

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



Leadership and Democracy

## **Articles**

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Matthew R. Johnson

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## **Interviews**

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## **Afterword**

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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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# 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 POWER OF PUBLIC DELIBERATION

## Civic Education for Older Students

William V. Muse and Carol Farquhar Nugent

During the past seven years, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) and its extended network have offered courses at a number of institutions of higher education. These courses, which focus on the practice of deliberating about public issues, are offered to older adults within continuing education programs sponsored by the Bernard Osher Foundation. Having both held the position of president of NIFI, we see this program as an opportunity to fulfill NIFI's mission of promoting public deliberation while also engaging an underserved—but politically active—audience in deliberative contemplation of political questions.

Educational programs at colleges and universities in this country serve a number of populations. The most iconic market consists of students who are selectively enrolled full time, live on or near the campus, and participate in many campus activities. These students are served primarily by private colleges and major public institutions. A second market segment includes students who are enrolled part or full time, live at home or off campus, and often work part or full time. Students in this audience primarily attend public institutions, particularly community colleges; they are less involved in campus activities and focus primarily on gaining the skills and credentials to acquire a job or advance in employment.

Retirement-aged students represent a frequently overlooked segment of the market for higher education. This third market segment includes adults who are seeking intellectual engagement and enrichment. They are served through “continuing education” divisions of local institutions in which students enroll in noncredit courses taught by retired faculty or members of the community who have experience in the subject being taught. The educational backgrounds of continuing education students range from never having attended college to those with advanced degrees. Although the students who participate in continuing education courses may highly value the experience, this segment of the university is rarely a high priority of the academic leadership.

In 2001, the Bernard Osher Foundation began providing grants to universities to expand and enrich their continuing education programs. The

foundation sought to strengthen offerings for older adults who are motivated by the joy of learning and the desire to stay connected to the world, rather than by a desire to acquire professional skills and credentials. The funds were used to establish Osher Lifelong Learning Institutes, or OLLIs. From the time of its inception, more than 120 colleges and universities have established OLLI programs. They offer courses to adults over the age of 50 for very modest fees in a wide variety of subjects. OLLIs have been established at religious and secular institutions, public and private schools, and research universities and liberal arts colleges.

***Retired senior citizens aren't done yet. And they are gratified that their ideas don't just evaporate, but are shared with people who can make a difference by carrying these ideas to eventual fruition.***

In 2012, the National Issues Forums Institute, which is headquartered in Dayton, Ohio, approached the University of Dayton about offering a course through its OLLI program. NIFI is a nonprofit and nonpartisan organization that, in partnership with the Kettering Foundation, develops materials and advocates a process for individuals to engage in public deliberation about things that matter to them. Kettering is a nonprofit operating foundation that researches democracy. Part of this research focuses on “naming and framing” issues of public concern to help citizens identify what they hold valuable and recognize necessary trade-offs in possible approaches to solving public problems. NIFI takes this information and publishes it in the form of “issue guides,” which usually include three options for approaching an issue. It then works with individuals and organizations to convene forums that give citizens an opportunity to learn about the issue, express their views, listen to the opinions of others, and share their conclusions. The forums provide Kettering Foundation with valuable research into the practice of deliberation.

NIFI forums typically involve 15 to 20 individuals, seated around a conference table or in chairs arranged in a circle. The discussion is led by a moderator whose role is to facilitate the exchange of views, ensuring that everyone has a voice and that no one dominates the discussion. The process is called public deliberation because it is very *deliberate*—focusing first on the issue, including personal experience and insights, and then on each option. Forum participants are asked to share their conclusions via a questionnaire.

The University of Dayton OLLI program accepted a proposal from the authors for a course entitled the Power of Public Deliberation. The OLLI course catalog listed the dates and topics for six weekly two-hour sessions. Students were encouraged to acquire the issue guides from NIFI and read them before the class sessions. There was some concern as to whether anyone would sign up for the course, given that it was so different from others in which the instructors share their expertise. Enrollment was limited to 20 students but, to our surprise, 25 enrolled in the first class. This pattern has continued over the past seven years, with the course being offered during both a fall and a spring term. Also surprising has been the number of individuals who have enrolled in the course two or three times, even when the same issue topics were scheduled. Students reported that having the opportunity to share their views and hear the conclusions of others is a different and valuable experience for them.

