The Little Republics of American Democracy

By David Mathews

Communities occupy a prominent place in the American conception of democracy. It is no wonder that Kettering's research on how democracy can work as it should includes studying how communities might work as they must. This issue highlights examples of communities where citizens are attempting to govern by engaging publicly in order to deal with problems. It also offers insights on why some communities are, or are not, able to govern themselves effectively.

Our research is practical — it is about what is currently happening, or not happening. Yet it is grounded in history. Here is some of what we are learning about the intimate relationship between community and democracy since our country was founded; our conclusions are, of course, still tentative.

The Place of Place in American Political History

American democracy is based on Thomas Jefferson's premise that the big republic — the nation and the federal government — rests on a foundation of little republics — communities and local governments. The reasoning is straightforward: If democracy isn't practiced where Americans live, we can't expect it to be practiced in Washington.

Community self-government has given American democracy its distinctive character, which took shape between the Revolution and the first decades of the new nation. Popular rule wasn't everyone's first choice for our system of government. Even though the Founders rebelled against the British Crown and Parliament, they valued many of the same things British society valued. After a brief period of loose confederation, America's leaders expected the country to be ruled by a strong central government, with citizens doing little more than giving their consent. Some explicitly rejected the argument that the country should be a democracy; perhaps recalling the excesses of the French Revolution, they denounced democratic governance as madness.

By the early years of the nineteenth century, those who feared democracy were horrified to find that the country was, in fact, becoming a democracy. Robert Wiebe explains that the change was driven less by leaders or political parties than by citizens themselves. He describes the historical public of nineteenth-century America as “thousands spurring thousands to civic action.” Public life was boisterous and nondeferential. People entered it without anyone's permission; they simply acted as though they belonged, which is the original meaning of "participation." Citizens built roads and schools just as they erected forts and formed militias. The American public was a working citi-
zenry; it was far more than a body of consumers or clients, more even than an aggregate of law-abiding voters and taxpayers. This was a citizenry in motion — people doing things with other people, not still but dynamic. That motion defines the public; in a sense, it is the public. To appreciate how much the public is a force, rather than just an object, think of electricity as opposed to a light bulb.

Public work was typically carried out in and for communities. Turning frontier settlements into civilized space where a valued way of life could take hold was a major industry during the formative years. The “American democratic polity was developed out of genuine community life,” John Dewey reminds us, arguing that “unless local community life can be restored, the public cannot resolve its most urgent problem: to find and identify itself.”

Unfortunately, traditional democracy rooted in communities began to weaken around the middle of the twentieth century. This may have happened because two world wars made communities seem irrelevant in what we came to recognize as a global society. For whatever reason, the word “community” (meaning a place) had little place in national policy after World War II, as Martha Derthick of the University of Virginia has pointed out. And, when it did appear, it frequently carried a negative connotation. Communities were often havens for prejudice that bred injustice; their governments were considered corrupt and inefficient. So the federal government began to intervene, often with justification but at the expense of home rule. As the leader of one of the many community associations that were being established said, “There’s a new recognition that the country’s not going to be saved by experts and bureaucrats. It’s going to be saved by some moral vision and some moral hope coming from the grassroots and the neighborhoods.” There is no better example of the new type of organization that was emerging than the neighborhood watches springing up without either centralized direction or federal funding. The watches grew as citizens in community after community realized that the police would be unable to stop crime if they took no responsibility.

In the 1990s, America was on the verge of entering a new democratic era. But it had a lot of unfinished business, much of it having to do with making communities work as they now had to.

The public’s change in attitude was dramatic. In the 30 years from the mid-1960s to the mid-1990s, the number of Americans certain that the government would do the right thing fell from 75 to 25 percent of the population. Confidence in the President declined from 41 to 12 percent, and faith in Congress dropped even more — from 42 to only 8 percent. These trends were only part of a widespread dissatisfaction with all authoritative institutions.

Historians now see that, beneath the loss of confidence and system failure, a significant transformation was occurring. Bruce Schulman thinks that the 1970s “marked the most significant watershed of modern U.S. history, the beginning of our own time.” One of the most important things that occurred during this period was that Americans began to look for better ways to solve problems, and they turned to their communities, which had local institutions they could enlist. They also began to organize themselves, once again, into a working public. As the leader of one of the many community associations that were being established said, “There’s a new recognition that the country’s not going to be saved by experts and bureaucrats. It’s going to be saved by some moral vision and some moral hope coming from the grassroots and the neighborhoods.” There is no better example of the new type of organization that was emerging than the neighborhood watches springing up without either centralized direction or federal funding. The watches grew as citizens in community after community realized that the police would be unable to stop crime if they took no responsibility.

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For Communities to Work

We’ve all wondered why some communities are reasonably effective at making needed changes while others, apparently not that different, aren’t. Or, why a given community is sometimes able to manage its problems and sometimes not. Communities of every size and type face similar problems. The only difference is that some are able to exercise a degree of control over those problems, whereas others become dysfunctional under the stress
of their difficulties. Simply put, some communities come together; others come apart. The foundation’s task is to offer some plausible explanations and find out what makes for a high-achieving community.

