

HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2018

Editors: Derek Barker and Alex Lovit
Copy Editor: Joey Easton
Formatting: Long's Graphic Design, Inc.

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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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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DEEPENING DELIBERATION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

Reflections on Our Research

John J. Theis, Carrie B. Kisker, and Alberto Olivas

Civic engagement in higher education has generated much excitement over the last several years, especially in community colleges. Institutions are creating centers for civic engagement, national initiatives have been launched, and social responsibility and civic engagement are being included as core competencies or as learning outcomes on campuses across the country. Yet as so often happens in higher education, the label “civic engagement” is often applied to conventional, preexisting programs, and there is substantial variation in the intended (and realized) outcomes of so-called “civic” initiatives.

In this article, we describe a three-year project—encouraged by the Kettering Foundation—to embed deliberation as a civic skill in community colleges. As we have written elsewhere,¹ although we believe there is room on community college campuses for other approaches to civic learning and democratic engagement, deliberation represents a way to redirect civic initiatives away from a focus on the problems *in* democracy to the problems *of* democracy. Whether fostered in the curriculum or the extracurriculum, deliberation “is a critical approach to educating for democracy, to engaging students in the practice of acting in the public arena, and to helping students understand that their voices and experiences can indeed have an impact on our communities and our democracy.”²

After a brief overview of civic engagement in higher education and a discussion of how deliberation transcends other popular but—we believe—limited forms

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of civic engagement, this article shares reflections, successes, and challenges from our project thus far and describes how the Kettering Foundation has facilitated the work. We conclude by imagining a future in which deliberation becomes a regular occurrence on community college campuses, both within and outside of the classroom—one in which deliberation is inserted into the

decision-making structure of campus life, and in which the colleges and their local communities utilize deliberation as a shared practice in enacting democracy.

Civic Engagement in Higher Education

Civic engagement activities at American colleges and universities can be broken down into three broad categories. First, and perhaps most common, is what would be called *volunteerism and service*. These sorts of engagement activities consist of classes or campus organizations requiring service to “help” some group or cause that may be disadvantaged or is suffering some hardship. Unfortunately, this form of civic engagement serves to reinforce the notion that colleges and universities “know better” and can help their communities best by providing services to those that are “less fortunate.”

A second form of civic engagement favored by colleges and universities could be called *adversarial*. These types of activities seek to engage students in elections and partisan politics with Get Out the Vote drives on campus, candidate forums, debate-watch parties and campus Democrat and Republican clubs. While they may drive electoral participation to some extent, these types of engagement activities suffer from reinforcing the notion that politics is done by leaders through parties and there will be a winner and a loser. This hollowed-out notion of civic participation leads to citizens viewing their own roles as simply voters, or as workers helping one side win, rather than as active participants in what David Mathews of the Kettering Foundation calls the “wetlands” of community life where democracy thrives.

While these two popular forms of civic engagement have their place, a more holistic view would broaden the notion of civic engagement to include deliberative and public work perspectives. As Martha Nussbaum writes, as citizens in democracies, students must be “active, critical, reflective, and empathetic member[s] of a community of equals, capable of exchanging ideas on the basis of respect and understanding with people from many different backgrounds.”³ Similarly, Bernie Ronan notes in *The Civic Spectrum* that citizenship involves complexity. Political activity involves dealing with complex problems, engaging in those issues with others, discovering a shared identity despite profound differences, and finally, taking action amidst a bewildering array of large-scale institutions. This developmental process occurs along a spectrum of increasing complexity and intensity. Whereas service and voting lie at the beginning of the spectrum, deliberation and public work rest at its apex.

Students need to be guided through the civic spectrum in order to engage in increasingly satisfying forms of civic involvement. We often hear of young people's disengagement from the political process. In our personal experiences, a great many students feel that politics is unproductive and that there is little they can do to change anything. As Windy Lawrence and John Theis described:

A major theme for many students was the idea that their previous conceptions of politics had been negative and the forums changed their perspective to one of hope. Students, for instance, described politics as "overwhelming and extremely negative." They also described their previous experiences of talking about politics with others as a "very heated debate," characterized by words such as "anger," "rude," and "disruptive." Some students also mentioned avoiding discussing politics altogether.⁴

Most of us have seen firsthand what Jill McMillan and Katy Harriger have documented, which is that "interest in politics and political engagement is . . . half of what it was for young people when freshman surveys began in the 1960s."⁵ Deliberation

provides a tool or method for changing students' conceptions of what is possible in politics, providing a different way of *doing politics*. More specifically, deliberation

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helps students engage in the very same problems of democracy that may have otherwise caused them to tune out or give in to their disaffection.

