The role of Civic Organizations in today’s society
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Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civil Engagement
By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach
Kettering’s annual review of its research in 2009-2010 has looked into what Alexis de Tocqueville reported in the 1830s, the unique American reliance on all kinds of civic associations in its political life. These associations have become today’s civic organizations, and they have been changing recently. To be sure, citizens are still forming ad hoc alliances for all kinds of purposes, but major civic organizations may no longer be playing the role they once played as vehicles people could use for their collective initiatives. Citizens and communities have reason to be concerned. So the foundation is trying to look ahead to what are, or could be, emerging as new vehicles for people who want to come together to act on their common problems.

As in past issues of Connections, we describe what we are learning from our research review through stories much as a journalist would write. If you would like to read about the concepts behind the stories, see the Kettering Review. And the Higher Education Exchange explores the implications of our findings for colleges and universities.

The trends affecting the civic or non-governmental organizations (NGOs) that make up what has been called the “independent sector” have been documented in a number of studies and reported in various media. Articles in Connections will elaborate, but I’ll note some of the major trends. For instance, organizations representing particular interests now seem more prevalent than those attempting to represent the general interest. Some argue that protecting individual rights has eclipsed protecting the good of all in our highly litigious society. An extreme case: a park visitor trips on a sidewalk and sues, forcing the facility to close because it can’t afford the cost of defending the park against future lawsuits. While individual rights should be defended and special interest groups have a legitimate role, the balance in civil society may have shifted.

Other studies suggest that large civic organizations are less available to the local concerns of citizens and their communities. In fact, some organizations with local chapters that once served to organize the citizenry have closed those chapters and relocated to Washington in order to lobby Congress and federal agencies. And as the government has delegated responsibility for more programs to NGOs, federal agencies may have colonized these independent bodies with their own professional and bureaucratic modes of operation. Even though that was not the intent, compliance with government rules and financial requirements has made colonization unavoidable. This may partly explain why Kettering has found that citizens do not necessarily distinguish between governmental and nongovernmental
organizations but see them as much the same. In addition, according to a Harwood Institute study done with the Kettering Foundation (The Organization-First Approach), some national nonprofits now tend to be oriented inward, focusing on strategic planning, professionally designed programs, and measures of their impact. As bureaucracies with their own agendas, these organizations are less responsive to citizens and communities that have agendas of their own. Furthermore, pressure on nonprofits to demonstrate the impact of their programs is a disincentive to build local civic capacity because it is more difficult to demonstrate that changes came from their interventions and not indigenous forces.

While rank-and-file citizens aren’t up in arms over these trends, less accessible, less responsive civic organizations may be contributing to what we have found, which is a growing anxiety about where the country is heading (a concern certainly heightened by the downturn in the economy) and about people’s inability to control their future. These concerns, which we plan to study in more depth, appear to grow out of a perception that the political system isn’t working to solve our problems and that there is little citizens can do about it.

Given the trends just cited, it would be logical to expect new types of civic associations and new ways of organizing civic action to emerge in response. Stories in this Connections suggest this may be happening. For instance, while many nonprofits are intent on demonstrating their impact and follow best practices to “get up to scale,” some small, place-based foundations are defying these conventions. They are not insisting that everything done locally has to follow the conventions and expand. They see value in indigenous projects that begin small and stay small, which can give citizens a greater ability to chart their own course. Other community foundations are interested in how citizens come together to strengthen communities and the roles that foundations can play other than just financial. There are also a few school boards willing to talk about how they can better represent the community to the school and not just the school to the community. That might lead them into community building and not just community mobilizing. Adding to the list of possibilities, some cooperative extension divisions are turning their attention to building the civic capacities of communities. Perhaps most intriguing of all, we are seeing some governmental organizations trying to function more like citizen-centered NGOs. They aren’t just regulating communities; they are trying to rejuvenate them.

All of these initiatives, in one way or another, could give the citizenry more vehicles for acting on their problems. That is what civic organizations are supposed to do. The foundation has been particularly interested in a group of centers for public life that seem to be taking on the role of NGOs. They are reinforcing the practices citizens use in collective work. These centers started by using public deliberation to inform public opinion and then came to see deliberative decision making as key to effective civic action. For collective work to go forward, someone has to decide what the work will be, and yet there are likely to be disagreements over just what the work should be and who should do it. Who makes these decisions and how they make them is crucial, which is why the centers began by focusing on decision making—the choice work that is a necessary part of collective work. In addition to stories about these centers in this publication, you can find a more complete account in the 2010 Higher Education Exchange and in a forthcoming Kettering report by Scott London, tentatively titled Doing Democracy.

Adding to the information on civic life that was used in this year’s review—thanks to a large international network—the foundation had an opportunity to learn from countries just beginning to create NGOs. Having civic ties and associations is critical in developing countries facing a history of internal conflict and divisiveness. So some countries like Ghana are encouraging the creation of inclusive community organizations. Communities and voluntary associations are also important topics in China, as evident in a recent article in the China Daily:

Social organizations . . . are a relatively new phenomenon. . . . For about 40 years . . . most Chinese . . . had been part of administratively assigned work units for life. The units took care of almost all of their need. . . . People hardly had any need for social networking beyond relatives. The developments of the past two decades, however, have allowed more and more people to move from one part of the country to another for jobs and to shift from one employer to another. Many new non-political organizations, not led by government officials or CPC members, have mushroomed in the past two decades.

What would Tocqueville say about our civic associations if he were to visit us again on the 200th anniversary of his trip to see democracy in America?

Our research to date only identifies potentials in new vehicles for civic enterprise. We are left with questions that beg for answers. Irrespective of what we or others think is desirable, what kind of civic organizations do citizens want, and what will they work to create? What roles do people want to play in the political system, and what kind of vehicles will they need to carry them where they want to go? Most basic of all, who is going to control and set the directions for tomorrow’s civic organizations? What would Tocqueville say about our civic associations if he were to visit us again on the 200th anniversary of his trip to see democracy in America?

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Editor’s Note:

The foundation has a longstanding research interest in understanding some of the barriers to democratic practice. During the past year, we have focused our attention on the kinds of organizations that help promote civic skills and opportunities to address collective problems within communities. We are not alone in noting that a once thriving network of civic organizations has become less “civic” and more “organized,” limiting the opportunities for citizens to feel they can make a difference. The first section of this issue describes some of the challenges this change has had on collective self-rule. Derek Barker provides a brief history and literature describing the reduction in civil society. Martín Carcasson highlights the polarized nature of public discourse and describes a center for public life that is passionately neutral, and thus an honest broker of difficult conversations. Dorothy Battle describes the gap between what citizens might bring to collective problem solving and how organizations often fail to recognize these citizen resources. Scott Peters and others relate the need to connect different ways of communicating and how cooperative extension might weave connections among different perspectives. Finally, Dallas and Marin share a series of multinational perspectives on the need for an independent sector; without it, democracy fails to deliver its promises.
Each year, Kettering identifies a trend or challenge in democracy as a unifying focus for its research across program areas. This year, the research focuses on what appears to be a growing gap between citizens and organizations. Although organizations in the civic sphere have historically played a critical role in democracy around the world, they appear to offer few opportunities for citizens to play an active role in confronting the most vexing problems facing their communities. As organizations increase their efficiency in accomplishing technical tasks, are they enabling civic work to strengthen democracy? If not, what can citizens, communities, and organizations do to fill this gap?

