

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.

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.

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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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A QUESTION OF CULTURE

David Mathews

My job every year is to write a piece for Kettering's three annual periodicals: *Connections*, *Kettering Review*, and *Higher Education Exchange*. Each piece is about a specific area of the foundation's research on democracy. This year, the focus is on nongovernmental institutions, which include foundations, civic organizations, and universities. The question behind this research is, What role should these institutions be playing in our democracy?

We are looking specifically at problems of democracy that are found in the relationship between the large, professionally run, hierarchical institutions, which we have called "Squares," and the smaller, often ad hoc civic associations that inhabit what we have described as the "wetlands" of the democratic ecosystem. We have called these organic associations of citizens "Blobs" because they are often loosely organized. There are significant difficulties in the relationship between the Blobs and Squares, even when they try to work together, and these difficulties weaken democracy.

One of the problems is that the large, professionally staffed institutions may not recognize the importance of the smaller associations of citizens, or Blobs, as the cellular building blocks of democratic life. Because some may only involve a handful of citizens and have none of the structure of a Square, they may seem insignificant. Another more serious difficulty is that even when the Blobs are recognized as valuable, Squares may dominate or colonize them in their efforts to help them—although they do so quite unintentionally. That "colonization" can turn the Blobs into little Squares, which robs them of their civic legitimacy and effectiveness.

Even though the Blobs are essential to democracy working as it should, Kettering has not been able to find any Squares that are fully able to prevent this colonization. The heart of the problem, as I will try to explain, is that what the culture of the Squares considers valuable is nearly the opposite of what the culture of the Blobs prizes. And the culture of the Squares dominates the relationship between the two, leading to colonization.

All three of this year's publications address this problem. In *Connections*, you will read about institutions that are experimenting with what it would mean to align their work with the work of Blobs. In the *Kettering Review*, you will find some thoughtful scholars exploring this problem, identifying both challenges and opportunities. And in the *Higher Education Exchange*, you will

hear from those in academe who have been wrestling with this problem in their own work.

Kettering discovered this problem when asked by some grantmaking foundations why their funding in certain communities was often ineffective in solving problems. The grantmakers knew that grassroots associations of citizens could be effective in combating community pathologies like drug abuse and crime. And the grantmakers wanted to help them, but something was going wrong. That was when Kettering discovered the colonization of the Blobs, which undermines their authenticity and legitimacy.

Edgar Cahn drew on our research in his book *No More Throw-Away People*. He then turned the foundation's findings on the Blobs and Squares mismatch into a clever animation, *The Parable of the Blobs and Squares*. Cahn noted that the Blobs have the energy and networks that can be useful in combating many community problems. Squares, on the other hand, know how to manage money and organize institutional action. They have equipment and professional expertise. The problem, as Cahn explained, is that "no matter how much the Squares promised to reach out in the community and get at the root causes of the problems, the Squares never got there." They couldn't "mobilize the energy of the community."¹

The Squares try to meet this challenge by giving money to the Blobs. Naturally, this has meant that the Blobs have had to show financial accountability. Many Squares have also insisted on measurable results. "Grassroots groups," Cahn wrote, "were taught to develop mission statements and strategic plans in order to remain 'true' to mission. Neighborhood leaders were trained in how to be Board members, how to conduct 'proper' meetings, [and] how to write and amend by-laws."² The sad result was that the Blobs lost the very qualities that made them effective at the grass roots.

Blobs play an essential role in democratic life in a number of ways. They convert energy, even cynicism, into constructive action. They connect and engage people. They also promote values that are essential to a democratic culture, norms like cooperation and respect. Blobs are self-generating because human beings are social creatures. People are continuously building ties to one another and forming all kinds of Blobs, from neighborhood associations to street gangs. We ignore their importance—good or bad—at our peril.

A Way Forward

The relevance of the problem of the relationship of Blobs to Squares today was impressed on us by one of our international residents, Tendai Murisa, from

Zimbabwe. Tendai is attempting to create a civic organization in his country that will strengthen democracy from the grass roots up. He is trying to create a Square that is Blob friendly. Despite criticism that his understanding of democracy is impossibly utopian, Tendai knows that there are many Blob-like associations in Africa to work with. He has in mind citizen groups that aren't registered officially yet already exist. They pool financial savings for economic development, form bereavement societies, protect the environment, and enhance village security. He wants to create an institution that will listen to and learn from what these Blobs are doing. At Kettering, Tendai is asking, How can both established NGOs as well as newly created ones be more supportive of Blobs without colonizing them?

What Tendai is asking resonates with similar questions we have heard from many other Squares. These days, major nongovernmental institutions—from academic ones to those in philanthropy—believe that democracy is in trouble and that they need to do more to be of assistance. But they aren't sure what they should do or how. Part of the difficulty is that they are all Squares and, as should be expected, they have Square-ish norms and cultures. This makes relating to the Blobs a challenge. The way Squares work is very different from the way the Blobs do democratic work. It is as though the two are gears on the same machine that don't mesh.