It is in this context that we embarked upon a project to embed deliberation as a civic skill in community colleges. Community colleges educate two-thirds of the young adults in institutions of higher education, including roughly half of all those who earn a baccalaureate degree. Remaking young people's conceptions of politics cannot be accomplished without involving community colleges in the process. In addition, most community college students come from the communities where the college is located and remain there after graduation. As such, community colleges are stewards of place with a mandate to respond to community issues and needs. Community colleges are *democracy's colleges* in the truest sense. In trying to change the nature of politics in communities, community colleges can play an indispensable role.

Project Design

Over the past three years, in collaboration with the Kettering Foundation, we recruited cohorts of faculty, staff, and students from 11 community colleges around the country to participate in our project. All members of the Democracy Commitment, the colleges involved were Tarrant County Community College-Southeast (Texas), Guttman Community College (New York), Lane Community College (Oregon), Delta Community College (Michigan), Santa Fe College (Florida), College of the Canyons (California), Monroe Community College (New York), St. Paul Community and Technical College (Minnesota), Kirkwood Community College (Iowa), Piedmont Virginia Community College (Virginia), and Wright Community College (Illinois). This geographically diverse set of schools has provided insights into what we need to do to build deliberation in community colleges nationwide.

The eleven colleges were divided into three cohorts, and each fall, one or two cohorts came to Dayton to participate in a research exchange. Following their first research exchange, each school hosted a moderator training and then at least one deliberative forum. Members from the previous year's cohort returned to Kettering the following fall—together with the incoming cohort—to share their experiences and reflect on the year's work. There was an intentionality to the study's design that sought to ensure that we would develop a network of community colleges that could augment and connect to existing Kettering networks. One of the strengths of Kettering's research program is bringing together a variety of actors—librarians, city managers, faculty, and representatives from not-for-profits—to work through the same fundamental questions. While the primary use of deliberative dialogues at community colleges will be in campus and classroom settings, we envision that the practice will eventually expand to encompass noncampus actors and community groups.

Reflections on the Project

A number of successes and challenges emerged from our three-year study. In particular, we identified four main points that we consider important in broadening the reach of deliberation at community colleges. First, students enjoy deliberating about and engaging with “wicked” questions—those for which there are no clear-cut solutions. As one project participant noted:

Students are anxious to share their views and hear the views of others. . . . They welcome breaking down the barriers of the classroom and deliberating with the public to better understand different points of view. Students are engaged, restless, and anxious. Deliberation holds forth the promise of

seeking a way forward without acrimony and the traps of regular political conversation.⁶

Another participant made a similar point:

The current political climate, and how students see the “responsible adults” of the political world conduct themselves, has made our students really crave interactions like deliberative dialogue. It may well be an important tool in keeping many students from becoming completely disengaged from politics.

This is a crucial accomplishment. Many students attend community colleges to get job skills, but providing opportunities for students to have democratic experiences

that transcend that purpose is essential, even if democratic citizenship is rarely promoted as an explicit institutional goal. In addition, the fact that students respond in such a positive manner goes a long way toward ensuring they will continue to participate as dialogues

“Students are anxious to share their views and hear the views of others. . . . They welcome breaking down the barriers of the classroom and deliberating with the public to better understand different points of view.”

become more common on their campus. This is not a trivial point, as higher education research indicates that student engagement is a major factor in student retention and academic success. So, the fact that students enjoy participating in deliberations is not merely a nice side effect of the work; it means that deliberative events support a core institutional priority. This point will be especially important for the colleges introducing deliberation to their constituents and working to institutionalize it on campus. They will need to consistently portray deliberation to college leaders as an opportunity to engage students in the college and the community if they are to sustain the work of deliberation on campus over the long term.