When Alexis de Tocqueville visited the United States in 1832, he was struck by the vitality of its civic sphere and the associations through which citizens developed the habits and skills of citizenship. Through the early 20th century, chapter-based national membership organizations continued to provide public spaces for citizens to discuss politics, influence government policy, and establish social insurance programs and other benefits for their members. In the early 1990s, academic scholarship, political journalism, and democratic activists around the world recognized the powerful role that civic associations played in nurturing the democratic norms that led to the collapse of authoritarian regimes in Eastern Europe, beginning with the collapse of the Berlin Wall. Theories of “civil society” seemed to offer a solution to the polarization of the cold war, with nongovernmental associations understood as possible antidotes to both the repressive forces of authoritarian governments and the privatizing forces of markets. An explosion of organizations followed, using such labels as nongovernmental, nonprofit, community-based, and so on, and with missions related to every conceivable social problem. As the world of civil society organizations developed, proponents hoped that they combined the...
Citizens, Organizations, and the Gap in Civil Society

Despite great promise to provide citizens with public spaces through which they can make choices and shape their future, civil society now appears to have few distinctly democratic features.

Virtues of both governments and markets, while avoiding their weaknesses. Organizations in the civil sphere promised the public mission of government without its bureaucracy, the entrepreneurial spirit of businesses without their profit motives, and collective power without the use of government legislation.

Nearly two decades later, organizations in civil society have continued to proliferate, provide valuable services, and advance technical knowledge. But have they created a distinct realm for collective civic action? Across civil society, civil society organizations are, like their government and corporate counterparts, subject to pressures toward centralization, specialization, and efficiency. Often dependent upon the federal government and a few key philanthropic foundations for their continued existence, civil society organizations must conform to the norms and agendas of large-scale entities that have little connection to any rank-and-file membership. Like the corporate world, nonprofit organizations evaluate their programs in terms of standardized metrics and measurable results, with little opportunity for citizens to name goals in their own terms. At the same time, the professional cultures of organizations tend to reinforce a technocratic ideal of providing services to needy clients, not unlike government bureaucracies. Although many use the language of civic engagement, their routines appear to be misaligned with citizens who might be seeking a greater sense of agency. Despite great promise to provide citizens with public spaces through which they can make choices and shape their future, civil society now appears to have few distinctly democratic features.

In view of these trends, conversations across a number of Kettering workshops and program areas will be talking about what can be done to fill the gap in civil society:

- What are the characteristics of organizations that are providing spaces for citizens to make choices on difficult issues? What is the role of leaders within these organizations?
- What are the most promising groups of professionals, within institutions or across fields, who are aligning their routines with the civic capacities of communities?

Please contact us if you know of organizations, groups of professionals, or individuals who might be interested in joining these conversations.

For Further Reading:


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In the fall of 2006, I created the Colorado State University Center for Public Deliberation (CPD). My experiences as a communication studies scholar in general, and with CPD in particular, have led to two clear conclusions: (1) democracy requires high quality communication to function well and (2) such communication requires significant effort to develop and sustain. In particular, high quality democratic communication does not come naturally and seems to call for what I’ve termed “passionate impartiality.” Passionate impartiality is necessary because the quality of our political communication tends to suffer from a number of ailments.
Developing Democracy’s Hubs

What began as an effort to provide students with a substantive curricular experience that went beyond their textbooks has seemingly become a full-fledged attempt to transform the politics of our local community. In community politics, addressing issues of undue power and inequality, uncovering and helping audiences work through the tough choices and trade-offs inherent to public decision making, and supporting productive interactions between the public, experts, and institutional decision makers. The bottom line is that democracy needs these activities to function well, and our current political system rarely provides them.

I readily acknowledge that the idea of passionate impartiality seems oxymoronic—not too many people are fired up about not having an opinion. The form of impartiality I have in mind here, though, is not a dull, detached neutrality, but one that passionately supports democracy and the values it entails, such as equality, inclusion, and the rights and responsibilities of citizenship. At CPD, we are thus impartial but passionate about the work of helping our community communicate better, come together across differences, and solve problems more collaboratively. The question thus becomes, how do we develop such a capacity broadly? The answer I would like to call for here advocates for the importance of developing local centers that can serve as hubs of democracy and catalysts for passionate impartiality and democratic governance.

During the three and a half years I’ve directed CPD, we have continually learned more and more about the need for local capacity for community decision making and problem solving, and sought to situate ourselves to serve that role. What began as an effort to provide students with a substantive curricular experience that went beyond their textbooks has seemingly become a full-fledged attempt to transform the politics of our local community. As we began to run projects, we realized that our community needed the work much more than we anticipated and that it took more time and capacity than expected. For example, I initially assumed I was primarily teaching students and community members to be moderators, but as we progressed with the work, the tasks before and after the forums—such as researching and framing issues from a deliberative perspective, convening and developing inclusive audiences for the forums, and then analyzing and reporting on the forums to ensure the hard work is utilized—were just as critical, and, unfortunately, just as absent in our communities. Each of these tasks calls for passionate impartiality, in which our communities are often woefully deficient.

It is clear to me now that our work in many ways is attempting to fill a void in our communities that used to be filled by a variety of community organizations, nonprofits, and nongovernmental organizations (NGOs). Those organizations have either professionalized, politicized, or shifted their focus to Washington (as argued by Rich Harwood and Theda Skocpol), or perhaps simply suffered from a general decline in local participation (as argued by Robert Putnam). Our communities still certainly benefit from wonderful and obviously critically important nonprofits selfishly dedicated to improving their communities and helping people, but they tend to be focused on particular issues and can often only address symptoms of those issues rather than root causes (i.e. addressing hunger rather than poverty). The individuals involved with such nonprofits are also often activists supporting particular perspectives and worldviews, and tend to work among the like-minded rather than across perspectives, and thus are not well situated to serve broader roles of bringing their communities together and supporting notions of democratic governance.

The case for developing and supporting locally situated centers focused on deliberative democracy is thus, I believe, a strong one. National organizations, such as the National Issues Forums Institute, Everyday Democracy, AmericaSpeaks, and Public Agenda, have played critical roles in sparking productive conversations about democracy and in developing processes and infrastructure for improved democratic governance. But as we discover more about deliberative practice and the skills and resources required to truly impact communities, it becomes more and more clear that, ideally, each community will develop its own impartial deliberative resources, connected in important ways to the national organizations. The skills needed for running one-time events can perhaps be imported or borrowed, but the skills for the capacity building necessary to develop deliberation as a community habit and a way of life need to be homegrown and continuously present. When situated locally, organizations can develop the reputation for excellence and impartiality necessary to meet emerging community needs. They can more easily move beyond the event model to capacity building and serve as advocates for democracy and improved communication in general. They can nurture stronger relationships with local officials and community leaders to better design projects to best fit the situation. They can serve as key laboratories of democracy that utilize and develop a multitude of methods and processes, constructing a deliberative toolkit that can adapt to any situation. Perhaps most important, they can develop a broad and inclusive network of partici-
Developing Democracy’s Hubs

pants and strive closer to the elusive ideal of an engaged, representative community of citizens as collaborative problem solvers.

Interestingly, the history of the NIF network of centers for public life has exhibited a trajectory similar to that of CPD. The network initially had a training focus, developing moderators to run public forums and educate citizens on issues and on a different way of talking about politics. As the deliberative democracy movement began to grow, practitioners focused more on moving from talk to action, many of the NIF centers began to expand their own capacity, focus more on local issues, and develop their own material. Now many of the centers serve as full-fledged, locally situated, hubs of democracy, brimming with passionate impartiality. Another network, newly formed but quickly growing, the University Network for Collaborative Governance (UNCG), serves a similar role, cultivating passionate impartiality specifically from university campuses.