The solution for how to mesh the gears is elusive because the obvious answers don't work. It can't be for the Squares to become more "Blob-ish," because their cultural norms are appropriate for what they do. And it certainly isn't for the Blobs to become more "Square-ish." The culture of Squares properly values things such as efficiency, good management, and professional expertise. However, the culture of the Blobs has different values, which leads to different ways of working. Blobs are responsive to the intangibles that people hold dear, such as the feelings of security that come from having personal control over their future. They identify problems in terms that reflect what is deeply important to people, not in terms that professionals use. Blobs do their work mostly by connecting small groups of people rather than by building organizations. They foster collective decision-making that spurs myriad complementary actions.

As Elinor Ostrom demonstrated in her Nobel Prize-winning research, despite their differences, the Squares need the Blobs because even the largest and most powerful institutions—hospitals, school systems, governments, and NGOs—can't do their jobs as efficiently as they need to without reinforcement from what citizens contribute through the work they do in Blobs. The example I often use is in health care. Hospitals can care *for* you. But only people can

care *about* you. Blobs organize this caring and make it available in many ways to those who are ill.

Our First Response

Kettering's first and perhaps natural impulse was to respond to questions like Tendai's by reviewing what our foundation, which is Square-ish, has done to relate to Blobs. We went through boxes of files to recover our history. Yet as soon as we started down this path, we stopped suddenly in our tracks. We stopped when we realized that Kettering would appear as a model to copy with best practices to emulate. Whatever we did, our experience (that is, our mistakes) taught us *not* to do that. Our reaction has to do with the importance of learning in a democracy. Following a model or copying best practices can be imitative, and that can inhibit learning. Coming to Kettering, Tendai was intrigued by the idea of not following a foreign model or copying best practices but finding his own answers. He was open to looking at the way democracy benefits from and grows through collective learning.

Experimenting and Learning

Democracies depend on collective learning because they do not accept any authority about what should be done except for that of the citizenry itself, "We the People." This understanding of the citizenry as the ultimate authority in a democracy is evident in the roots of the word. The *demos* is the citizenry or a collective body, as in a village. And *cracy* is from *kratos*, which is supreme power, the kind Zeus has. This means that when there are problems, citizens have to "figure out" what to do themselves through collective decision-making in civic groups or representative assemblies. "Figuring out" means learning together, which involves more than copying or imitating.

On problems such as making the relationship between the Blobs and Squares mutually beneficial, answers have to come from collective learning, and that requires experimentation to see what might work. Finding ways to deal with the Blobs-Squares mismatch is going to take a lot of experimenting along with the ability to fail successfully; that is, the ability to learn from inevitable setbacks and failures.

Realigning Ways of Working

What might these experiments look like? When gears don't mesh, they have to be realigned. There need to be experiments to better align the work of

each so they won't clash as much and might even become mutually supportive. After all, there are things that Blobs can do that Squares can't. And vice versa.

As I mentioned before, the ways Squares work are not the same as the ways Blobs work—and for good reason. Yet, whether done by Blobs or Squares, most every kind of work involves carrying out certain tasks—identifying problems, making decisions about what needs to be done, finding the necessary resources, organizing the efforts, and evaluating or learning from what happens. Nothing exceptional about that. However, understanding the differences between the ways Blobs and Squares carry out these tasks is a necessary step toward realignment.

These are some of the differences. Citizens don't usually identify problems in the expert terms often used by the institutions we have called Squares. As I discussed, people name problems in terms of the things that humans hold dear—their family's safety, their freedom to act, the amount of control they will have. The options for actions to solve problems that citizens consider go beyond the things that can be done by institutions, such as the actions that families and civic associations can take. People make decisions about which options are best but not usually by methods institutions use, such as cost-benefit analysis. In the best cases, people decide by using the kind of deliberation that exercises the human faculty for judgment. The resources citizens draw on to act, such as personal talents and collective experiences, are different from institutional resources. Citizens also organize their work less bureaucratically than institutions do. And they evaluate results differently, using the things they hold valuable as standards rather than just quantitative measures.

Despite these differences, realigning ways of working to reinforce one another seems possible. Better alignment between institutions and the citizenry doesn't require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on an extra load of new duties. Either would be extremely difficult. Instead, realignment only asks that the professionals in institutions do what they usually do a bit differently, so their work reinforces what citizens working together in Blobs do.

It wouldn't be too difficult for Squares to take into consideration the names people use when they describe how problems affect what they consider valuable, and it shouldn't be hard to consider what citizens could do as actors. Neither would it seem impossible for Squares to take note of the way people go about making up their minds as they deliberate on controversial issues. Recognizing the resources Blobs use when they act—people's experiences and talents, their ability to form associations—isn't a big stretch. Respecting ways

of organizing that aren't centralized and bureaucratic? Why not? How about evaluating results using the things people hold dear as the standard? Why not do that along with quantitative measures? There are all kinds of opportunities for Blobs and Squares to mesh what they do.