We have noticed communities that have acted effectively to gain greater control over their futures have usually made fundamental changes in their politics. They haven’t just solved problems; they have changed themselves by changing the way they go about their collective business. The key to that change has been to build a stronger public life, or civil society. Said more plainly, these communities have put the public back into the public’s business.

Why is a public necessary? Because, to use an overworked expression, it takes a village to solve our most serious problems, the ones that don’t seem to go away — racism or deeply entrenched poverty, for example. These “wicked” problems are neither discrete nor easily defined. They are as tricky as they are aggressive and vicious. Their causes are so intertwined that it is difficult to arrive at a diagnosis. Each problem is a symptom of another, in a never-ending chain. While bridges are built and diseases eradicated, wicked problems persist. Success in dealing with them can’t be determined in the same way as the reliability of an engineered structure or the curative power of a laboratory-developed drug. No single institution, agency, or segment of a community is able to solve the problem on its own.

When faced with wicked problems, reaching a shared understanding of the approximate nature of what people are contending with is more important than deciding on a “solution,” which may prove misguided. In fact, scholars have argued that dealing with wicked problems depends on not reaching a fixed decision early on about what type of solution is best. The ability of citizens to exercise good judgment and experiment in the face of uncertainty is more important than the often-illusory certainty of experts.

If the public is dynamic, it will be found in activities, in the things people do, in their practices. Kettering has compiled these practices, and its community politics research deals with all of them — how people become involved, how they determine what they have to do, how they make collective decisions, how they implement those decisions, how they act as a public, how they evaluate their actions, how they maintain political momentum. Other issues of Connections have examined one particular practice, public deliberation, which is the talk and reasoning that goes into collective decision making. But through public deliberation, choice work is only part of the work citizens have to do.

Future Research

The foundation is trying to learn more about a number of barriers to developing a working public in a community: Why do people get involved — or not? How great is their involvement, and how long does it last? What does it take to create a vibrant public life? Some argue that this isn’t possible in poorer communities because people have no financial resources and are preoccupied with their personal survival. These “realists” argue public life is impossible under these circumstances. Is that really the case, we wonder? Do communities where people have money and leisure necessarily have publics that work effectively? Most of all, we want to know how a community changes itself. But what kind of leaders are needed?

Engagement

Kettering might focus its research on how people become engaged to the point that they exercise their capacity to take collective action. Those who believe their communities must work better — whether the goals are to eliminate injustice, improve race relations, or promote healthy communities — often put lack of citizen involvement at the top of their list of barriers to progress. But why aren’t people involved? Is the conventional judgment that the uninvolved are unconcerned a sound one? There are a host of unanswered questions.

Richard Harwood’s research found that engagement is chaotic — full of false starts, lapses, and reversals. His report entitled Meaningful Chaos: How People Form Relationships with Public Concerns reveals that engagement is a multifaceted process not limited to an isolated activity or practice. Such a process can’t be measured or evaluated easily. It involves an interactive dialogue that encourages participants to ask how a problem affects them personally and
what they can do, individually and collectively, to solve it.

Most people appear to talk their way to involvement with community problems, perhaps across a backyard fence or at a kitchen table. Something happens, and people talk about it — why it occurred, what it means, what should be done. The literature of public engagement suggests that citizens will get involved only if the initial conversations demonstrate two things: first, that the problem relates to something people care about and affects them or their families personally and, second, that citizens can do something about the problem. It isn’t enough to show that an agency or organization can do something; people have to be satisfied that they themselves, can — and must — act in a way that will make a difference.

The foundation is asking whether there is anything that might trigger or expand people’s involvement. Betty Knighton, of the West Virginia Center for Civic Life, is convinced that the terms used to name community problems and the opportunity to rename them are the key to engagement. Who defines a problem and the name it is given determine the number of people available to solve it, the kind of response that will emerge, and the level of engagement that will be possible. Too often, problems are named by officeholders or professionals who use language that reflects favored solutions, rather than public concerns. Problems may also be named by ideologically driven advocates, who recognize that controlling the name is a public relations advantage. When citizens participate in naming public issues and deciding on the terms to be used, they are likely to become, and remain, engaged.

**Inactive Communities**

Another research approach grows out of a conviction that the real problem isn’t individual involvement. Any number of studies show that volunteering and personal acts of kindness are quite common, especially since the attacks of September 11, 2001. Not so for actions that make use of our collective capacities. A year later, Americans are still asking what they can do. We aren’t at all sure of our ability to do anything significant about terrorism. This uncertainty is particularly evident among young people, as William Galston, director of the University of Maryland’s Center for Information and Research on Civic Learning and Engagement, points out. He notes that they are willing to volunteer for personal acts of charity (perhaps because they can see immediate results) but lack a sense of themselves as a collective force. A recent survey by Robert Putnam shows that we have become more trusting of government and our neighbors since the attacks. But it remains to be seen whether the shifts in attitude will translate into long-term increases in civic activism.

Personal service is certainly useful, but it is not civic action. In order to make
Six

We suspect that the degree to which a community is engaged in ongoing collective learning and the degree to which it can keep up its civic momentum are correlated.

a significant difference, we need to come together and combine our abilities. And, here, the argument that not everyone has sufficient time or resources becomes relevant. As I mentioned, some argue that to be realistic, we have to admit that certain communities will never have a public life; they are so dysfunctional that self-rule is impossible. Perhaps the foundation should look for local groups contesting that conventional wisdom.