So how (and where) can we develop more of these centers? A number of possibilities exist, both profit and nonprofit, but speaking from my experience, I’ll focus on the potential of developing them at colleges and universities. As already mentioned, passionate impartiality is a rare resource, but even more scarce are passionate, impartial individuals with skills and resources to do the work well. Colleges and universities, however, actually represent relatively fertile ground for all of the above. Faculty in a variety of disciplines represent worthy candidates for deliberative practitioners. They often serve as “passionate impartial” in their classes, so the role is not all that foreign, and in public institutions supported in part by taxpayer money, such a role should be natural. As a communications professor, my work with CPD seems to fit exactly the role I believe communications professors should play in society—improving the quality of our communication through our teaching, research, and service. Students also represent a great campus resource.

A huge part of CPD’s success is due to its access to students. They are often passionate about getting involved and making a difference, yet are not so set in their ways and dedicated to particular viewpoints—at least concerning local issues—so they can realistically play the role of impartial practitioners. In fact, some students find themselves drawn to impartiality rather than partisan advocacy, which they perceive as unproductive and dishonest. Passionate impartiality thus provides them with a meaningful alternative to making a difference in their communities. Although doing this work on campus is certainly still difficult and somewhat disconnected from the mainstream research focus of our campuses, it nonetheless serves as the most likely source for embedding local, passionate impartiality.

I’ll close with a simple thought experiment. Imagine the impact on our democracy if just one professor at every college and university across the country focused on cultivating passionate impartiality and developed a local program on deliberative democracy. Imagine the impact if 10 professors at each did so. As the deliberative democracy movement continues to grow and, to use Matt Leighninger’s phrase, the “next form of democracy” continues to evolve, local centers of deliberative practice can potentially play a key role. I believe that how we can help develop and sustain local capacity should be a particular focus of our work at this point.

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Ordinary citizens are always talking to each other about conditions and circumstances that they would like to see changed in their community; I've been listening in. So, What are people saying? Who is listening? Who should be listening?

Community talk is important, unique work that citizens must do. When it doesn't happen, citizens can become sidelined, which can lead to frustration and anger. At one point in U.S. history, civic organizations provided the bridge between the issues citizens talked about and the many institutions within a community. But over time that bridge has been weakening, leaving an ever-widening gap between citizens and their contributions and their community.

The following story offers a classic example of how citizens are sidelined from helping address the problems they care about.

It all began when people in my community recognized the number of high school dropouts were a community problem—a problem that the schools and parents alone, were not able to handle. Community members saw youth on the streets during school hours and noticed an increase in juvenile crime. They knew that what happened with local youth would have profound, broad, community implications.
These community members met for months, talking through the problem and determined that the issue would require a collaborative response from citizens, school district board members and administrators, local government officials, and nonprofits. Here’s a summary of what was done:

A citizens' group had gotten together to deal with school dropouts. They met for months to define the dropout problem, figure out what could be done, and then see that something was done. They formulated a plan and asked county officials to endorse the effort and provide financial resources. The county officials complied. The citizens’ group also sought to link planning with the mission, strategies, and structures of a local educational institution. Citizens had invited administrators to participate with them as they looked at how they might go about shaping a program for dropouts. For a brief period, collaboration seemed to exist between citizens and the administrators. Suddenly, citizen capacity was challenged. The leaders of the local educational institution agreed that generally the citizens had a good plan. However, when it came to who would control and manage the program for dropouts, the institution’s administrators declared that they should be in charge of making decisions about the program. The implications were that citizens were no longer needed to solve the problem. Citizens left the table and professionals and experts from various community institutions who proceeded to establish a program for dropouts replaced them.

This institution failed to see what citizens might provide and may have even failed to recognize the concerns that were framed when the citizens talked together.

An inside view of organic community politics is helpful in understanding how the collective contribution of ordinary people makes democracy work as it should. There is a natural interdependence between communities and their institutions, but sometimes communication breaks down. That’s why citizen-to-citizen deliberation should be a key part of many of the systems set up to support democracy. These exchanges evolve from simply being concerns that citizens share with each other, but they progress in no particular sequence or in any standardized manner. Rather, community politics unfold as people confront the complex realities of their lives to help create change that is consistent with what they value. There are no predetermined structures, strategies, or incremental outcomes. People engage, using their own resources and capacities as a starting point. Beyond that, they may begin networking with others and reaching out to public and nonprofit institutions for additional resources.

So much of my own experience in community politics happens by chance. Typically, it happens informally face-to-face or with a phone call, on an Internet social site or by e-mail. Communication about community affairs might be initiated by questions like Did you read the article in today’s paper about the closing of a city swimming pool? Have you heard more about the school district’s plan to close more schools? What do you think about the plan for streetcar transportation? Did you notice the decrease in high school graduation rates? Do you think the people in that meeting reflect the views of our community? Are they focused on protecting the interests of people just like themselves? These types of questions, and their responses, might prompt people to meet and continue to talk about the issue; they ask others to join them. Ownership of a problem and taking responsibility for solving that problem can happen when people talk together in a way that is deliberate.

In the community where I reside, there are an abundance of institutions and organizations that claim dedication and willingness to help citizens deal with community issues. Yet, some citizens in my community have said that our public institutions and organizations have fallen short on their claims and responsibilities in regards to community growth and progress. One woman who is quite active in the community has repeatedly stated:

They don’t know what community is because they haven’t taken the time to know. Instead they sit in their offices and decide what is good for the community. They think they know the answers, but they can’t without practical knowledge of what is taking place in the lives of people in the community.

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Another woman, a neighborhood leader, declared:

They send experts to train us in a process in which each of the neighborhoods have to compete for the resources. We only participate in their process because we need the funds. Their process does not change or address what we in our community believe should happen.

A gentleman who is concerned about schools in his neighborhood explained:

They asked us to participate in designing our neighborhood school. All along, they knew what they wanted the design to be. They just wanted us to approve what had already been decided by the architects and other planners.

In addition to listening in on community conversations, I am a member of a civic organization. So I have seen both sides of the issue. Members of this organization are expected to maintain a high level of civic engagement. The organizational structure configures groups of members to address educational, social, and local governance issues. But this structure unintentionally keeps the membership somewhat fragmented. A mission statement, goals, and strategies guide the
Uncovering Organic Community Politics

To solve problems that are complex, multidimensional, and tied to human meaning, the experience of people who are driven by their desires and commitments must be factored into changing community conditions for the better.

The response usually involves indicating how many of the group's materials have been distributed, which community leaders are aware of the organization's efforts, and how the group might influence and attract the attention of other community leaders.

While each and every member of the organization is a volunteer and no doubt deeply cares about the community, there is a mind-set about solving complex community problems. This mind-set suggests that those privileged by formal knowledge, skills, expertise, and station in life know best how to define the problems and decide what should be done. They rarely think to connect the association's work with others in the community who could bring a new perspective to what it means to live in the community or who may have resources to address problems in concert with the organization. One former association member summed it up by saying: Their idea of solving community problems is bringing in people just like them.

The human meaning that develops from engaging one another in shared concerns has been pushed aside and replaced by scientific problem solving. This has left us with a world that is dependent upon professionals and experts. This expert-driven world is only sufficient for solving problems of an instrumental or technical nature. To solve problems that are complex, multidimensional, and tied to human meaning, the experience of people who are driven by their desires and commitments must be factored into changing community conditions for the better. Some citizens have stepped aside for professional problem solvers; others have not. I have participated with groups of people in my community who come together when necessary to change circumstances that are not in accordance with their collective beliefs, hopes, and aspirations.

