

CONNECTIONS

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An Experiment Studying Experiments

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From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums

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COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

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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.

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The Library as Community Hub

By Marie Pyko, Lissa Staley,
and Debbie Stanton

At the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Topeka, Kansas, our Community Impact Goals are ambitious and are meant to describe societal issues that we all must address for the success of our citizenry. For the past decade, one focus of our community work has been on embedding librarians in the community. Librarians are uniquely positioned to work this way. CEO Gina Millsap invested in facilitation training for librarians and often offers our services to local groups, saying “If one of our librarians is at the table, your process is better because we’re trained facilitators who know how to ask key questions, and your product is better because we



PHOTO COURTESY OF TOPEKA AND SHAWNEE COUNTY PUBLIC LIBRARY, TOPEKA, KANSAS

bring our skills as information professionals to provide solid data and fact checking.” In a recent survey, our customers responded that the most valuable resource the library brings to their community is “a trusted community anchor,” ranking that highest and above digital or print collections or any other resource. Libraries are known for being neutral, nonpartisan spaces. As we reimagine how to best serve our community, we continually ask ourselves: Once the library is invited to community tables as a trusted resource, what can we do to be effective agents of change?

As part of the role of librarian as facilitator of community change, Lissa Staley, community connections librarian, began chairing and facilitating a county-wide coalition work group focused on health equity. The group quickly saw that they were talking in circles with the usual suspects, who already acknowledged that health equity involved multi-disciplinary and systemic challenges larger than individual health organizations could address alone. The group identified several topics from the National Issues Forums guides to convene deliberative conversations on the daunting issues that communities face. They hoped that more individuals and organizations outside of health professionals would be willing to seek and support possible

actions that would ultimately address health equity issues.

In a yearlong series in 2019, the group held deliberative forums on poverty (using the NIF issue guide *Making Ends Meet*), behavioral health (*Mental Illness: How Do We Address a Growing Problem?*), and violence and institutional racism (*Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence?*). By design, these topics were not obviously health issues although each issue framework identified actions and trade-offs that aligned with discussing underlying



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health equity questions. In presentations, Dr. Gianfranco Pezzino, the county health officer, frequently emphasized that “policy is the vaccine for the social determinants of health.” The group realized that deliberating issues allowed for conversations about policies without too quickly raising the heat too high, which often happens in an advocacy conversation. Participants included local and state level social service agency staff, concerned citizens, funders, health professionals, corrections officers and police officers, and library staff, among others. One enthusiastic coalition member said, “I wish all of my meetings asked people to consider

trade-offs!” and because the events were in a series, participants referred colleagues to later sessions.

GOING ONLINE

In spring 2020, due to the COVID-19 pandemic, additional conversations were scheduled within a new experiment, using Zoom face-to-face videoconferencing with the *Health Care: How Can We Bring Costs Down While Getting the Care We Need?* issue guide promoted as part of the Hidden Common Ground national initiative. Those experiments allowed some of our library board members to participate, and several became supporters of this ongoing work. The elegance of our virtual Zoom conversations during the coronavirus pandemic was the simple act of coming together and sharing our thoughts in this specific, empowering manner. During a time when many felt isolated and unable to connect with others, these deliberations were purposeful and engaging, no matter what else we were all going through.

So far, our online conversations are advertised as opportunities to learn and practice deliberation, but as more people in our community become familiar with this process, we hope to work more closely with groups actively seeking to work with those with whom they haven’t

worked before. By strongly encouraging many library staff members to participate in deliberations, we began integrating deliberative thinking into our internal organizational conversations as well. Staff and community members are interested in decisions being made about reopening the building during the pandemic, and with this shared language of options and actions and trade-offs, our internal decision-making is stronger and better articulated, especially when values are in conflict.

Some of our experiments have been conducted with our own staff during this time, as we try to manage expectations from almost 200 smart and caring employees who want to contribute helpful suggestions in a pandemic, all while they are also being asked to work in new and different ways. Asking, “Of all the things we can do here, what will we do to make the greatest impact?” engages everyone in a conversation, weighing possible options and trade-offs. As director of public services Marie Pyko shared in one such conversation, “Even now, choices have to be made for how our library will move forward during the pandemic and with limited service options. Being able to help frame a community need and then deliberate on how best to move forward has been a lifesaver.”

FOSTERING COMMUNITY DELIBERATION

We are finding that the library can help residents and the community by enthusiastically supporting deliberation to weigh options and consider trade-offs when making decisions while still embracing our own non-partisan position. As an organization with a mission of “sparking curiosity and connecting our community through literacy and learning,” we can ask deeper questions and convene broader conversations than other groups may be able to.