Leadership

A third research strategy would be to follow the conventional wisdom that “it’s all about leadership.” Although that may be true, the prevailing conception of the leader may not be the one that is most likely to result in effectively functioning, self-governing communities.

Kettering has reported elsewhere on a study contrasting leadership styles in two adjacent communities. The more dysfunctional of them actually had the best leaders, as traditionally understood. The leaders were well-educated, well-connected, personally successful, and civically responsible. Yet what stands out in the high-achieving community is not so much the characteristics of the leaders as their number, their location and, most of all, the way they interact with other citizens. The high-achieving community had ten times more people providing leadership than communities of comparable size. This community is “leaderful”; that is, nearly everyone provides some measure of initiative. And its leaders function not as gatekeepers but as door openers, bent on widening participation. With so many providing leadership, the leaders are not clearly distinguishable from other citizens.

More recently, the foundation has wondered whether the politics that new leaders are taught is consistent with the politics practiced in high-achieving communities. The Harwood Institute is currently attempting to answer that question.

In this issue of Connections, as in the past, we lay out our thoughts about future directions in the hope that readers will alert us to work we should be aware of and opportunities we may have overlooked.

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My thanks to Anne Thomason and Melissa Graboyes, who did the research for this article.
A Question Revisited: What’s in a Name?

By Betty Knighton

More than two decades ago, in sophomore English classes at Dunbar High School, my high school students and I had vivid conversations about the difference a name can make. Each of these discussions followed a class reading of Act II, Scene II of Romeo and Juliet. “What’s in a name?” Juliet asks in that scene, arguing that it is the Montague name and not Romeo’s nature that her parents reject.

While my 15-year-old students strongly related to many themes in the play, this one struck a particularly powerful chord. “Absolutely,” they responded to Juliet’s complaint. “She’s exactly right. Why should a name matter?”

Twenty-five years later, I find that I am still engaged in vivid conversations about the act of naming. Some of these conversations still involve high school students; most involve adults living and working together in West Virginia communities. Yet the focus remains on the difference a name can make.

These more recent conversations have focused less on the limitations of an insufficient name than on the potential of a sufficient one. They have illuminated another, more positive aspect of naming: the powerful dynamic that occurs when a name does resonate, does capture real qualities, does reflect an intended meaning. These conversations have focused on the power of naming — not in relationship to individual people, but in relationship to public issues. They have focused on the public process of describing a problem in the way people want to talk about it, in a way that shows how it affects their daily lives.

Our work here in West Virginia, and similar work in many other locations, is helping us recognize the connection between public involvement in defining a community problem and public engagement in talking and working together to address it. We are finding that when the concerns of a broad and diverse group of citizens drive the way an issue is framed for public dialogue, the issue connects to the community in ways that are both personal and public.

Recently, the West Virginia Center for Civic Life worked with a team of 14 colleagues from around the country to create a framework for discussing health care — one we hoped would resonate with Americans from all walks of life. An important part of this work has involved researching public policy initiatives and tapping into the expertise of health care professionals. But the framework has been built on the health care concerns of more than a thousand citizens who talked to us, who were willing to contribute their private experiences to a public examination of health care in this country.

All of the health care team members are involved in building networks for public deliberation in their own communities, and all involved their communities in creating this national framework on health care. Although the goal of the team has been to create a discussion guide that would be useful throughout the nation, the work of naming the issue began in local communities in ways that were intensely personal and inherently individual.

Each team member sought out community members from all walks of life. Each asked questions that would allow citizens’ concerns and insights to surface:
We heard an unemployed father of four describe his experience with the requirements of a public health program he knew was designed to help children like his: “I applied for CHIP (Children’s Health Insurance Program), but they told me I make $63 a month too much.” He would gladly return the $63 if he could, he told us.

We heard a highly skilled nurse express her frustration with navigating the health care system when her father-in-law was ill. “When he was in the hospital, he had six different doctors and was on eight different medications. No one was looking at the big picture.”

These individual experiences with naming a public issue allowed people to tap into their personal concerns and not only their professional positions. For many of them, participating in naming a public issue provided an opportunity to consider their public identity — for some of them, an initial opportunity.

As we asked questions about their own health care — and as they understood that their individual concerns would help design a framework that would benefit the community — they expressed strong interest in participating in these future public dialogues.

Our work with health care is continuing. Citizens around the country are participating in deliberative dialogue about the issue. Here in West Virginia, we are pleased to be seeing some familiar faces in community forums. We are engaging in public work with many of the same citizens whose individual insights helped inform it.

As always, we are reflecting on the work we have done and how we have done it. We still recognize the importance of questioning “What’s in a name?” But for us, the more compelling question has become, “How did that name come to be?”

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Reflections on the Practice of Community Politics

By Grace Severyn

Since the mid-1990s, the Kettering Foundation has been conducting workshops to share ideas about community politics with teams of people from communities in different parts of the country. Community politics is about ideas and practices that can create an engaged citizenry in a community. It’s about citizens joining together to take responsibility not only for community problems, but also for the way they, as a community, go about the business of making decisions and addressing problems.