In another example, a group of citizens were more successful in becoming “part of the process.” An organization, formed with backing from corporations and large nonprofits in the community, commissioned a study to determine progress with community-police relationships. Community members were invited to a presentation of the major findings in this study. When the ordinary citizens (rather than professionals or experts) left the meeting, they convened at a restaurant to not only talk to one another but also to raise questions about the merits of the report. The following comments came from that discussion:

Now what? We heard the report. What should we be doing?

The people in that room were a small representation of community. In fact the people who should have been in the room were not invited. Those who convened this meeting really don’t have an idea of who community actually consists of. They think community for the most part, are people who look and act like them. How can police-community relations really improve without the people who are most directly affected?

Let’s help by setting up a meeting with the people who commissioned this report and are responsible for continuing the work of improved police-community relations. We should tell them that they must become more inclusive with their efforts to involve the community. They must listen to the community more broadly. We can map out who should be included. Actually, if we look at our neighborhood councils as ways into getting broader community participation, we have begun to map a strategy.

The group carried forth on their plan to advise the organization’s leadership that broader community participation was necessary. Several members of the group met with the organizational leaders and presented an outline of a plan. The overall response from the organizational leaders was: Can you prove that this will work? Technical approaches to problems rely on quantification, linearity, precision, results orientation, standardization, replication, and proof. This approach has dominated problem solving in communities and may actually constrain the civic capacity of citizens by leaving them with no work to do. For citizens, the proof comes when they recognize change by strengthened relationships and a clear understanding of shared values.

The complex nature of our community and the problems affecting the well-being of citizens, have implications not just for experts who solve technical problems. These complex problems require meaning making and norms that are based on trust and relationships. This meaning making rests with the civic capacity of citizens to transform their communities through a process of well thought out exchanges. For citizens, time or notions of efficiency do not necessarily bind this process. Instead the process becomes a weaving of relationships and collective values, which unfold as transformative possibilities.

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We hope to develop and learn from stories that illuminate how extension professionals and community members have encountered and dealt with the tensions between reason and emotion in their civic engagement work and experiences. The initiative is motivated and inspired by a hopeful possibility; extension is uniquely positioned to help people weave emotion and reason together in constructive and productive ways. As an institutionalized part of the national system of land-grant colleges and universities, extension has the capacity to generate, access, and engage a wealth of scientific and technical expertise and knowledge. But extension is not just a university organization. It’s locally grounded, situated, and governed, with offices in nearly every county in the nation. As a community-based organization, extension professionals and their community partners are positioned to tap into and engage people’s passions and emotions about the things they value and care for and the issues they’re interested in or concerned about.

We’re convinced that extension can help—and already is helping—people address the problem of relating emotion and reason in the work of democratic politics. But we’re also keenly aware that this rather simple (and at this point in this article, abstract) sounding task is, in a few key ways, profoundly countercultural. To see this, consider the following story. During the 1990s, several farmers from Minnesota applied for permits to construct huge enclosed “feedlots” for large-scale hog production. In response, some people called on county governments in rural parts of the state to pass new laws that would regulate and restrict the location and size of these feedlots, if not ban them altogether. Other people urged government to stay out of the matter. These conflicting views raised a difficult public policy question: should county governments regulate feedlots for hog production, and if so, why, in what specific ways, and for what ends?

Community members had a potential partner that could help them answer this question: the University of Minnesota Extension Service. Its official mission statement at the time was “to involve people in improving the quality of life and enhancing the economy and the environment.”

In relation to the work of politics, Max Weber once asked: How can “hot passion and cool judgment” be “forced together in the same soul?” Weber’s question points to a critically important problem of democracy: to figure out not only how we might meld hot passion and cool judgment together in our work as political agents, but also why we should try to do so. To use slightly different language, the problem is to learn not only how to relate emotion and reason, but also how to understand their respective value and importance.

We’ve placed this problem at the center of an action research initiative we’re pursuing in partnership with the Kettering Foundation and cooperative extension professionals from several different states.
Emotions and passions are viewed as problems to be isolated and overcome, rather than potential resources to be drawn upon and utilized. While they certainly can be and often are a problem, they are not always so. And a strong case can be made that they are absolutely indispensable to the work of politics.
and importance of emotion and reason in politics and civic life. There is an emerging literature on this topic. Two of the points we find in this literature are particularly important for the work we are doing with cooperative extension:

- **Emotions should not only and always be seen as expressions of irrationality that endanger reason.** Rather, they can be and often are infused with intelligence and discernment, and should therefore be seen as critically important resources in ethical reasoning practices. Grounded in our life experiences, they often (but of course not always) reflect rich, detailed perceptions of the meaning and implications of events and actions. If we try to isolate them or leave our emotions and passions at the door, we lose a critically important ingredient in the process of making sound judgments about what ought to be done about the problems we face.

- **Emotions motivate us to act.** We typically don’t choose to become engaged in political life and affairs only because we understand something in an intellectual sense. We choose to act because of how we feel about what we see and experience, and the things we stand for and care about—things that are either endangered or not yet fully realized.

These two points do not mean that we should elevate emotion above reason. Rather, they should compel us to work to weave them together. We’re well aware of how challenging this task can be and is. Our story from Minnesota teaches us that it is countercultural, both in a university-related organization that privileges technical and scientific rationality and knowledge, and in a larger society that continues to see emotion and reason in opposing rather than complementary terms. If we ask ourselves what the extension staff in Minnesota should have done to weave emotion and reason together in the context of deliberations about the feedlot policy question, we can begin to imagine how difficult and challenging such a task is. We all know that it is both difficult and risky to intervene in situations that are politically polarized and infused with passions and emotion. It’s hard to create spaces in which different voices and perspectives can be respectfully heard and considered when emotions are intense, when various interests are in seemingly intractable angry conflict, and when people are personally threatened, as they were in the Minnesota story. It’s hard to conduct civil, reasoned discourse that generates shared understandings of the ‘facts’ about an issue when emotions are explicitly welcomed and invited into the room instead of being “left at the door.”

How should the tensions between emotion and reason be handled in public deliberation and discussion? How can the process of deliberation and discussion among disparate interests in a public setting be designed and framed so as to foster a learning environment that encourages and supports both emotion and reason, giving all voices a chance to be heard without any one voice or organization being given primacy? Should initiatives to engage hot-button political issues through broad-based deliberative discourse even be attempted? Are issues like the feedlot question in Minnesota too hot to handle? What should be the roles of “experts” relative to the roles of community members in discussing and deliberating about these issues? More generally, what should be the relative roles of “expert” and local knowledge? How can “experts” engage in these debates as respectful partners, bringing their own perspectives, but also acknowledging the passion, emotion, experience, knowledge, and wisdom of others? Beyond deliberative forums, are there other opportunities to weave emotion and reason together in collaborative public work initiatives? Where and when and how is this happening? How does or how might extension contribute to it?

These are just a few of the questions we intend to raise and pursue in our research. We hope and expect that the public work stories we’re finding and developing will offer new insights into the ways cooperative extension might improve its efforts to help people address this problem of democracy. While some of these stories are about deliberative forums where the problem emerges openly and directly, others are about long-term relational work in which it emerges in veiled and subtle ways. From this recognition we’re already learning to look in unexpected places for stories and lessons about the work of weaving emotion and reason together.

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As the Kettering Foundation has focused this year on the trends that seem to be distancing civic organizations from the people and communities they represent and the effect this may be having on democracy in this country, we had an opportunity to share our current findings and concerns with colleagues from 14 countries, including the United States and Puerto Rico, to see whether any of them had experienced a similar phenomenon.

They had. And what was striking was the extent to which these former and current leaders of nongovernmental organizations from four different continents have been struggling with many of the same challenges as their U.S. counterparts. For some of those who had lived through a democratic transition, there was also a sense that civil society is often forgotten in the focus on elections.