The second major realization stemming from our project is that deliberation helps students broaden their perspectives. As one student said, “Before the forum, I only knew issues through my own experiences, and after, my perspective definitely changed because I heard/saw that poverty affects every race, gender, and age.” If part of a “student-citizen” is to be reflective and empathetic, deliberation is one way to achieve those characteristics.

A third realization is that, especially in the community college context, it is important not to isolate a deliberative initiative within a specific department or organizational unit, or pigeonhole it as the responsibility of a specific center or faculty member. Support for deliberative pedagogy can be found across the campus, and responsibility for it must be shared across campus units, faculty members, administrators, and staff. Among the eleven colleges we

Time and time again, participants saw deliberation as a way to deal with issues that were not originally conceived of as “deliberative projects.”

worked with, faculty participants came from English, political science, history, sociology, and the natural sciences. There was also interest from student-life professionals and administrators. Deliberation is a

skill that speaks to faculty and staff in various ways. Taking a comprehensive approach to acquainting a college to deliberation, and specifically involving a broad coalition of individuals, holds the most promise in terms of making deliberation a part of campus culture.

Finally, and perhaps most important, deliberation provides faculty and staff with a set of tools to respond productively to issues, opportunities, and events that demand campus and community discussion. Time and time again, participants saw deliberation as a way to deal with issues that were not originally conceived of as “deliberative projects.” As one faculty member and project participant put it:

Student engagement staff who work with peer mentors, the United Men of Color student organization, and Studio Art classes have inquired about tapping into student moderator expertise for training that would incorporate deliberative dialogue for future town halls and responses to inevitable events that demand a campus forum.

Similarly, another participant reported that, “[Our] students have continued to express significant interest in growing the use of deliberative dialogues on campus.” Another participant shared a similar sentiment:

Before we could hold our planned deliberative dialogue on economic inequality, it has been necessary to schedule a dialogue on gun violence, in part to inform the student protest movement and give the public a direction for next steps in the ongoing national conversation about gun violence.

One of the strengths of deliberation is its adaptive ability. As issues arise, colleges can respond in a way that is substantive, respectful, authentic, and

most importantly, resonates with students. The typical “expert forum,” where two sides debate an issue, can be replaced with deliberations that involve all participants and that consider multiple, complex viewpoints and plans of action. Deliberation becomes a way to respond to requests from outside the campus as well. As one project participant shared:

[An] unexpected and welcome opportunity related to deliberative practices was Texas 101 Day 2016. Texas 101 Day was a four-hour interactive and collaborative town hall, which brought people together from across our community to discuss the challenges and issues impacting southeast Tarrant County. I was contacted . . . [and] ask[ed] if our students could help moderate breakout sessions related to current and pressing issues in District 101. . . . I worked closely with [a state house member from the local district] and his staff and helped them develop the sessions into deliberative forums.

In addition to these four major takeaways, we also encountered several challenges in getting deliberation onto college campuses. In particular, several faculty spoke about the constraints of the academic calendar. During the first year of this research project, participating colleges struggled to coordinate their schedules to hold moderator trainings or forums during the same semester or even during the same academic year. In subsequent years, we rescheduled the research exchange meetings convened by the Kettering Foundation in Dayton to better accommodate the constraints of the academic calendar.

A second challenge was that the project experienced some staff and student turnover on campuses. In some cases, point people departed their institution before the dialogue could be held, and while dozens of faculty and staff had been trained as moderators, there was a general discomfort in stepping into a leadership role and planning the forum because of the associated administrative responsibility. In addition to staff turnover, community colleges suffer from notoriously high student turnover from year to year. A 50 to 60 percent fall-to-fall retention rate is not uncommon. One school described their “highly transient student population” as being an obstacle to keeping trained moderators. Even when students do persist, community college students tend to graduate or transfer in fewer years than at four-year institutions. The best students seek to graduate in four or five semesters; as such, often by the time students become engaged with deliberation and trained as moderators, they have only a semester or two remaining at the college. To overcome this problem, it is best to implement an ongoing process of moderator training and provide numerous practice opportunities for students and employees so that when deliberative opportunities arise, moderators will be available.