Susan Vogelsang is one of the people who have taken the leap to “get started” in this work. The leader of a team from Summit County, Ohio (Akron), Vogelsang was drawn to community politics by the desire to “change the way our community approaches our common problems and change who comes to the table to ‘work through’ our common concerns.” Ollie White was motivated to join the Helena, Arkansas, team because she saw possibility in the process of working together to solve common problems. “I believe that if we can continue to work in our community with this process, we will eventually effect the changes that we so desperately need.”

Like a number of other participants in the workshop, Ever Jean Ford, also from Helena, had to overcome some initial hesitation. “Community politics, ‘deliberative democracy,’ ‘forums,’ ‘moderating’ — when I first heard these terms, I began to wonder,” she said. “How is this going to be different from any other town meeting or focus group?” Her work in community politics has taught her the difference. Through the work, she said, she has “reconnected with my community, and renewed my passion for working.”

The Visible Ingredients for Getting Started

Those who engage in community politics consistently refer to several ingredients as essential for getting started. These “visible” ingredients include a key leader or two, a team committed to the ideas, and an organization that can provide a home for the work.

The key person, or team leader, must function as the “driving force” or the “keeper of the process.” Naomi Cottons, the leader of the team from Helena, is an example of a leader who can inspire her team. She is passionately committed to community politics as a process “whereby citizens can collectively determine the path for our future and bring about change.” Even when her team members expressed their reluctance to take on more work — pleading, “Naomi, we have lives, too” — Naomi could get them to give 100 percent.

Just as important as a key person is a team willing to do the work of community politics. “If you want to make changes in the way things get done, you need a team — a core of committed people who understand the effort’s purposes and support the lead person,” said Jodie DeLamatre, a member of the close-knit team from Summit County. “Team members and the coordinator need a commitment and understanding of the process and purpose of the journey. That understanding evolves and changes, but the act of trying to get at deliberation’s essence helps the work.”

Teams from Tuscaloosa, Alabama, and Stillwater, Oklahoma, (who just began their participation in the Community Politics Workshop series this past September) took this appreciation for the value of a team to a new level. From the outset, both organized two layers of...
Ten

participation: a team of approximately eight people to travel to the workshops and a larger, broadly based “home team” to support and extend the work of community politics within their communities.

As Ron Beer, coleader of the team from Stillwater, said:

The purpose for the larger group is to ensure a broader representation of the community and to establish “connections” with key organizations, agencies, and networks, all of which will, in our opinion, provide a better base for identifying issues of concern and engage more citizens….

The decision to create both a “travel” team and a “home” team in Tuscaloosa was motivated, in part, by the fact that so many people expressed interest in being on the team. “The high interest level at that early stage made us begin thinking about how many we could include but still have a manageable group,” said Star Bloom, coleader of the team. Establishing a home and travel team, however, has placed some additional responsibility on the travel team, according to Bloom. “We feel obligated to really share what we learned [during the workshops].”

A third ingredient that can nurture the growth of community politics is a community-based organization that provides a home for the work. According to Kathy Christie, soon after completing the workshop series, the team from Owensboro, Kentucky, invited a group of citizens to brainstorm “about the ‘look’ of our community in the future and a structure that might push along the deliberative process in our community… The overwhelming response was to create a formal structure to nurture the process.” Community Conversations, Inc., a nonprofit organization, was the eventual result. The team’s hope, said Christie, is that as the new organization’s work progresses, citizens will be eager to talk about tough issues together, and eventually won’t rely on Community Conversations, Inc. as the convening force. Citizens will see themselves as political actors in the community with a part in the resolution of community problems.

Several communities have been able to fit their work nicely within the mission of an existing organization. Greater Campbellsville United (GCU), a grassroots organization dedicated to promoting equality, serves as the umbrella organization for the community politics team in Campbellsville, Kentucky. The beauty of this, in the words of John Chowning, chair of GCU, is that the umbrella organization can provide the team with “independence, but connectivity to the community and other organizations [necessary] to be effective in the community politics process.”

The Invisible Ingredients

Team members, as they look back on their experiences in getting started with community politics, identify “invisible” ingredients that are also essential to their success. Two invisible ingredients that team members mention frequently are a welcoming attitude toward learning and invention and an understanding that, in the words of Renate Pore from Kanawha County, West Virginia, “it’s all about relationships.”

David Ross, a member of the team from Owensboro, Kentucky, has gradually come to appreciate the inventive nature of the work.

I have experienced a broad range of emotions: at first, the whole project seemed overwhelming…. I remember when I began to think I was catching on to some of the concepts and ideas and “overwhelmness” often turned into frustration…. I am less concerned with “catching on” now and more concerned about observing our community catch on. The challenge of researching and participating is being able to capture what is happening as it is happening, while all the time being part of the happening.