A Chilean law professor, for instance, said that civil society was very important in ending that country’s dictatorship. During elections, however, “civil society was sort of tired,” he said, and power was handed over to the government. Today, formal democracy in Chile continues to work pretty well, but it is not enough.

A Romanian colleague agreed, describing a sense that democracy has not delivered after what he called “the Romanian Period” following the end of his country’s Communist regime. Talking about NGOs like the one he works for, he said that, in spite of greater professionalization, they are increasingly alienated from communities. “We are able to survive because we developed bureaucratic skills . . . to be funded by European public money, but at the same time, we involve less and less the citizens in our projects.”

Multinational Perspectives on Civil Society

By Paloma Dallas and Ileana Marin
People working in NGOs from Zimbabwe to New Zealand talked about a similar disconnect, as well as the tendency of their organizations to act on behalf of communities without asking the communities what they want. Others noted a problem at the other extreme: that many communities suffer from “consultation fatigue,” without ever really feeling listened to. Either way, there was widespread agreement among those we spoke with that NGOs are becoming less connected to the citizens they were created to help.

As with the NGO, or independent sector, in the United States, there has been an increased focus on accountability and transparency, but few felt this was helping to increase NGOs’ legitimacy. Instead, many of the people that we spoke with felt that the measures have created new layers of bureaucracy, which have further distanced them from the people. A Ghanaian journalist spoke about the perception that much of the money NGOs receive is being spent on bureaucracy or overhead, rather than on helping people. And an Irish colleague spoke of the insidious way that such measures have of undermining creativty.

No one challenged the need to track how money is being spent, but many questioned how standards are determined and assessed, echoing concerns we have often heard from civic organizations in the United States. An Argentine colleague said that NGOs often operate like “bags in the wind.” “They will blow according to where money is going,” he said.

And a Puerto Rican colleague challenged the very premise of NGOs being accountable to the citizenry. “It is not by chance that there has been an explosion of NGOs as the state has been shrinking,” she said. “The state is shrinking and yet citizens still have needs to be taken care of collectively. But NGOs are not accountable to citizens; they are accountable to the same forces and donor agencies that are shrinking the state.”

The difficulties in countering these problems are numerous. “My first challenge is helping my colleagues understand that we even have this problem,” said the colleague from Romania. Another challenge that many voiced is one of Kettering’s perennial concerns: how to engage with communities so people take ownership over the problems they face.

“We are trying to get engagement to belong to the people rather than to the institutions,” said a colleague from South Africa. “Often they want to do things for people; they do not think about people doing things for themselves. If people own an issue, they will be engaged.”

Part of the challenge, said a Puerto Rican colleague, is to move away from a critical stance to imagine solutions. “We know what we don’t want, but what is it that we want? . . . It’s very hard to imagine the country that we want and work towards that.”

This challenge was echoed by many. “People are asking for more democracy, even when they don’t participate in society. It’s because there is no way out,” said a colleague from Guatemala. “I think we need . . . to answer, what kind of country do we need for the next 50 years?”

In tackling this question, many spoke about building on local democratic practices and capacities rather than seeing democracy as something that must be imported or taught.

For instance, the Guatemalan colleague noted important successes that his country might build on. “We signed the peace agreement after 35 years of armed conflict inside the country. So, we happened to end the war, but we didn’t succeed in building peace. Now, we are facing the same old problems . . . corruption, lack of transparency . . . opportunistic action of civil society.” The challenge, he said, is “to . . . construct a new social capital which is needed in the modern times.”

A colleague from New Zealand who works with the Maori said, “Democracy has not worked for Maori, and it isn’t working for Maori.” She described working to translate traditional models for the modern world. “We are reawakening what we call the ancestral mind in our peoples.” Others also noted democratic traditions among the indigenous people of their countries, what a colleague from South Africa described as “a style of talking through an issue until you resolve it.” He went on to add, “Democracy in most societies was not a foreign concept, but just formalized.”

Despite these traditions, many felt that shifting notions of identity have affected the conceptualization of the collective and, therefore, people’s ability to work together. During the liberation struggle, said one South African colleague, many embraced a collective identity as African. Now, different ethnic identities are being used to divide.

An Indian colleague said his country struggles with the same. “The challenge for us is, how do you have enough space for identities to be expressed, but at the

Many questioned how standards are determined and assessed, echoing concerns we have often heard from civic organizations in the United States. . . . NGOs often operate like “bags in the wind.” “They will blow according to where money is going.”
New Forms of Organizations

Editor’s Note:

The lessons from organizations that are trying to address the decline in civil society are important reflections on what is being done in a variety of organizations, from higher education, to foundations, and even to governments. Randall Nielsen describes a model of civic, learning networks and how one organization in Chattanooga is attempting to foster them. I have a short article that describes how some centers (such as Carcasson’s in section I) in the network of organizations using National Issues Forums (NIF) have evolved to focus on changing the nature of politics. Connie Crockett reflects on how communities come to “own” their problems—in this case education—thus improving youth development in ways schools cannot manage alone. Phil Lurie relates two stories about how government agencies recognize the ways citizens can contribute to improving communities well beyond what government can do on its own. And finally, Janis Foster suggests ways philanthropic organizations can turn their attention toward cultivating community-building activities if they look beyond the development of a nonprofit organization as their only important outcome.
Is our object to get a new playground or to create methods by which playgrounds will become part of the neighborhood consciousness, methods which will above all educate for further concerted effort?

—The New State, Mary Parker Follett

The reports in this issue of Connections present a fundamental challenge for those of us who see communities as places where people engage together in public work. In our focus on the political roles of civic organizations, we emphasize the networks of working civic relationships that people create to achieve goals vital to their individual and collective interests. It is in and through those civic interactions that what Mary Parker Follett felicitously called the “neighborhood consciousness” develops.

Civic associations have historically provided the vehicles through which people entered the public life of their communities. The entry points and the qualities of the interactions they facilitate are the defining characteristics of any political community. We recognize, however, that many community-based organizations have come to see people only in the context of the problems the organization solves through programs funded by external sources. Rather than resources to be engaged, people have become clients to be served or victims to be aided.

The change in the ways civic organizations locate themselves in communities can of course be seen as one aspect of a larger movement. Many of the challenges people once saw themselves and their fellow citizens responsible for—individual and social security, education, the gathering and sharing of news, and economic development—have become the purview of distinct experts and institutions. Even the challenge of “public engagement” itself has rapidly become a specialized field of expert consultants.

That presents a problem for those who feel that democracy depends on a citizenry willing and able to recognize and take responsibility for the governance of shared concerns. While there is no doubt that the professionalization of civil society organizations has resulted in an increase in the efficiency of the administration of programs, it has come at the cost of opportunities people have to think, act, and learn together in communities of public work.
Communities are made up of many small, interacting civic spheres bound together in ever-shifting alliances that emerge from the recognition of the interdependence among different concerns. And that recognition depends on practices that facilitate collaborative public work.

The challenge is increasingly seen as an opportunity for innovation. What can new forms of organization do to strengthen the ability of citizens to carry out their responsibilities? Some civic entrepreneurs are exploring ways to create opportunities for interaction that bring people into public life as decision-making actors. A key appears to be the ability of innovators to recognize and strengthen ties among disparate governmental and nongovernmental organizations, who themselves can be motivated by the recognition of their inability to solve problems without an engaged citizenry.

The result of such civic innovation is generally not the creation of another distinct mission-based organization. Some have appeared to recognize that the challenge is in the cultivation of practices that connect the civic resources that exist. For example, a remarkable group in Chattanooga, Tennessee, is so concerned about being captured by a narrow mission that they call themselves the “Center for Whatever It Needs to Be.”

