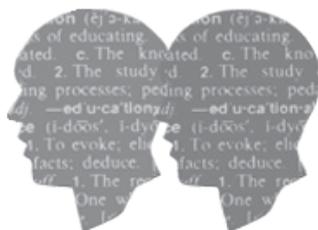# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE

2017

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.

The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit operating foundation, chartered in 1927, that does not make grants but welcomes partnerships with other institutions (or groups of institutions) and individuals who are actively working on problems of communities, governing, politics, and education. The interpretations and conclusions contained in the *Higher Education Exchange*, unless expressly stated to the contrary, represent the views of the author or authors and not necessarily those of the foundation, its trustees, or officers.

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE

2017

We dedicate this issue of the *Higher Education Exchange* to Dan Yankelovich, who just passed away. His writing about public judgment has been critical to Kettering's understanding of deliberation. His seminal book *Coming to Public Judgment: Making Democracy Work in a Complex World* is required reading for thoughtful scholars of democracy.

He was not only an emeritus board member of the Kettering Foundation; he was also a great friend. We will all miss him.

David Mathews

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Afterword

DEMOCRACY IS IN TROUBLE, HIGHER EDUCATION IS IN TROUBLE

David Mathews

Historically, higher education has been one of the principal vehicles for expanding and strengthening democracy. This was evident beginning with the creation of state universities to replace colonial colleges and continuing through the creation of land-grant colleges, new institutions for African Americans, and colleges specifically for women. Now, unfortunately, fewer and fewer people see a public role for higher education, much less a role in democracy. This change in attitude is reflected in the defunding of higher education. If colleges and universities primarily benefit individuals, then the argument is, why shouldn't students pay for the education that benefits them personally? That may be one of the reasons tuition costs have risen dramatically. The loss of a public mission is a serious challenge to both higher education and democracy—but there are ways to address it.

To reverse this trend, colleges and universities, both public and private, are going to have to revalidate their democratic mission. And since a public mission has to come from the public, this means that higher education is going to have to reengage a democratic citizenry. How to do that depends on how academic institutions understand citizens.

Currently, higher education tends to see citizens, at least implicitly, as people who receive services and provide institutional support. A democratic citizenry, however, is far more. Democratic citizens are agents and producers, not just consumers or advocates. Citizens must decide and act together to produce things that benefit the common good. How should higher education relate to such a productive citizenry? Getting an answer will probably push colleges and universities to go beyond the admirable work they already do in public service and community engagement. One step in that direction, which some institutions have already taken, is to prepare their students for deciding and acting together on controversial issues by giving them experiences in exercising the human faculty for judgment through public deliberation. That is why this issue of *HEX* has devoted so much space to explaining what kind of deliberation promotes sound judgment.

The next chapter in the history of higher education and how it relates to a democratic citizenry hasn't been written yet. Hopefully this issue of the *Exchange* will contribute to thinking about what has to be done.

The Connection Between Higher Education and Democracy

The citizenry in a democracy is naturally concerned about the challenges facing democracy, and these are mounting. And because of the history of higher education in the United States, when democracy is in trouble, higher education is in trouble. This suggests that we need to step back and look at the challenges preventing democracy from working as it should.

Much of the research these days on democracy is troubling, even alarming. Four fundamental problems or challenges facing democracy today stand out. I'll describe them briefly now and elaborate later:

1. Citizens are roundly criticized, even by other citizens, for being inattentive, uninformed, and, even when attentive, easily manipulated. Many are believed to be incapable of making sound judgments, particularly in elections. Citizens, on the other hand, feel estranged from the government and pushed out of the political system, which they say includes the media. Americans often doubt they can make any real difference in the system beyond voting and writing their representatives.

2. Frustrated by the problems in the national political system, people are turning more to their communities to solve problems. Yet communities may be too divided in all sorts of ways for citizens to work together effectively. Furthermore, people may not recognize the resources they have or the opportunities in everyday community routines to use their assets to make the difference they would like to make.