Tim Hrastar, a communications consultant who enrolled in the OLLI course at the University of Dayton and later became a session moderator in the course, gave this assessment of his experience:

Retired senior citizens aren't done yet. They find a deliberative session rewarding, being able to contribute ideas that lend themselves to solutions. And they are gratified that their ideas don't just evaporate, but are shared with people who can make a difference by carrying these ideas to eventual fruition.

By giving older citizens the opportunity to engage with current issues of deep concern, the Power of Public Deliberation course fulfills the overall mission of OLLI programs.

The central research question posed by the Kettering Foundation is "What does it take to make a democracy work as it should?" The most significant answer to that question is citizen engagement. That normally means voting since a democracy is a representative form of government and voting is the primary way in which one is represented. But in too many elections, particularly at the local levels, voting participation is very low—a great weakness in our democratic system.

Kettering Foundation research found that to increase voting and public engagement, citizens need (1) to have a better understanding of individual issues and how the issues could affect them, (2) a voice to express their views about an issue and hear what others have to say, and (3) an opportunity to engage with others in deciding what should be done. If the issue is one that is being considered by elected officials, this might mean communicating with

them about the conclusions reached in the forums. If the issue affects their own community, it might lead to a task force being formed to work toward a solution.

Working with the Kettering Foundation, the National Issues Forums Institute (and its predecessor, the Domestic Policy Institute) have been using forums that incorporate public deliberation for nearly 40 years. National Issues Forums are convened in

churches, public libraries, civic institutions, schools, and personal residences. Teachers in educational institutions—from middle and high schools to universities, at both the undergraduate and graduate levels—have concluded that the

***Senior citizens who enroll in continuing education classes feel that they have learned much over their lifetimes and are very responsive to the opportunity to share their perspectives.***

deliberation process helps their students develop critical-thinking skills, the ability to communicate effectively (both in speaking and listening), and a willingness to collaborate with others who may be different and who have different views.

Senior citizens who enroll in continuing education classes feel that they have learned much over their lifetimes and are very responsive to the opportunity to share their perspectives. And the setting and climate for public deliberation help individuals learn how to listen to other views and move toward finding common ground—a place where they can work together. Kent Friel, a retired business executive in Cincinnati who developed a course for the OLLI program at the University of Cincinnati, had this to say about his experience with the course:

I have been moderating OLLI classes using the deliberative process and the NIFI issue guides for six years. Universally, in after-class evaluations, the students have endorsed the [process of] learning by listening to others and the civility they have experienced in these classes.

In addition to the University of Dayton, similar courses have been established at the University of Cincinnati, the University of North Florida, Auburn University, the University of Georgia, Oklahoma State University, and the University of Hawaii. Gregg Kaufman, an NIFI ambassador, made a presentation about the Power of Public Deliberation course at the 2018



National OLLI Conference in Scottsdale, Arizona. He was assisted by Julie Mitchell from the University of Dayton and Jeanette Tooley from the University of North Florida, both executive directors of OLLI programs at their universities. They offered a mini-forum, followed by a presentation on how to develop an OLLI course. The objective was to encourage other universities with OLLI programs to implement similar courses. Kaufman, a retired college professor who established the OLLI course at the University of North Florida, said:

The OLLI students bring a diversity of employment and life backgrounds, as well as intellectual curiosity and, much like the first-year students I have taught, respond to the deliberative process with similar satisfaction. People of all ages perceive deliberative dialogue's civility and respect as new and refreshing.

Most senior citizens have already established or completed their careers. This means that continuing education programs like OLLI are opportunities to highlight other purposes of higher education, such as personal enrichment and preparation for civic life. Older adults vote at a higher rate

***Most senior citizens have already established or completed their careers. This means that continuing education programs are opportunities to highlight other purposes of higher education, such as personal enrichment and preparation for civic life.***

than any other age group. Therefore, when they are better informed about issues that are important to their communities, states, and nation, their votes help ensure that we have the kind of leaders who will work toward the most desirable solutions. But democracy flourishes when citizens participate in ways that extend

beyond voting. Senior citizens have voices that need to be heard. The OLLI programs provide the opportunity for this to occur.

This unique deliberative and democratic approach allows people to engage in meaningful and informed discussion despite political, religious, social, cultural, and gender differences. It is critical that we find ways to have civil discourse about the challenges we face, and providing an environment

for the deliberative exchange of views could go a long way toward reducing the level of polarization that now exists in our society.



# CONTRIBUTORS

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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

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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.

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