Of course, what they do will name them. They describe themselves as connectors, developers of civic capacity, which can be used to deal with whatever concern emerges. Their work is based on the insight that communities are made up of many small, interacting civic spheres bound together in ever-shifting alliances that emerge from the recognition of the interdependence among different concerns. And that recognition depends on practices that facilitate collaborative public work. How can those practices be supported and encouraged?

For the Chattanooga group, the key has been the use of learning as the conceptual lens. From reflections on their own recent history, they recognize that change is inevitable and that productive response to change requires learning. They are exploring ways to develop the capacity of citizens to control their own learning and thus the change in their lives.

Eleanor Cooper is a lifelong resident of Chattanooga and was actively involved in its remarkable renaissance, which began in the early 1980s. She notes that the history is commonly told as a triumph of city planning, with the construction of a downtown aquarium as the keystone achievement. But Cooper contends that, while the story does include capital projects for downtown revitalization and development of the waterfront, those physical outcomes were the results of the political changes that made the insights about possibilities and the necessary decisions possible. She tells the story as an ongoing process of civic learning.

Cooper recalls that in Chattanooga in the early 1980s many civic organizations worked toward their distinct missions in support of the arts, education, economic development, or social services. What was lacking was an entity that would bring people together to identify gaps in these missions and, more important, harness the “synergy to change.” Cooper was instrumental in the creation of an organization that developed practices through which people learned about their capacities as a community and redefined it as a result.

That insight has led Cooper and Jim Tucker, Professor of Learning and Leadership at the University of Tennessee at Chattanooga, to focus on what he calls “learning encounters” that take place through and across the civic and institutional entities of a community. How can they continue to be recognized and encouraged?
The Chattanooga story encourages a recognition of communities as constantly evolving living systems. Communities emerge, and either grow and transform in adaptive ways, or decline in the face of changing conditions. It is in communities that people educate themselves and their children in shared norms and essential skills, protect themselves from threats, and provide the conditions for prosperous exchange.

The capacity that people have to address those goals is largely guided by the quality of the political environment they have created. The primary quality is their ability to interact in ways that facilitate the recognition of collective resources and overcome obstacles to effectively bringing them into public work. Communities that prosper through time have found ways to create conditions for their people to think and act together effectively. Building and maintaining a community is therefore a matter of building and maintaining the relationships that facilitate the civic interactions through which people think and act together.

Thus we think of the political community as nested spheres of communicative exchange. The nodes of the ever-changing network are the organizations, associations, and other places where people interact in a way that builds the capacity of the body politic to think and learn—and thus to effectively act on shared concerns. The qualities of collective thinking are determined by the structure and character of the interactions in and among those associations.

Organizations like the nascent Chattanooga center face difficult challenges. How will they become recognized—and thus named—in their communities? How will they judge the results of their own efforts? How will their efforts be judged by others? We need more opportunities to learn about the challenges civic innovators face in creating and sustaining entities for learning-based change. The connective practices they work through are the key to understanding how communities can continue to develop as places where people can prosper together.

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Kettering has a long history of working with organizations around the country that are trying to build a more deliberative culture and a more public form of politics. Many of these “centers for public life” first came into contact with the foundation through holding deliberative forums and using National Issues Forums (NIF) materials. And over the course of 25 years, Kettering has learned alongside them; our research has benefited greatly from their work and our shared reflections on the practical challenges of public life in a democratic society.

By Alice Diebel
The Evolution of Centers for Public Life

Over time, the centers have played different roles in their communities, including providing basic civic education, bridging differences in difficult conversations, encouraging community problem solving, and informing elected officials about public thinking. Many of the centers fill a combination of these roles, as has been documented in Scott London’s report, tentatively titled Doing Democracy (forthcoming).

In an attempt to better understand how these different centers understand their work, Kettering brought them together in 2009 for a series of small workshops to explore core challenges. We got a strong sense that the centers have become comfortable with the ideas that Kettering describes and have moved beyond seeing a deliberative forum as an end in itself, to seeing it as part of a larger practice of a more public and deliberative kind of politics. They adapt the ideas to fit the interests of their communities.

The value of deliberation

The centers recognize deliberation as a different way to practice politics. They use deliberation in many aspects of community life—personal, professional, and vocational. That said, they also see that people view public deliberation as a means of communicating that is not particularly natural and that forums can be useful ways of modeling how to deliberate together about a shared problem. And they understand and value how difficult it can be to moderate difficult conversations, especially in a polarized political climate. Developing three options for deliberation and avoiding polar choices is a valuable tool for these discussions. The centers perceive this work as critical to changing today’s political discourse.

The role of tensions in issue framing

The centers understand the importance of bringing out the tensions among the things people hold valuable, and they see “weighing” as the heart of deliberation. By highlighting the tensions, participants actually become a little less certain of their own positions, opening up their willingness to hear other perspectives.

Kettering has long recognized that a center for public life is an important addition to the constellation of community and civic organizations, but this idea seems to be gaining currency elsewhere as well. We see many forms of this work across the country taking shape in the growth of organizations that promote dialogue and deliberation, generally. Yet as Scott London’s report reveals, this network of centers with its long history and reflective practice has something important to offer. NIF has proved a valuable entry point into deliberative public politics—particularly when it is understood as just that, an entry point, rather than as an event or as an end in itself. We see the work of the centers as an important antidote to trends of polarization and to a general weakening of the civic sphere that pose grave threats for our democracy. As organizations, they are tackling these threats through a variety of approaches, and they are making a difference.

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1 Kettering has referred to them as public policy institutes as well, but this name no longer seems to fit. Of course, each center names itself according to how it thinks about its work.
To better understand community strategies for education, we’ve talked to people from many walks of life. We’ve met with people who work in police departments, health departments, and city governments. We’ve met with passionate retirees, youth development organizations, alternative school kids, and home-schooling moms. We’ve been looking for connections people are making between their own individual efforts on behalf of young people and that of a consciously larger public purpose. We’ve sought out strategic engagement being done by people who, although not elected to school boards, act thoughtfully and collaboratively as a board of education might. What we’ve found in some cases is the sense that everyone in a given community is linking efforts to help kids find their positive futures. Having a larger sense of purpose makes the people we met in Linefork appear to act like a board of education. In too many places, community members have abdicated their collective responsibility for education, thinking of it as something that only happens in schools. When things don’t go well for young people, most of us still look to schools to make things better rather than looking to ourselves for remedies. If our role as citizens is to wrestle with tough problems together, and education is a primary societal function, then it stands to reason that educational accountability focused solely on schools would weaken democracy by leaving nothing (beyond passing levies) for citizens to do. As Kettering president David Mathews has said, the citizenry that places confidence in an institution is not the same as the public that exercises responsible ownership. Educating children to find their place in society is the work of whole communities. It’s what communities can do. 

Research by John McKnight of the University of Chicago shows that even communities that don’t think they have much going for them have unrecognized or untapped assets. Thinking of education as a lifelong, whole community effort means that, while we support and give schools their due, there is much more that we can offer collectively to build a community where educational opportunities are maximized. Certainly it helps when
schools, the “official” educating institutions in a community, are open to what non-official educators do. Ideally, all who care about children work within a complementary network. When that happens, Kettering notes an alignment of citizens and institutional actors.

We have wondered what conditions might cause a fundamental shift in the working of public institutions like schools that might trigger their closer alignment with a networked community “board of education.” We’re always looking for places where a community consciousness has formed about what people can do, not in perfect concert, but in a practical sense of complementary efforts.