The Summit County team’s understanding of their role in community politics has also changed. Said Susan Vogelsang:

We thought that Kettering had this all figured out and they were going to give us the tools necessary to change the way our community worked together to solve its complex problems. All we would have to do is listen, study, learn, and practice. But we didn’t get “answers” from the workshops. Instead, we learned that through continuous study, reflection, and experimentation, we would discover what [works] best to bring … community politics to life in our community. There was no right or wrong answer, but instead, a journey of discovery and innovation.
This attitude of invention can be put to the test when teams face challenges or circumstances that invite them to reconfigure their work. When members of the Summit County team completed their participation in the workshop series, they were faced with a need to reinvent themselves and “get started” again.

In the words of Crystal Jones:

“Since we are no longer governed by the workshop schedule, there is more of a challenge for us to continue to work with one another and keep the process going. We don’t have the sense that we ‘have to do it because it’s our homework or because we’re going to have to present something at the next workshop.’ This forces us to make the transition to make the process intrinsically ours, as opposed to Kettering’s.”

Finally, because community politics is all about ways of acting together to address public problems, networking — building relationships — is essential. For the team from Allendale County, South Carolina, “Community politics is working to connect the people and the community and opening up channels of communication among community members.”

Says Julie Pratt of Kanawha County: “For this kind of work to be successful, it seems there has to be at least a minimal level of networking happening. There has to be some kind of social fabric, enough going on between people, between organizations, that you can introduce [community politics]. Then, when you do, it furthers the networking. It’s kind of a chicken-and-egg thing. Community politics offers great opportunities for network-building, but if there are not enough connections between people and organizations in a community,”
you may have to do some work building relationships before more formal and structured forums can take hold.

Networking is not about “evangelizing or recruiting others to our way of thinking,” noted the Kanawha County team. Instead, it is about learning from one another “in ways that further our collective and separate work.” Ultimately, they believe, networking gradually creates the social fabric in which to embed this work.

The Insights of Hindsight

As people have reflected on getting started, they have identified several insights that have become meaningful to them and to others as well. Julie Pratt calls attention to the need to “begin with the end in mind,” urging people to be mindful of their ultimate goals from the outset. The team from Helena found that meeting regularly to “discuss where we were, where we were going, and how we were going to get there” helped them keep focused on their goals as they took each step.

Renate Pore, who has spent many years as an advocate for health care reform and who is presently serving on the Governor’s cabinet in West Virginia, says her experience with community politics “profoundly changed” her. “I thought I needed to have all the answers before I’d engage the public,” she said. “It’s really been like an epiphany.… Now, I see that the public can and must come up with directions.”

Keith Sanders, of Owensboro, summed up what he, Renate, and others who practice community politics — many of whom are or have been advocates or activists — have learned. “Advocacy alone will not get us where we want to go,” he said. Since citizens themselves ultimately know what is best for the community, it is necessary to promote a process by which citizens assume responsibility for, and take ownership of, community problems.

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Inactive Communities: Lessons from Rebuilding

By Carolyn Farrow-Garland

Kettering Foundation research on “inactive communities” is an important aspect of community politics and leadership research. Instead of focusing on communities with vibrant, healthy civic lives, “inactive communities” research sheds light on how civic life gets going in places where social ties are weak. Weak social ties exist in many different kinds of communities. Wealthy, gated communities and suburban neighborhoods are as likely to have inactive civic lives as inner-city neighborhoods and poor, rural communities. The difference is that financial resources can cover up the absence of public or community life. Where resources are few, however, the absence of public life is more deeply felt. The Kettering Foundation is interested in these kinds of places. Where crime, unemployment, or economic dislocation have overtaken a community, the presence of a vibrant civic life is essential to building the quality of community life.

The research on inactive communities seeks to uncover the spark or element that prompts citizens in communities where the social fabric is coming apart to engage with their neighbors in civic discourse or action. It examines how the absence of certain civic factors causes or contributes to a community’s decline. Even in cases where there is cause for little hope, people in some communities continue trying, people in others simply give up. Our research tries to identify what leads to public-acting in one community and public inaction in another. It probes questions that enable us to gain some understanding of the relationship between civic engagement and neighborhood stability. It seeks to understand how civic engagement triggers positive change in community life. It asks, What gets public engagement started and, also, what keeps it going?

Public engagement is a continuing, dynamic process, and staying the course, especially in what can seem to be inactive communities, is difficult. Experience in observing inactive communities reveals that change requires strong commitment. People often continue to work despite tremendous obstacles and setbacks, but there are barriers to progress, as KF research shows. In inactive communities, where the need for action is critical, the nature of that action is also important. Relying on experts or on government can relegate people to the sidelines and stop the community-building process.

The successful resolution of a problem can also slow or halt progress. In the absence of a problem to draw them together, people may return to business as usual. Their sense of themselves as public actors diminishes, and they turn inward, ignoring their role in public life. In other cases, citizens faced with seemingly intractable problems simply give up in frustration because they are tired of getting no place.

Understanding how some communities shift from having inactive to active civic lives can provide insights that will enable people who are attempting to rebuild civic life in their communities to plot a course of action. This research is enriched by people in many communities in the United States and in other countries. In war-torn countries such as Tajikistan and in places like Cincinnati, Ohio, where racial tensions have divided the community, people are working to repair civil society and improve public life.

Success in communities that change their public practices is often attributed to activities that occur after people in the community did whatever they did to get the process going. Since change in communities takes place over many years, people tend to forget what actually happened.