3. Public confidence in major institutions, not just governmental but nongovernmental as well, continues to stay at a historic low—despite numerous initiatives in citizen participation, accountability, and community engagement. These measures may even add to citizens' loss of confidence. Partisan gridlock and polarization in Washington probably further contribute to this declining confidence.

4. While there is evidence of vitality in civic life at the grassroots or local level, there is little connection between this, the politics people refuse to call politics, and the politics of elections and government. This disconnect was noted in reports that I will elaborate on later.

Research on Representative Government and Civic Democracy

With these four general findings in mind, I would like to go into more detail on the research that we drew on in our analysis.

Since the 1980s, the foundation has been tracking the public's attitude about the political system through analysis of public deliberations in National Issues Forums (NIF), along with other sources. Whatever the issue being addressed in the forums, they have often involved questions about the role that the government should play. In 2012, John Creighton analyzed the results of a number of NIF deliberations, concluding, "It would be difficult to overstate the cynicism people feel toward elected officials." Other studies of citizens' perceptions of government agencies, and the reactions of the agencies, show that the cynicism and distrust is often mutual. People may have little confidence in the government, and the government sometimes has little confidence in the people.

A key piece of research for Kettering came in 1991. In *Citizens and Politics: A View from Main Street America*, Rich Harwood found that, contrary to the then-conventional wisdom, the American people were not apathetic about the political system. Many were "mad as the devil." Significantly, the Harwood study went beneath the usual popular dissatisfaction with government and politicians to discover an abiding sense of civic duty, which is why people were so angry about being pushed out of what they considered their rightful place in a democracy.

Since that report, we have seen more evidence of this civic spirit, despite negative feelings about government. To be sure, people express doubts about their fellow citizens. Nonetheless, we continue to hear stories about citizens joining forces to solve problems and assist one another. This has been especially evident recently in communities that have been hit by natural disasters. And there have been studies showing that the politics of neighborliness and civic life are not dead but flourishing in some locales—so much so that it brings with it a sense of opportunity, even optimism.

Many studies show that public distrust of government is not confined to the United States. One of the more interesting studies, *The Democratic Disconnect*, was published by the Transatlantic Academy in May 2013. The report pointed to a "yawning" gap separating citizens from the institutions of government. Although recognizing that "internet-empowered social activism of a new generation has never been more vibrant," the study found that "little of this participatory mobilization from civil society seems effectively to connect with formal structures [of government] and institutional processes." Yet

they also found that "strong potential exists for renewal." They argued that "the key" to revitalizing democracy is "enhancing the participatory vibrancy that represents the cornerstone of high quality democracy." The report concluded that, "visions of top-down problem solving are insufficient. Open-ended and vibrant democratic deliberation is needed."

This suggests that if democracy is taken to mean only representative government, it is in very serious trouble. However, if democracy is also understood to include the work citizens do with citizens, the outlook is less grim. The difficulty, as this report argued, is that representative government and civic democracy, although often estranged, are nonetheless interdependent. What citizens do with citizens is the oldest form of democracy, even older than ancient Greek democracy. This civic or citizen democracy is like the wetlands of the political ecology; it is where political life begins. If the legitimacy of institutional democracy is to be restored, efforts have to begin in these wetlands.

Organizing the Research Around the Actors

Because the research on democracy from all sources is voluminous and growing, we have found it useful to group the studies around the people and organizations that will need to respond to the challenges facing democracy: the citizenry, communities, and institutions, both governmental and nongovernmental. The four fundamental problems facing democracy today, with which I began this piece, affect all the actors in various ways.

Citizens

As implied in the word *democracy*, the role of the *demos* ("the citizenry") is central. "We the People" are sovereign in the US Constitution, yet, as noted, people have often been criticized for not exercising sound judgment. That criticism has been sharper recently because of the decisions people have made as voters. One conventional remedy is to provide citizens with more factually correct information. That's fine; however, the most important political decisions are often about what is *right* or *should be* done. These normative questions can't be answered with facts alone. They require the exercise of human judgment. When this distinction isn't recognized, the political debate is carried on with dueling facts that degenerate into polarizing wars over solutions rather than addressing what is behind the problems.