In at least one case, it took a crisis. Years ago, an unhappy community gathered before the new school superintendent in Houston, Minnesota. The schools were in debt, enrollment was declining, and an unpopular prospect of having to consolidate loomed. It was in this turbulent setting that the new superintendent spoke to remind people that this was their school and, despite the fact that they had no part in creating the financial mess, he wanted their suggestions about necessary budget cuts. His frank opening sparked community members to reconsider a problem usually left to school administrators to solve, and they began to think creatively together. What happened is a remarkable testament to things becoming possible when citizens take responsibility for problems shared in common.

The superintendents’ challenge to residents of Houston led one man to note that, while the community had bike trails, it had no bike shop. He offered to teach young people repair and shop management skills that would enable them to run a small, profitable business. A local pastor noted that he had experience running a print shop, sorely needed in Houston, and noted that he had experience running a small, profitable business. A local pastor

Public Schools soon enrolled 500 new students, adding revenue and energy to a small district. All of this forward motion created more energy, changing the way people saw themselves and their town. In time, Houston found that it had a whole lot more educators than might be determined from a list of school staff alone.

Only citizens thinking together can map community ideals that pave the way forward. Institutions may act in service to those ideals, but only citizens can decide what should be. Citizens coming together to do the work that only citizens can do, such as collaborating for education in ways that might not seem obvious (like opening a bike shop), become a “dynamic” citizenry. They are a flow of unharnessed resources with implications for education, the exercise of citizenship, and the big topic of educational accountability.

As a nation, we’ve spent a lot of time and energy trying to ensure educational accountability. Vast sums have been spent, but these measures haven’t provided the missing ingredient needed to bring about a well-educated citizenry. In places like Houston, Minnesota, people can see for themselves whether young people of the community are engaged because they are coproducers of the town’s educational success story. The schools and the community act in alignment. In Houston, people don’t need to read about test scores to know kids are doing well; they can see it all around them.

But most of us aren’t close enough to, or challenged to be a part of, our communal educational responsibilities and we pay attention to only the most superficial details. Accustomed to reports showing the local results of national school test data, we seem to view widely varying assessments between good schools and those in need of improvement as though it were just another form of healthy competition.

What we need to develop are more authentic local assessments of academic measurement, the kind produced by a dynamic citizenry articulating its ideals of what should be. What would begin as citizen-to-citizen engagement, an expression of concern, would lead to broader conversations, stronger local communities, and better schools. Recognition and use of local assets would also lead to the development of healthy cross-regional cooperation. And that would be good for small towns and big cities alike. Education seen as community responsibility has the potential to connect our disparate society, as when whole towns turned out for school expositions and spelling bees.

Education is the means through which we find our place in society. It is not the responsibility of schools alone. In Houston’s story, authentic collaboration was prompted by the superintendent’s challenge. Do you know of other places where education was taken up by the community rather than left up to the schools alone? Every community is a school of some sort. What is your community teaching? Where you live, who are the relevant actors in the social endeavor called education? Kettering would welcome reports not of individuals or single organizations, but of loosely linked networks, groups that fall outside the “usual suspects,” those who do the kind of bridging work that shows they’ve come to see responsibility for education as being widely shared. Kettering might call them a “dynamic citizenry” or a “community board of education,” but you might call them “us.” We’d like to hear from you.

Thinking of education as a lifelong, whole community effort means that, while we support and give schools their due, there is much more that we can offer collectively to build a community where educational opportunities are maximized.

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One facet of the Kettering Foundation’s research, especially in the arena of Institutions and Professions in the Public Realm (IPPR), explores how institutions could align their routines with the democratic practices of citizens. To that effect, our collaborative research efforts speak to the lessons that might be learned from community organizations, institutions, philanthropy, and, in particular, the work of centers for public life that have positioned themselves as facilitators of citizen decision making and action in a community context.

This reflection and exploration stems from the following thesis:

1. That many nongovernmental and civic organizations are being “colonized” by organizational structures and cultures previously most common in governments and the corporate sector.
2. That citizens see themselves increasingly disconnected from these organizations.
3. That many organizations, some of which might have seemed unlikely candidates, appear to be filling the void.

Some of these unlikely organizations are located within government, where particular administrative agencies seem to be acting as civic entities. The foundation has recently received two reports that analyze two interesting cases.

The first case explores the work that Allan Comp has done through the Department of the Interior, with the Friends of the Appalachian Coal Country Watershed Team. His recent report reflects on the ways that citizens build their capacity to address local challenges and bring their communities together, particularly around local environmental problems, which often requires participation by government. Much of this work had been done in the Appalachian coal towns that were totally dominated by the companies that formed them. This posed a particular set of challenges because residents quickly learn that in such towns, you had to keep your head down, or get beaten or fired, which meant loss of house and being blackballed by every company around. As a responsible family person, you learned not to be civically engaged. This is an enduring feature of such towns, with little sense of challenging the establishment because the consequences were so dire. However, these habits begin to change when somebody suggests they clean up the stream, which they do, and then other neighbors stop to help. This begins a process in which the people in these small towns decide they need to do something. As they start to come together, they realize they are able to do something so they seek out resources to help and this leads to a need and a readiness to engage with others.

This report highlights those processes—the depth and diversity of citizen-government partnerships by sharing some of the ways in which citizens affect and often enhance the functions of government and vice versa. Five main themes emerged, including:

1. Watershed organizations give citizens a space to discuss community needs and an avenue to meet those needs; 
2. Citizen-based watershed groups act as the intermediary to establish personal contacts between citizens and agencies; 
3. Citizen leaders often play dual roles as government administrators; 
4. A government agency’s willingness to genuinely partner differs depending on the system, the administrators’ own attitudes, and the citizens’

By Phillip Lurie
of their professional responsibilities; [3] Public administrators are reassured by the experience of their peers and adaptable examples; [4] Civic engagement involves “culture change” and “authenticity”; [5] Public administrators have powerful motivations to support civic engagement; and [6] Public administrators know that they need to develop new skills for supporting civic engagement, but they are not sure what those skills are.

These findings suggest that many public administrators have simplistic concepts of civic engagement, and I suspect that the notion that citizens can’t communicate responsibly is derived from assimilation of the term to nondeliberative forms of discourse among citizens, which continue to be contentious and unproductive.

Similarly, administrators want a partnership with the public, but only if they could be assured that the public would act responsibly, meaning that they wouldn’t deliberately subvert the process and that they would listen to each other, think systematically, and not engage in political theater. Also, the “culture change” required reflects a number of tensions that administrators face in proceeding with this kind of work, including: authenticity, or a tool in a toolbox; power; motivations; openness to initiative; control, and how they respond to losing it; and time constraints. Administrators want citizens to act more responsibly and want a well-designed, well-facilitated process. This is in tension with actual public life. Lastly, structural needs include an awareness that the existing system doesn’t work; that they must do something else. Relationships exist or must be cultivated; skills must be taught to manage these types of exchanges.

So, what do we still need to know about how governmental organizations (GOs) act as nongovernmental organizations (NGOs) or civic organizations? Building on our existing work, I offer the following questions to frame future discussions:

1. What are the organizational forms necessary to engage in this type of citizen-driven work, and how can GOs adopt these forms?
2. How do GOs manage this work given the roles they are typically or legally asked to play or the results they are typically or legally bound to deliver?
3. To what degree do “politics” come into play at the governmental organization?
4. What are the obstacles that prevent individuals or organizations from doing this type of work? What are some of the ways around these obstacles?

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Finding a Different Path

By Janis Foster

Do all paths philanthropic lead to a nonprofit? With philanthropy’s focus on legally established and professionally managed nonprofit organizations, does that mean—as evidence suggests—that the primary way to community vitality and resilience is through the nonprofit door? Or is philanthropy’s focus on nonprofits an unintended consequence of policies that limit the range of philanthropic giving or pressures that philanthropies feel to be more accountable and to deliver guaranteed results?