Despite the challenge in maintaining a core group of student moderators to serve in community colleges, we firmly believe that in the community college setting, with student participants, students are preferable as moderators to faculty members because the practice of moderating a deliberation helps build a critical set of skills that will benefit the students for years to come. However, it can be difficult to get students to commit to a day-long or multi-step sequential training. As one campus put it: “Most of our students work and schedule their classes on as few days as possible to maximize availability for work. While they had no class conflicts [for a daylong training], many had work conflicts.” While this is clearly an obstacle, it is not insurmountable. Providing a two-hour training that acquaints students with basic moderating skills and following up with a variety of small campus forums where students can hone those skills, provides a way for time-crunched students to pick and choose opportunities to moderate forums. By the time they leave campus, many students are seasoned moderators and comfortable moderating forums among students, faculty, staff, and even community members. One point that we emphasized to all participants is that the best training for moderators is practice. Practicing the “art” of moderating is what really develops moderator skills.

Finally, a perpetual question that moderators and participants alike shared after deliberative dialogues is, “Now what?” As one participant reflected after participating in a forum on the opioid crisis:

They [students] were very engaged in the process of give and take, deep listening, and speaking from experience to deliberate the options. What they said when completing post-forum questionnaires was disheartening: “Who cares what we think? Nothing changes anyway.”

While there are a number of ways to work on this concern, our sense is that this sentiment is common across deliberative experiences. It is our belief that there are several ways to attack critiques such as this. First, community colleges should hold a forum on the National Issues Forum Institute (NIFI) “issue of the year” and send the survey results in to NIFI. With this relatively simple action, students become part of the Public Voice event held each year in Washington, DC, and schools can live-stream the event on their campuses, which shows some action among policymakers. Alternatively, local policymakers can be invited to forums, or the results of deliberations can be turned into letters to the editor or letters to elected representatives offering policy recommendations. Another strategy for dealing with this issue is to make deliberation part of a bigger dynamic on campus. At Lone Star College-Kingwood, we have used deliberation as a first step in defining problems for students in our

Public Achievement program. In addition, student governments may use deliberation—as opposed to the more common survey methodologies—to learn how students feel about proposed courses of action on campus.

Kettering’s Role

During the research process, collaboration with the Kettering Foundation encouraged democratic skill building at community colleges in several important ways. First, Kettering’s status as a national foundation focused on democracy and effective civic-engagement practices helped lend legitimacy to college faculty and administrators introducing this work on their campuses and provided a national context for promoting deliberation within community colleges. Without the encouragement and imprimatur of a national foundation like Kettering, efforts to convince college administrators and faculty leaders to embrace a new initiative requiring training, event planning, and community engagement on potentially controversial topics might not be nearly as successful.

Kettering also played a catalytic role in providing encouragement for the initiation of programs by faculty and staff. The letters of invitation to a research exchange increased the

visibility of a project for those pursuing them and elevated them in the eyes of campus administrators. By bringing people together to learn about best practices for deliberation on community college campuses,

By bringing people together to learn about best practices for deliberation on community college campuses, Kettering allowed a “bottom up” conception of democracy to flourish.

Kettering allowed a “bottom up” conception of democracy to flourish. The exchanges became a catalyst for further growth, and the foundation’s encouragement often gave faculty, staff, and administrators cover to take initiatives up the chain of command.

In addition, working with Kettering allowed programs to “bubble up.” Kettering’s democratic nature is evident in the way in which it works with collaborators. Since Kettering is not a grantmaking foundation, participants did not have to tailor their programs to a funder’s goals. This allowed for far more innovation and flexibility in how programs were adapted to a campus environment. Furthermore, participation in research exchanges and the wide body of Kettering research provides a theoretical framework for participants

to think about issues in our democracy. Concepts such as “wicked problems” and the democratic “wetlands” provided a unifying theme for a broad and diverse set of democratic education programs.