Our research finds that most people in communities are seldom aware of the significance of community engagement and of their role as citizens in helping promote a healthy civic life. When asked, “How did your community come to be the way it is?” respondents often tend to focus on
Fourteen

Cleveland, Ohio, is an example of a community that changed itself from the inside out. In the 1970s and early 1980s, it was a city in decline. Over the course of the two decades, many of the industries that had once contributed to a thriving community moved to other places or went out of business. The downtown suffered, and many of the neighborhoods surrounding downtown were left to deteriorate. Today, Cleveland is a different city — it is known as a renaissance city. At a recent conference in Cleveland, civic leaders were asked how this transformation had occurred. They gave credit to the political leadership, they noted the importance of their public-private partnerships, and their ability to attract state and federal dollars. When pressed to share something they did that others, in smaller communities without resources, might learn from, they pondered the question. Finally, one person said, “We started to listen to one another, and we started to understand that change was in our mutual self-interest.”

The success in Cleveland underscores the value of civic engagement as a key element in the public-private partnership equation that is often touted by city planners and business leaders. The commitment to consider what is best for people in the community made an important difference in the Cleveland community’s ability to succeed where other communities have faltered.

It is possible for communities to change their public practices. Even in the worst social and economic circumstances, we have seen people generate positive change and transform places where there was little hope.

economic or institutional successes or failures. They describe resources, such as the development of new housing, without acknowledging the social capital that they themselves invested to cause the housing to come about. In instances where communities are failing or in decline, they talk about how they lost their primary industry, describe government corruption, or focus on some other manifestation of their failed circumstance. Most people view their community as static. Yet the reality is that communities are always changing and what people tend to do, or not do, affects the nature of that change and the manner in which they view their community’s civic capacity.

A study of Tupelo, Mississippi, by Vaughn Grisham, Jr. ([Tupelo: The Evolution of a Community. [Dayton: Kettering Foundation Press, 1999]) provides insight on how a community can change its sense of itself for the better. What is significant and what the experience of Tupelo shows is that as the attitudes of people within the community change, attitudes of people outside the community also change. Tupelo, for example, has been able to attract new business and industry because people now see it as a place worth investing in.

Kettering research suggests that there may be a connection between the economic and social health of communities. In Tajikistan, for example, a sustained dialogue that began nearly ten years ago in an effort to bring an end to a vicious civil war has given rise to regional citizens’ groups composed of former enemies, now united in an effort to sustain peace and build economic prosperity in Tajikistan.
We suspect that change begins when people in a community decide that they need one another in order to solve a common problem that is too great to ignore. Usually, the problem has reached crisis proportions and there is nothing to lose by attempting to work together — and everything to gain. Findings also suggest that a certain type of leadership is necessary. This style of leadership serves as a catalyst, energizing the talents of others in the community.

KF research also suggests another thing that causes or encourages people to become engaged: a type of human interaction that generates among people a sense of what is possible. J. Herman Blake, a scholar and educator, witnessed this sense of possibility and its power to motivate, during his work with community groups in the late 1980s in Indianapolis. Blake operates within the asset-based framework articulated by John L. McKnight and John P. Kretzmann in their book *Building Communities from the Inside Out*. Instead of needs, he sees resources. Instead of “inactive” communities, he sees untapped capabilities and capacities. People without physical or economic resources sometimes feel they lack the ability to solve the problems confronting their communities. But Blake’s experience as well as our research suggests otherwise.

Findings from our research in communities demonstrate that it is possible for communities to change their public practices. Even in the worst social and economic circumstances, we have seen people generate positive change and transform places where there was little hope. As Herman Blake says, “There is no known limit to the capacity of the human mind to learn, grow, develop, and change.”

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Shared Learning with Uniontown: Lessons in Community Development

By Joe A. Sumners

Uniontown, a community of about 3,500, is located in the heart of Alabama’s Black Belt, named for a deposit of dark, fertile soil extending from Mississippi’s border through the heart of Alabama. This region, once the backbone of the state’s agricultural economy, is now besieged by pervasive poverty and economic stagnation — the worst in the nation by most standards and considered by some to be at or below the level of many Third World nations. An area of urgent need, the region faces declining population, insufficient health care, substandard schools, and weak business development. Uniontown is one of the poorest of the many poor communities in the Alabama Black Belt.

Auburn University’s efforts to assist the community began in 1999. Auburn’s Economic Development Institute first provided assistance by helping create a strategic plan for the community. Auburn next recommended the creation of a Community Development Corporation (CDC) as a way to obtain broader public involvement and provide a structured organization capable of implementing some of the strategic plan’s recommendations. The CDC was created, with the mayor serving as president and appointing all CDC members. The mayor also tended to dominate meetings. Citizens who attended strategic-planning or CDC meetings often took a passive role and appeared reluctant to express their viewpoints in front of others. They tended to look to a leader — the mayor or some “outside” expert — for answers to community problems.

Although the CDC met regularly, it was mostly unsuccessful in its efforts to broaden public engagement or improve the community’s quality of life.

