuses met on Zoom to deliberate about safeguarding and improving our elections. Following a large-group plenary session, participants broke into smaller groups for in-depth deliberation, reconvening at the close to reflect on the issue and their experience of examining it together. The small-group assignments were designed to allow participants to talk with others from different regions of the state and from urban, rural, and suburban communities. Many students said they appreciated the opportunity to learn from others whom they would not normally have met and for the structure that allowed a productive exchange of insights. As one student reflected in the closing session, “If more of us understood that this kind of discussion is possible, we wouldn’t be so turned off by the idea of politics. Politics needs to include opportunities to think through issues in this way.” Peter Sawyer, chair of the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences at Hudson Valley Community College and a member of the SUNY Constitution Day planning team,

is working with his colleagues to provide opportunities for ongoing cross-campus student deliberation, which he believes will encourage new syntheses of thought, new insights about public policy, and new approaches to solving public problems.

- During Constitution Week, the Minnesota state system of colleges and universities, which includes 30 state colleges and 7 state universities, organized 10 forums via Zoom and the Common Ground for Action platform to allow students, faculty, and staff to engage in statewide deliberations on free speech, voting, and policing. An important goal of their work was to bring together diverse, place-based campuses in system-wide deliberations. Minnesota State Coordinator of Strategic Initiatives for Academic and Student Affairs Laura Boche described the experience: “The forums provided students, faculty, and staff an opportunity to begin on common ground around an often highly contested issue for many individuals. I participated in my first With the People forum, and it broadened my perspective on a deeply political issue: policing. What I loved about the experience is that I was not afraid to share my views and I was excited to hear others’

stories. Together, we were able to see where the commonalities exist in our views and move forward from there.”

- In November, Chris Gilmer, president of West Virginia University-Parkersburg and a founder of the National Institutes for Historically-Underserved Students, worked with other college presidents to connect students from diverse backgrounds in inter-campus deliberation on racial justice. Sinte Gleska University in South Dakota, Tougaloo College in Mississippi, Adams State University in Colorado, and WVU-Parkersburg in West Virginia all participated.
- Kara Dillard, professor of communication studies at James Madison University, used the Common Ground for Action online platform to organize a national week of cross-campus deliberations in October. Students participated in online deliberative forums on voting, policing, economic recovery, and free speech. In addition to highlighting the capacity and interest of college students to examine public issues with their peers across the country, the forums also showcased their capacity to lead such discussions. In fact, all forums were led by student moderators.

- The New England Centers for Democratic Initiatives (including the University of Connecticut, the University of Hartford, the University of Massachusetts Boston, Emerson College, and Franklin Pierce University), Campus Compact of Southern New England, and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) organized cross-campus forums in October in the lead-up to the election. The October forums on policing were just the beginning. According to Courtney Breese, executive director of NCDD, “This first effort included participants from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. We hope to expand our partnerships to include more New England states in our future efforts.”
- In West Virginia, both the West Virginia Library Association and the West Virginia Community and Technical College System are sponsoring statewide With the People initiatives. The West Virginia Library Association introduced With the People during an October virtual statewide conference, with a focus on creating a statewide network of public libraries that bring West Virginians together to examine public issues that are impacting their lives. Statewide forums

on economic recovery, connecting all community colleges in West Virginia, were held in October and November over Zoom, using an interactive version of the issue guide *Back to Work: How Should We Rebuild Our Economy?*, which allows the addition of local background, circumstances, and action ideas.

### CONNECTING, LEARNING, AND MOVING AHEAD

The rich connections developed in the first few months of the With the People initiative have set the stage for many more—as traditional boundaries on campuses and in communities give way to boundary-spanning opportunities to connect across differences to address common problems. A “with” foundation for citizen-centered democracy can help communities create environments in which residents talk and work together productively, and it can help colleges and universities strengthen the civic capacity of their students. Together, these contributions provide an invaluable foundation for the democratic identity of a nation and its citizens. ■

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