The highly adversarial tone of political discourse today can prevent common efforts needed to solve shared problems. Encouraging people to be more

civil is fine; however, there is no substitute for doing the hard work of making shared judgments. Such "choice work" changes relationships, making them more pragmatic and less adversarial. Choice work is also called "deliberation." Unfortunately, conventional definitions of deliberation may make no mention of deliberation as the exercise of human judgment.

Lack of civility is often a result of ideological polarization. This can be reduced by deliberations in which people weigh possible solutions against what is really valuable to them, what they hold most dear. Most of us want to be secure from danger, to be free to act as we think best, and to be treated fairly. The source of the conflict is not that we don't share these concerns but that people give different priorities to what they value because of differences in their circumstances. Recognizing this distinction can change the tone of the disputes. This helps combat polarization because even though people still differ on what should be done, it is easier for them to find ways to move ahead—despite lack of full agreement.

Research on deliberation and public judgment speaks directly to concerns about citizens and the soundness of their decision making. This research needs to extend to political discourse online. At Kettering, we hope to learn more about how online platforms can facilitate the exercise of good judgment. That question can't be answered, however, without more experimentation with making the technology friendly to democratic purposes.

Concerns about the ability of people to be responsible citizens also have obvious implications for civic education. People aren't born knowing how to be citizens; they have to learn to carry out the duties that come with citizenship. But *how* they are to be educated has been a subject of continuing controversy. One school of thought considers familiarity with historical documents like the Constitution to be essential. I'm a historian by training, so I would agree. Others would add familiarity with the operations of government, such as how a bill is passed. Having served in government, I would also agree. However, I've been a teacher, and I know how hard it is to get young people to pay attention to things they consider unrelated to their day-to-day experiences. They may see the functions of government as irrelevant and the history lessons dry. As a student once wrote in his textbook, "If the world is filled with waters high, dear teacher, this book will still be dry."

Fortunately, there are now experiments that help animate civic education by giving students actual experience with doing the most basic work of citizens—making decisions with others. These experiments are happening in colleges, secondary schools, and even elementary classrooms. Museums have

also been trying this same approach to civic education in order to make their exhibits more meaningful. For example, trying to make the choices being debated in adopting the Constitution makes that document come alive for students. Given the problems our political system is having now, rethinking civic education couldn't be more urgent.

Citizens and Communities

The places where people live, work, raise their families, and deal with everyday challenges are at the center of the political world. This is what I mean by "community," although I recognize there are other valid definitions.

As I said, communities are also susceptible to the divisions that can make it difficult for people to work together. But at the same time, the foundation is seeing many examples of the politics of neighborliness. For example, see Nancy Rosenblum's book *Good Neighbors* and James Fallows' article "How America Is Putting Itself Back Together" in the March 2016 *Atlantic*. Communities are more pressured than ever to come together and combat their problems, and many of these problems are the kind that only citizens can solve because the remedies are in the human interventions that only people can make. Community institutions, hospitals for instance, can care *for* you but only other people can care *about* you. And that care is powerful medicine.

Perhaps the spotlight has shifted more to our communities because people have lost confidence in national institutions. I'm not saying that people don't value what the federal government does or that it is as ill executed as it sometimes may appear. Nonetheless, the frustration with inaccessibility of many centralized institutions is real, and that frustration appears to be pushing people to look for local solutions. Research on how people in communities can come together, despite their differences, and do the work of producing things that make life a bit better for everyone is critical in today's circumstances.