In the fall of 2000, the incumbent mayor was defeated in his bid for reelection and his successor was not enthusiastic about the city’s strategic plan. The new mayor rightly felt the group that created it was not representative of the whole community. He also was skeptical about using the CDC (composed of the former mayor and his supporters) as the vehicle for promoting community and economic development. Any momentum that Auburn University had gained in its community-building efforts was stalled.

Auburn’s goal from the start was to develop citizens’ capacity within the Uniontown community. Despite our good intentions, on reflection, we began to wonder whether we had approached this community with a mind-set that limited our ability to make a positive impact. We had initially viewed the community as a bundle of needs, or problems, that we were going to try to help alleviate. This kind of “outside-in” approach is a common trap for those involved in the development of distressed communities and is effectively described by John Kretzman and John McKnight in *Building Communities from the Inside Out: A Path Toward Finding and Mobilizing a Community’s Assets* (Chicago, IL: ACTA Publications, 1993):

Negative images, such as crime and violence, joblessness and welfare dependency, vacant land and abandoned land and buildings, can be conceived as a kind of mental “map” of the community. This “needs” map determines how problems are to be addressed, through deficiency-oriented policies and programs. Public, private and non-profit human service systems, often supported by university research and foundation funding, translate the programs into local activities that teach people the nature and extent of their problems, and the value of services as the answer to their problems. As a result, many lower-income neighborhoods … begin to see themselves as people
with special needs that can only be met by outsiders. They become consumers of services, with no incentive to be producers.

Additionally, the only entry into the community available to us was through the mayor. We thus attempted to work with and through the mayor to get things done. As a result, our initial approach was primarily “top-down.” Clearly, this “trickle-down” approach to community development was not working.

We learned our lesson. Initially, Auburn’s efforts were focused largely on providing technical assistance to the Uniontown community to help solve problems. After the incumbent mayor’s defeat, Auburn decided to try a different approach. The new focus was less explicitly on problem solving and much more on facilitating dialogue, listening, and responding to the needs of Uniontown citizens as they defined them.

Instead of working through the city’s mayor, we decided to more actively engage ordinary citizens.

To do this, Auburn identified and recruited about 25 individuals representing all segments of the community to participate in a focus group. This biracial group of citizens representing a wide range of age groups, income levels, and occupations now meets on a biweekly basis. In order to create a sense of shared identity, we encouraged the citizens to give their group a name. They selected the name “Uniontown Cares.”

Since the creation of Uniontown Cares, citizens have taken advantage of new public space to talk about community issues in a deliberative way, identify and take ownership of community problems, and connect with one another and with their community. As members of the Uniontown community discuss local problems, they are beginning to realize their capacity for doing something about them. Talk is being turned into action. And these actions have led to results — cleanups of parks and cemeteries, creation of an Alcoholics Anonymous chapter, creation of an adopt-a-park program, among many other successes. Those residents who have been engaged through Uniontown Cares are beginning to feel good about themselves and their sense of...

“The Uniontown Cares is a group of community residents working in a cooperative manner to promote effective community collaboration and development. We are a diverse group of citizens that care about Uniontown and continue to work to make it a great place to live.

We meet regularly to discuss issues of importance to our community. We have been involved in numerous community projects and continually work to identify new projects and areas where we can offer our help. We are an ever-growing and continually active group that welcomes your input and involvement.”

— Excerpted from the Uniontown Web site, www.uniontownalabama.org
**Shared-Learning Agreements**

As a research organization, the Kettering Foundation has an evolving set of questions it is trying to answer. Those questions relate to the study of practices — ways that citizens, communities, and institutions can work together — that hold the promise of making democratic public life work as it should. One way the foundation develops insights is through learning agreements with organizations that have a shared interest in those questions. Such organizations have two characteristics: First, they have decided, for their own reasons, to explore how to do what they do differently, due, in part, to their recognition of Kettering research into the nature of effective political practice. Second, they are interested in learning from their efforts and sharing what they learn in a systematic way. The shared-learning agreements do not fund the organizations in doing what they decide to do, but are intended to support the preparation of reports of what was learned, which are based on mutually agreed-upon lines of questions.

Auburn University’s Economic Development Institute is an example of an organization in a shared-learning relationship with the Kettering Foundation. In his report for *Connections*, Joe Sumners briefly recounts some of the lessons that have come from the institute’s efforts to reimagine the role of university outreach efforts. The report has implications for understanding how communities work, how external organizations can affect a community’s politics, and the relationships between the qualities of community practices and community economic well-being.

— Randall Nielsen

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efficacy is increasing. They are now beginning to see themselves as citizens — public actors — who can do something to improve the quality of life in Uniontown.

The new mayor is participating as a member of the group, and the dynamics of local politics have changed for the better. Unontown Cares is making a difference and others in the community are beginning to notice. More and more members of the community have joined the group. In fact, they have outgrown their original city hall meeting room and have moved to a new public library, which Unontown Cares’ members helped renovate and stock with new books and computers.

In the first phase of the Unontown project, Auburn focused on working through an existing institution (the city government) and attempted to create a new one (CDC) to help strengthen the community. This approach met with only modest success. It was not until Auburn changed its approach that we began to see real progress in “community-building.” The lesson here is that real and lasting change requires an “inside-out” and “bottom-up” approach, in addition to “outside-in” and “top-down.” The lesson is not that economically disadvantaged communities need no external assistance or resources. They do. We remain convinced that university outreach efforts and other external resources can play an important role in bringing about positive change in communities. However, outside help will be much more effectively used when the community is itself fully engaged, and if it can define the agendas for which outside resources will be used.