Perhaps one major contribution the Kettering Foundation could make in future research would be to help link people within its network that are geographically proximal, but not yet working together. Ideally, Kettering’s research would stimulate self-organized regional and local exchanges to take place without Kettering driving them, and we understand that Kettering does not want to intervene directly in communities. However, sometimes an organization like Kettering is needed. It may prove fruitful to have community-based research exchanges that bring together a wide variety of actors from one geographical locale—some of whom are in the Kettering network already and some who are not. This would allow members of a community to begin to build networks—with Kettering support—more reminiscent of the democratic “wetlands” David Mathews writes about in *Ships Passing in the Night?*

Conclusions

As we conclude the final year of this research project seeking to help community colleges broaden and deepen deliberative practices on their campuses and in their communities, a few issues clearly stand out. Selling a broad audience on the potential of deliberation is absolutely essential. It should never be pigeonholed as an activity that is limited to a single academic or administrative program. To this point, several campuses were conscious of including deliberative-dialogue training in their professional-development activities. As one participant noted:

Traditionally, our campus has a professional-development week just prior to the week classes begin in August and January. The deliberative-dialogue model will be featured during that week to inform faculty and staff of the concept, to bring attention to the NIFI issue guides, and to hold a campus forum.

Another way to “sell” deliberation on campus is to bring attention about the transformative potential of deliberation up through the administrative hierarchy. For example, one campus shared that, “In a report at the College Board meeting the following week, deliberative dialogue was touted as a great way to address the oppositional issues that often crop up in decision-making venues.”

A second point to be made is that deliberation as a pedagogy has the flexibility in both training moderators and in creating forums to respond to

the community college environment and provide a tool to tackle serious and divisive issues. These issues may arise either within the shared decision-making structures of the college or in the community that students and the college care about. This flexibility serves as a primary benefit given the constraints that students and community colleges face.

Deliberation holds promise as a method of political discourse in which students enjoy engaging. It builds civic skills too often ignored in our conventional politics. The challenge for community colleges is to broaden its use so deliberation becomes a regular occurrence on our campuses, both within and outside of the classroom. Once this is accomplished, a second challenge becomes answering the “So what next?” question by bringing deliberation into the decision-making structure of campus life. Finally, community colleges can work with the Kettering Foundation to help develop local “wetlands,” bringing a variety of network members into contact so deliberation moves from being an academic exercise for community colleges to a shared practice in the places where community colleges are located. In this, we have a unique opportunity to model for students and the community a different, more *deliberative* way of decision-making.



NOTES

- ¹ Carrie B. Kisker, et al., “Community Colleges and Educating for Democracy,” *eJournal of Public Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2016): 211-233, <http://ejopa.missouristate.edu/index.php/ejournal/article/view/154> (accessed August 17, 2018).
- ² *Ibid.*, 226.
- ³ Martha C. Nussbaum, *Not for Profit: Why Democracy Needs the Humanities* (Princeton, NJ: Princeton University Press, 2010), 141.
- ⁴ Windy Lawrence and John J. Theis, “Reimagining Civic Education in Colleges and Universities: The Influence of Deliberation on Students’ Perceptions of Political Participation,” *eJournal of Public Affairs* 5, no. 2 (2016), <https://ejopa.missouristate.edu/index.php/ejournal/article/view/126> (accessed August 17, 2018).
- ⁵ Jill J. McMillan and Katy Harriger, *Speaking of Politics: Preparing College Students for Democratic Citizenship Through Deliberative Dialogue* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2007), 11.
- ⁶ Quotes from participants throughout this article were drawn from post-forum questionnaires (in possession of authors).

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CONTRIBUTORS

DEREK W. M. BARKER is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. With a background in political theory, he works primarily on research concerning the democratic role of higher education institutions, philanthropy and nonprofit organizations, journalism, and the professions. Barker is the coeditor (with Alex Lovit) of Kettering's *Higher Education Exchange* and has contributed to other Kettering publications, including the *Kettering Review* and *Connections*. He is the author of *Tragedy and Citizenship: Conflict, Reconciliation, and Democracy from Haemon to Hegel* (SUNY Press, 2009) and articles appearing in the academic journals *Political Theory*, *New Political Science*, and *The Good Society*.

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 SCLC, organized by Martin Luther King Jr., and subsequently did community organizing among low-income white residents in Durham, North Carolina.

ALICE DIEBEL is a senior associate with the Kettering Foundation. As a previous program officer with the foundation, Diebel helped initiate its centers for democratic public life research in 2011.