As executive director of Grassroots Grantmakers, a network of funders investing in active citizens at the block level as a key, place-based funding strategy, I see this issue surface on a regular basis.

• It was there in discussions about the theory of change that we are developing for Grassroots Grantmakers: are we assuming that the ultimate objective of grassroots grantmaking is to move groups from “emerging” to “successful” nonprofit organization?

• It was there in a presentation by a colleague who manages a grassroots grantmaking program. When asked about indicators of success, this colleague listed the number of grassroots groups that had become fully established nonprofit organizations after they began receiving grants.

• It was there in a conversation I had with someone about technical assistance to grassroots groups receiving grants—with “technical assistance”
Finding a Different Path

their funding in a particular community, say that their mission is to strengthen the nonprofit sector, what message does that send to ordinary people about their role? The proliferation of nonprofits has sent a signal to good-intentioned people everywhere: that we as people can’t or shouldn’t act in powerful ways—that nonprofits have the know-how and responsibility to solve problems and create change. Have nonprofits essentially moved into the space that active citizens once occupied—pushing people, as active citizens, to the sidelines as recipients, clients, consumers, participants, complainers, and advisors?

The question for me is how can we honor, encourage, and support people with good hearts and an orientation toward action, without either explicitly or implicitly pointing them to the nonprofit path as the only path? How can we avoid sending the signal—either intentionally or unintentionally—that people who want to continue doing what they are doing in a way that is manageable for them but may seem small-scale to us, are not contributing in a way that has value? How can our works, policies and actions communicate that it is okay if you want to continue to have your neighborhood’s summer paint program and do not want to form a community development corporation that is equipped to do more significant home rehab? Or that it is okay if you want to continue with the two-week program for kids in your neighborhood every summer without growing the program to be a year-round youth-serving nonprofit? We need to say that it is really more than just okay—that by doing the paint program or the two-week summer program, you are contributing to community viability and resilience in a way that cannot be replaced by all the nonprofit service programs in the world.

When we measure the success of our programs by the number of nonprofits that have been created or focus our funding exclusively on nonprofit organizations, we are making an explicit value statement—that we value nonprofits more than we value active citizens and the groups that they create to get things done. We are saying that grassroots groups are essentially “baby nonprofits” and that the goal is to help the “babies” grow up to be full-functioning nonprofit “adults”—those that do not choose this path fall into the category of failed attempts or unrealized potential.

How could a funding organization do this? They would need someone who spends time out of the office building relationships and doing work at the micro level but who is also present and participative in in-house discussions at the organization. This would be someone who can get beyond the typical “funder conversations” with community residents and group leaders and take what they learn back into the funding organization—even if it’s uncomfortable. This person would have to have a position of sufficient influence within the organization in order to ask a question, expand a conversation, bend a rule, speed-up a process, open a door, take a stand. All in all, a funding organization would not only need “personal smarts” and courage, but also “institutional smarts” and institutional courage, taking the funding organization to a different type of relationship with its community.

Janis Foster is the executive director of Grassroots Grantmakers. She can be reached at janis@grassrootsgrantmakers.org.
Books Worth Reading

Democracy and Higher Education: Traditions and Stories of Civic Engagement

By Scott J. Peters, with Theodore R. Alter and Neil Schwartzbach
Michigan State University Press, 2010

How should higher education contribute to democracy? Over the years, it has been argued that colleges and universities have a duty to provide equitable access to education, support public intellectuals, or simply discover and preserve the truth. A growing number of scholars and practitioners are investigating the ways colleges and universities might help further participatory democratic ends. Scott Peters, who studies the history of the national land-grant system as well as contemporary land-grant scholars and extension educators, has made a major contribution to this inquiry with the publication of his most recent book, Democracy and Higher Education.

While private universities are not subject to any obvious democratic demands, the land-grant system was created to serve a variety of public ends through the Morrill Acts of 1862 and 1890. The land-grant system became obligated to connect the work of academic professionals to the interests and activities of local communities, the states, and the nation as a whole with the Hatch Act of 1887 and the Smith-Lever Act of 1914. By tracing this history and telling the stories of those working within the land-grant system, Peters hopes to articulate an often-ignored ideal of higher education and show how it might be realized.

Democracy and Higher Education is largely comprised of interviews conducted with 12 exemplary individuals at Cornell University, a land-grant institution. These oral histories shed light on the ways professionals at colleges and universities may contribute to democracy, such as by working with communities to name and frame a problem or goal; identify options for what can be done, as well as the consequences of each; decide what should be done, in light of particular interests, values, and commitments; and act and evaluate what has been done (14).

For example, Molly Jahn, a plant geneticist, created the Public Seed Initiative (PSI) in order to better serve farmers whose needs were not being met by global seed production companies. PSI connects university researchers, seed companies, extension personnel, seed producers, nonprofits, and government organizations and has helped increase the availability of vegetable crops that thrive in the Northeast. It has also increased the knowledge and capacities of those involved in ways that further individual, common, and larger public interests (97-112).

Peters suggests that there are four key conditions for public work that surface in the interviews. Going out and being present in the community, especially by asking questions and listening. Becoming an insider, by taking part in the democratic process rather than acting as a servant to clients. Making “I” “we,” such as by being purposefully inefficient in order to allow everyone involved a chance to claim ownership. And leapfrogging back and forth between public and academic roles.

The interviews collected and the conclusions Peters draws are not meant to provide final answers but to contribute to an ongoing conversation about democracy and higher education. Each interviewee tells a singular story of their involvement in public work, and it seems clear that much more could be done to change institutional factors to encourage a more democratic relationship between academics and local communities. How this can be best achieved is a matter requiring further inquiry and discussion.

— Zach VanderVeen

Zach VanderVeen is a research associate at the Kettering Foundation.
This volume offers the first English translations of work by Li Shenzhi (1923-2003), a leading Chinese statesman and academic, who was a premier architect of China’s liberal intellectual revival in the late 1990s and an uncompromising campaigner for political reform and democracy in China.

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The Organization-First Approach
How Programs Crowd Out Community
by Richard C. Harwood and John A. Creighton

“The Organization-First Approach reveals the troubling trend of nonprofits, foundations, advocacy groups, and others becoming increasingly focused inward, consumed by an ethos of professionalization that leaves little room for authentic engagement or deliberation. The report finds that many of these groups have replaced engagement with outreach and interface with the public around the organization’s programs and agenda instead of the community’s needs or aspirations.”

— David Mathews, President & CEO, Kettering Foundation

Doing Democracy
A report for the Kettering Foundation
by Scott London

Some organizations are reversing the trend toward a decline in civil society by creating the spaces and the means for public deliberation on a wide variety of local, state, and national issues. This report by Scott London describes how many centers across the country are building the capacity of citizens to tackle tough problems. They promote public life in classrooms by developing skills. And they promote public life in communities by encouraging citizens to work to address problems and by affecting the decisions public officials must make.
The Kettering Foundation, chartered in 1927, is a research foundation rooted in the American tradition of inventive research. Its founder, Charles F. Kettering, holder of more than 200 patents, is best known for his invention of the automobile self-starter. He was interested, above all, in seeking practical answers to “the problems behind the problems.”

The foundation today continues in that tradition. The objective of the research now is to study what helps democracy work as it should. Six major Kettering programs are designed to shed light on what is required to strengthen public life.

Kettering is a nonprofit 501(c)(3) research organization supported by an endowment. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation’s Web site at www.kettering.org.

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