The Greatest Challenge: A Matter of Institutional Culture

If realigning ways of working is possible, despite requiring considerable experimentation, Tendai's question boils down to one of how to develop cultures in Squares that will support experimentation with Blobs. Tendai found an institutional cultural impasse in some of his early efforts to create an environment in which people could learn from their own experiences and those of others rather than following an approved development model. And he is certainly not alone.

Using Democracy as a Focus for Experiments

Democracy has many different meanings and, as an institution experiments with its role, the meaning may, and probably should, evolve and grow richer. This growth is learning. The evolving understanding of democracy makes settling on predetermined results difficult.

To complicate matters even more, it makes a difference whether institutions have in mind problems *in* or *within* a democratic country, which range from poverty to crime, or problems *of* a democracy, which prevent democracy from functioning because they are systemic. For example, citizens being unable to exercise power and make a difference in the political realm is a basic, fundamental problem of democracy. (That, by the way, is what many people say today: they can't make a significant difference.)

I am not suggesting that experiments by Squares in realignment be controlled by a rigid definition of democracy, but rather that returning time and time again to the question of what democracy is and what it requires is essential to experiments in realignment. An understanding of democracy, even an evolving one, gives consistence and coherence to the experiments; they can fit together and build on one another. And what the Squares learn from the experiments should expand and enrich their understanding of democracy.

One of the most important changes in the concept of democracy may have to do with the role of citizens. Squares are "built" to see citizens more as clients, people to be served, or consumers of services. Blobs, on the other hand, are "built" to see citizens as producers because they usually do most of the work.

A crucial issue in realignment is for Squares to find ways to treat citizens as producers in their own right and not just as the beneficiaries of the many things they provide. In the case of institutions of education, for example, the benefits include public service, publicly relevant research, and community engagement. These services are all commendable, yet they tend to treat citizens as objects of the good work of others rather than actors doing their own work. What would it mean for colleges and universities or other Squares to relate to citizens as producers? The answers aren't clear. Finding them will take a lot of experimenting.

Such experiments could change the Squares themselves in constructive ways and not just in how they relate to the Blobs. A similar cycle can begin by institutions asking themselves whether the way they are going about their work is consistent with the way they are coming to understand democracy. To really be effective in strengthening democracy from the grass roots up, institutions have to behave themselves in ways that promote the kind of democracy they advocate. This process of reflecting and adjusting ways of acting is a process of constant learning, which is consistent with the way a democracy makes positive changes. It is also one way to change institutional cultures.

Being Realistic about the Obstacles

As I have acknowledged, the dominant culture in a Square admirably suits what Squares do: produce, solve problems, provide services. The usual expectations of Squares aren't unreasonable. There are good reasons to have goals, timetables, and definite outcomes. Squares also speak admiringly of being innovative, taking reasonable risk, and "thinking outside the box." So, what I have just stated could be written off as reformulations of what Squares already do. But that would minimize the real obstacles to realigning with Blobs.

Blob-ishness can be, and often is, very off-putting to Squares. Blobs have purposes but not necessarily detailed plans and measurable goals. A bottom line or tangible outcome may be elusive. There may be no goal line to mark completion of an initiative or even to mark progress. What appears to be an endless journey can be maddening to Squares.

Even experimenting and learning from it can be troubling for Squares. In some institutions, experimenting may be impossible because their professionals don't have permission to fail, as one school superintendent sadly told us. Furthermore, experiments dealing with the systemic problems of democracy don't suddenly, or perhaps ever, yield to instant breakthroughs. It is necessary to play the long game. Dealing with such inevitabilities requires patience, tol-

erance for ambiguity, and acceptance of unresolvable tensions. Few of these may be valued norms in Square-ish cultures.

What About Tendai's Question and the Blobs-Squares Mismatch?

We are hoping to find others who share a concern about the Blobs-Squares mismatch. Because Kettering's research is done with, not on, others, our first priority is always to find allies. Writing this piece for our publications is one way we hope to find them.

One thing does seem clear, looking ahead. Despite the obstacles, building and perpetuating institutional cultures that support democratic experimentation is crucial, particularly at a time when democracies and hope-to-be democracies around the world are facing more systemic problems than they have since World War II. Tendai's question couldn't be more on target, the challenge of the Blobs and Squares couldn't be more relevant, and a culture that fosters experimentation and learning couldn't be more valuable.



NOTES

- ¹ Edgar S. Cahn, *No More Throw-Away People: The Co-Production Imperative*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Essential Books, 2004): 83. The video, *The Parable of the Blobs and Squares*, animation by Trevor Hardy, can be accessed at <https://vimeo.com/42332617>.
- ² Ibid.

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