JONI DOHERTY, a program officer at the Kettering Foundation, has a long-standing interest in discourse ethics and how the arts and humanities can inform deliberative democratic practices. She directs research on the centers for democratic public life and is involved with learning exchanges with higher education institutions, humanities councils, libraries, and museums. Doherty was previously the director of the New England Center for Civic Life at Franklin Pierce University and taught in the American studies program. Doherty earned a BFA in painting at the University of New Hampshire, an MA in cultural studies at Simmons College, and a PhD in philosophy and art theory from the Institute for Doctoral Studies in the Visual Arts.

LORLENE HOYT is the executive director of the Talloires Network, an international association of 385 engaged universities in 77 countries. Previously, as associate professor of urban planning at MIT, she founded MIT@Lawrence, an award-winning city-campus partnership. Her book *Regional Perspectives on Learning-by-Doing: Stories from Engaged Universities Around the World* (Michigan State University Press, 2017) demonstrates how universities can effectively mobilize their resources to create more equitable and prosperous communities while also educating civic leaders. Hoyt is a research professor in the Department of Urban and Environmental Policy and Planning, faculty member of the Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University, and a visiting scholar at Brown University. She holds a PhD in city and regional planning from the University of Pennsylvania.

CARRIE B. KISKER is an education research and policy consultant in Los Angeles and a director of the Center for the Study of Community Colleges. She engages in research pertaining to community college policy and practice, and regularly consults with college leaders on issues related to civic learning and democratic engagement. Kisker holds a BA from Dartmouth College and an MA and PhD from UCLA. She has coauthored two books, including *The American Community College* (Jossey-Bass, 2013) and *The Shaping of American Higher Education: Emergence and Growth of the Contemporary System* (Jossey-Bass, 2009). In 2016, Kisker, along

with Bernie Ronan, edited a *New Directions for Community Colleges* sourcebook on civic learning and democratic engagement.

NICHOLAS V. LONGO is a professor in the departments of Public and Community Service Studies and Global Studies and a Faculty Fellow for Engaged Scholarship with the Center for Teaching Excellence at Providence College. Longo is the author of a number of books, articles, and reports on youth civic education, engaged scholarship, and deliberative pedagogy. His publications include *Why Community Matters: Connecting Education with Civic Life* (SUNY Press, 2007) and several coedited volumes, including *Publicly Engaged Scholars: Next Generation Engagement and the Future of Higher Education* (Stylus Publishing, 2016), and *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement* (Michigan State University Press, 2017).

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 K-12 and higher education research 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*.

ALBERTO OLIVAS is executive director of the Congressman Ed Pastor Center for Politics and Public Service at Arizona State University, as well as a trainer and consultant on issues related to public participation and civic engagement in higher education. Previously, Olivas served as director of the Center for Civic Participation for the Maricopa Community College District. He served in appointed leadership positions for Arizona governor Jane Dee Hull and Arizona secretary of state Betsey Bayless, and on the Arizona Commission of Indian Affairs. Olivas is currently board secretary for the National Civic League, vice chair of the Arizona Town Hall board of directors, and serves on the board of Democracy Works, a national civic technology nonprofit.

MARSHALITA SIMS PETERSON is a consultant and researcher committed to public scholarship, deliberative pedagogy/dialogue, facilitation of National Issues Forums, and transformative action within the work of democratic practice. As founder of M.S. Peterson Consulting and Research, LLC, she is also dedicated to processes involving strategic planning, communication constructs, effective leadership, team building, and innovative processes of engagement to enhance organizational productivity. Peterson's research and work in the field of teacher education spans 38 years. She is former chair and associate professor of teacher education at Spelman College in Atlanta. Peterson has also served as a Whisenton Public Scholar and Whisenton Scholar-in-Residence at the Kettering Foundation.

JOHN J. THEIS is the director of the Center for Civic Engagement for Lone Star College-Kingwood, where he is also a professor of political science. He earned his PhD in political science from the University of Arizona. Theis serves as chair of the steering committee for The Democracy Commitment and on the board of directors of the National Issues Forums Institute. He has been involved in civic engagement work for over 20 years, founding both the LSC-Kingwood Public Achievement program and the Kingwood College Center for Civic Engagement.

Kettering Foundation

200 Commons Road, Dayton, Ohio 45459 (937) 434-7300; (800) 221-3657
444 North Capitol Street, NW, Suite 434, Washington, D.C. 20001 (202) 393-4478
www.kettering.org