I think that focusing research on citizens doing the *work* of citizens in their communities is particularly critical. I emphasize work because the work of democracy is real work—hard work that is often a struggle to do. I've already talked about the choice work involved in making shared decisions in spite of differences. However, there is more to this work than deliberation alone. In fact, decision making isn't an isolated act; it is one part of a body of interrelated work. There isn't anything mysterious about this work. The problem to be solved has to be identified. Ways of combating it have to be considered and decisions made about who needs to act. The actors have to commit themselves and then garner the resources they need. The work also has to be organized to be as effective as possible. And, under the best circumstances, the people doing

the work learn from what they have done so that when the next problem comes along, they will profit from their mistakes and be better able to respond.

The difficulty, from a democratic point of view, is that citizens may not recognize they are doing some of the work already or that there are overlooked opportunities. The critical question is, what will make these opportunities more apparent? Here is an example: People seldom, if ever, act without a reason, and that reason is reflected in how a problem is identified or described. Yet, as I mentioned earlier, this naming usually happens so unconsciously that people may not recognize how important it is. Often communities move straight to action. But even then, the name of the problem is implied in the action. A democratic opportunity is lost when citizens don't add the distinctive names people give problems.

People describing problems in terms of what they hold dear is not the way professionals are trained to name problems, which, as it should be, is in expert terms. One example I have often used is that citizens want to feel that they are safe in their homes, and this feeling of security is less quantifiable, yet more compelling, than the statistics professionals use to describe crime. Politicians name problems taken from a partisan agenda, which may not speak to people's experiences. Partisan names capture what a politician hopes will be a winning argument. The challenge is to recognize *all* the names, even those that aren't scientific or objective but rather experiential.

In each of the other aspects of civic work that I have listed, there are opportunities for citizens to make a difference—*if* they recognize the opportunities. Seeing them, however, is difficult because the way citizens do their work is different from the way professionals do theirs. For instance, the options for action taken by citizens are different from the options for professionals. If the problem is a rise in street crimes, which people see as a threat to the safety they value, one option for action might be citizens setting up neighborhood watches. When people name problems in terms of how the problems affect them and their families, it can prompt them to be civic actors.

The way citizens go about decision making in their communities is distinctive as well. Citizen decision making is seldom just a technical process of cost-benefit analysis. As noted earlier, public decision making at its best involves the exercise of public judgment. The resources people use to act are also different; so too is the way people organize themselves and evaluate results. At each point in community work, from the time a problem is named to the time the work is evaluated, there are opportunities for citizens to empower themselves. When people don't see these opportunities, it contributes to a sense of powerlessness,

which damages people's sense of responsibility. How can they be held accountable for what they cannot affect?

More research needs to be done on how people can recognize empowering opportunities. The same can be said about officials and administrators recognizing that citizens do their work in distinctive ways. The challenge isn't to get citizens to do what professionals do but for them to appreciate what they themselves can do.

Citizens and Institutions

Among all of the problems in our political system, none is more glaring than the public's declining confidence in our major institutions, not only governmental but also nongovernmental. More effective measures to bridge the divide separating the public from government and other institutions are badly needed.

One reason is our large institutions can't be optimally effective without assistance from the productive work of citizens. Elinor Ostrom won the Nobel Prize in Economic Sciences in 2009 for demonstrating that. Unfortunately, there are obstacles standing in the way of what should be a win-win for both the public and institutions—governments, schools, hospitals, and so on. One is that people don't always see opportunities to make a difference. Another, just mentioned, is that the way institutions usually work may not align well with the way citizens usually work. The result of this misalignment is that the potential for collaboration between the citizenry in a community and the community's institutions often remains unrealized.

Our institutions are effective technically because they are staffed by competent professionals who contribute their considerable expertise. The downside is that these professionals may see citizens the way some physicians see citizens, which is as patients, rather than as workers or coproducers of the things hospitals, schools, and government agencies need.

A study by Monica Schoch-Spana et al. on the way professionals could better engage with citizens during disasters and epidemics is revealing. According to the authors, "The prevailing assumption is that a panic-stricken public, blinded by self-preservation, will constitute a secondary disaster for authorities to manage. Some emergency authorities also have mistakenly interpreted citizen-led interventions in past and present disasters as evidence of failure on the part of responders."