We are also learning how to name and frame issues with others in our community, beginning with the concern-gathering conversations, focusing on the question, “What concerns you most about living and working in Topeka/Shawnee County?” Entering into the concern gathering without a clear idea of what issues would emerge initially felt risky. We started by working within a community engagement group that is supporting the county development organization’s strategic plan, with which one of our librarians had been building trust within the group by chairing it for the previous year. The structure of concern-gathering conversations, and issue framing more generally, can help the group raise awareness of barriers to

community pride and find common ground with various potential partners while considering possible unintended consequences. The pandemic has disrupted the meeting structure of this initiative, but we laid the groundwork for rethinking how we identify the challenges we face in the community and introduced deliberating possible actions as a strategy we can all use in any conversation.

Much of what we learned from community deliberations in 2019 is informing how we engage in the ever-evolving work of 2020. When groups work within their silos, they become complacent because members know their part of the mess, stick to their own mission, and validate each other for the work they do and plan to do. But as groups work across silos, they encounter more people who challenge or question their mission, find overlapping concerns with organizations who don't approach issues from the same perspective or with similar strategies, and discover the groups around the table may not even support all of the interventions they are each attempting.

No organization wants to draw attention to their individual weakness or limitation. In many organizational plans, interventions are often chosen to affect their targeted populations

instead of engaging community residents in identifying needs and deliberating around possible actions. But using deliberative frameworks, or other structures such as guiding questions, can create environments in which people acknowledge that the solutions and actions to current challenges may come from outside their sectors and outside the people currently at the table and that the problems are bigger than what these few organizations can solve. And, while professionals and organizations have roles to play, the challenges ultimately must be addressed by the community.

Community is a consequence of people. Each individual action can build up those near us, strengthening relationships and building trust. Librarians are also well positioned for this work as we have years of experience in interactions with customers that have built relationships over time. Intentionally turning those skills outward into the community allows us to be more impactful in supporting citizens and community actions.

Debbie Stanton, public services supervisor, moved to Kansas recently. She observed, "So often it takes a great deal of time to build trust enough in a new community to begin having deep conversations with

individuals. The way our deliberative conversations are structured, anyone can participate regardless of the amount of time they've lived in the area." Overcoming outsider status is always an issue for new residents, but many long-time residents also face the internal challenge of working successfully together across the silos of different sectors and organizations.

2020—AND BEYOND

In spring 2020, Marie Pyko joined a community COVID-19 response and coordination weekly Zoom call with several dozen government, school, church, and social service representatives. Many of the members had previously participated in deliberative conversations. This background made for more seamless and rapid discussions of solutions to current crisis situations and possible unintended consequences or trade-offs. During the pandemic particularly, a focus on partnership and finding common ground for action is evident in the ways that organizations shift to support feeding families through new distribution networks, identify local trends about evictions and childcare, and continually ask "Whom are we missing?" to invite in more voices and perspectives.

So far, our online conversations follow our original plans for 2020.

And yet, the work we are doing in the community continues to influence collective decision-making and encourage deliberative thinking. In these times of limited gatherings, much of the work is less visible to the public, and we focus on observing and surveying news, providing encouragement and connections, gauging where people are so we can engage appropriately, and acting on opportunities for deliberative thinking as they emerge in conversations. Even informally, we are helping individuals and groups see the issues differently or helping the groups see themselves differently.

Libraries and library staff play multiple roles within a community, sometimes taking the lead on an issue, sometimes contributing our work while other groups take the



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The only constant may be change, but we are hopeful that we can support careful consideration of trade-offs while the community makes decisions about changes.

lead on other issues. Facilitating a process for an organization about a topic outside of our areas of interest or providing public meeting space in our building for any organization is also part of our role. The strength of experimenting with deliberation and issue framing is that it allows us to help convene conversations on topics that are of interest in the community but not within the focus of the library's own mission.

In our next series of deliberative conversations, we are testing the new policing issue framework. All summer, we monitored the local situation, weighing trade-offs of partnering with certain groups over

other groups in a divisive situation, looking for possibilities to help center the work, and pulling back as things escalated. Many of the meetings in our community are being held in person, in a county with currently high community transmission during the pandemic. We are advertising Zoom forums and hoping to engage and include voices who haven't participated, along with those who are the current faces of organizations and movements. The week after we started to contact potential partners, our police chief announced his upcoming retirement.

The only constant may be change, but we are hopeful that we can support careful consideration of trade-offs while the community makes decisions about changes, even and especially during times when tensions are high and feelings are escalated. Communities and experiments and opportunities for action will continue to evolve, and we are excited to be part of this work. ■

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