Or take the case of colleges and universities that have admirable community outreach programs, conduct publicly beneficial research, and give their students opportunities for public service. What do these commendable

efforts imply about the role of citizens? It is easy to think of citizens simply as people who need information and services. This perception does not recognize that citizens also have resources and the capacity for action. The crucial question is, how can institutions of higher education relate to citizens as coproducers?

Government agencies and nongovernmental organizations face the same challenge. Working with citizens doesn't mean that professionals have to compromise their expertise or give up their power. It does mean, however, that professionals and their institutions have to open up space for citizens to act on their own—and be more than volunteers. Although professionals can't do the work of citizens, they can encourage and precipitate it, *if* (and that's a big *if*) they can be comfortable with sharing control.

Given the public criticisms of institutions and the danger of losing their legitimacy and authority, rethinking the role of professionals and exploring the possibilities for what has been called a more civic professionalism is necessary.

Benefits and Responsibilities

No strategy for overcoming the problems of democracy, whether they have to do with citizens, communities, or institutions, is likely to be effective unless it serves the self-interests of those who have to carry out the strategy. And carrying out any strategy imposes responsibilities. Some of these self-interests are obvious. Citizens want to make a difference in shaping their future, but that requires doing work that can be taxing, like the choice work needed to confront and then work through the tensions associated with difficult decisions. Will people do this kind of work? Some already are. More should. In the United States, there are now a number of nonpartisan organizations sponsoring public forums on difficult issues that could promote not just informed dialogue but also deliberative choice work.

Communities benefit when their citizens join forces to combat common problems. However, that requires dealing with the myriad differences that put people and groups at odds with one another. Is there any perfectly harmonious community? Of course not. Still, there are some communities that benefit from greater levels of collaboration. That is often evident after natural disasters, but cooperation isn't limited to tragedies. It could happen more often in more places. And that isn't just wishful thinking.

Despite doubts about what citizens can and will do, there are signs of renewed civic vitality in our communities. The key is recognizing that people don't have to be alike, or even to like one another, to work together. They just have to recognize the obvious—they need one another.

Who might benefit from bridging the divide separating the public from the government and other public-serving institutions? In the case of governments, it might help to give officeholders ways to connect to a public that is more than interest groups, constituencies with demands, or the statistical public in polling data. What about connecting to a deliberative public? A citizenry that deliberates has something in common with officeholders who have to exercise their best judgment on issues that can't be decided by data alone. As I mentioned earlier, these are matters where the issue is what is the *right* thing to do; these are normative *should* questions, and they are difficult decisions for officials to make. Officials have reason to want to understand how citizens go about making up their minds on such difficult issues.

Another obvious benefit: as I mentioned, governments have already made a number of efforts to combat declining confidence through public participation initiatives, civic-engagement projects, and demonstrations of accountability. Yet confidence has continued to fall, which suggests a need to go beyond current engagement practices to strategies where institutions work more *with* the public than just *for* the public. Kettering has found that when people are involved in collaborative work with institutions—when they are agents, not just subjects— they are more likely to have confidence in the institutions. A February 2017 white paper published by the World Economic Forum suggests a similar strategy:

> The 21st century needs a new model of government, a government *with* the people. Olli-Pekka Heinonen, Director General of the Finnish National Board of Education, writes that this revolutionary shift happens if we, instead of providing public services to citizens, learn to achieve results with citizens. This means a fundamental change in how the identity of citizens is seen; a shift from consumer-citizens to value creator-citizens.

We live in a time when democracy faces challenges on a number of fronts, and no one knows all that needs to be known about how to meet them. We need more experiments by governments, schools, colleges and universities, communities, neighborhoods, civic organizations, and citizen associations to combat these challenges. We can shake our fist at our problems, but there has seldom been a time when these problems were more obvious to more people who realize that something has to be done. This opens the door to invention. And that's the good news.

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