The horrendous problems of the Alabama Black Belt remain. The Unontown community has made little economic progress in the past few years and future prospects look dim. But for the people participating in Unontown Cares, things are looking better. They now see themselves as citizens instead of victims, as public actors instead of clients of services. They see that they can control many things about their lives and community. They are creating small ripples of hope in a community where hope has been in short supply.

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From Dialogue to Action in Tajikistan

By Parviz Mullojanov

The dialogue’s next stage — as it was identified by the August meeting participants — was to be a period of practical implementation of the major decisions and approaches worked out during the previous long and productive process of deliberation.

It was time to shift the Inter-Tajik Dialogue from Moscow to Tajikistan. Since the beginning, the dialogue had been held in Russia due to the complexity of the political situation in Tajikistan. But after the adoption of the peace treaty, internal political conditions became much more conducive to holding events such as the dialogue, inside the country.

It was also time to shift the dialogue from the top- and mid-levels to the level of ordinary citizens and communities. The official peace process involved a restricted number of top decision makers and could therefore be violated at any moment due to subjective reasons, such as personal misunderstanding between those involved or political self-interest.

The only way to make the peace process really sustainable was to make it more public. In other words, the more people, especially on the community level, involved in the peace process, the more stable it will become.

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The only way to make the peace process really sustainable was to make it more public. In other words, the more people, especially on the community level, involved in the peace process, the more stable it will become.

During the August meeting, participants designed a plan of action that included concrete ways to implement the decisions resulting from the dialogue.

One of the major decisions was to establish a nongovernmental organization (NGO) inside Tajikistan to be responsible for practical implementation of the action plan. The NGO was established and registered in Tajikistan in March 2000 as the Public Committee for Democratic Processes (PCDP).

The main course of action for the PCDP was carefully designed by a working group consisting of the most prominent members of the dialogue based on...
international experience; in this respect, the advice and recommendations of Harold Saunders, director of international affairs for the Kettering Foundation (KF), and KF associate Randa Slim were especially useful for working-group members.

One of the major directions of the PCDP became what is known as the Economic Development Committee (EDC) Track. This involved the establishment of citizen groups in three different regions of Tajikistan where ethnic, political, and social tensions still threatened regional stability. Each EDC’s primary aim was to mitigate the tensions and stabilize the situation on a community level by involving representatives of opposing groups in deliberation about social and economic issues, joint economic activities, and cooperation.

We decided that every EDC should consist of 12-15 people representing all levels, ethnic groups, and factions of local society. Representatives of different and sometimes opposing factions were to discuss economic and social problems specific to their region and find ways to solve them. In other words, the EDC Track could be described briefly as conflict resolution through social and economic development, with the main approach being public deliberation.

The EDC Track proceeded in stages:

First — We selected three regions of the republic: Kofarnihon, located near the capital, Dushanbe, and considered one of the opposition strongholds; Shahritus, located along the Afghan-Tajik border; and the city of Qurghan-teppa, located in the south. The three regions are different but, at the same time, they had one particular feature in common: in all of them, clashes and atrocities during the civil war were widespread. As a result, the tension between local communities and ethnic groups was still high.

The Kofarnihon and Shahritus EDCs were created on the community level. The Qurghan-teppa EDC, however, was established on the government level and was supervised by the local deputy mayor, which turned out to be a mistake: being too official, the Qurghan-teppa EDC finally failed and was discontinued at the end of the first year. But the other two EDCs survived and are successfully continuing their activities today.

Second — We carefully selected two moderators in every region. We tried to find the most respected and influential people to use as our representatives in the regions. We asked the moderators to identify among local people potential participants for every EDC. In order to get good feedback, it was especially important to ensure wide representation on the EDCs. Therefore, EDC members represent all levels and ethnic groups of local society; among them are doctors, farmers, engineers, laborers, journalists,
and local officeholders. We tried also to maintain balance inside every EDC in order to avoid any kind of domination in terms of ethnic, regional, or professional affiliation.

Third — In June 2000, we conducted the first training workshop for the moderators. During the next two years, every EDC moderator participated in a series of workshops on moderating skills held by the Public Committee.

Fourth — Each EDC conducted a series of monthly meetings during which the participants discussed economic and social conditions in their region and identified a cluster of the most acute problems and issues. In the course of the first year, EDC members successfully completed the issue-framing and naming stages. Throughout this period, PC representatives participated in every EDC meeting, taking responsibility for logistical issues and helping local moderators facilitate when necessary.

Fifth — At the end of the first year, the EDCs entered the next stage: the design of concrete actions. In the previous stage, they had managed to identify the most acute economic and social problems in their communities; during the next stage, they identified ways and mechanisms to solve the problems. The Public Committee offered to EDC members a series of one- or two-day training workshops on fundraising and proposal writing. EDC members then developed concrete projects and proposals, which were later submitted to the appropriate donor agencies. A separate working group made up of EDC members and invited experts from outside worked out the details for each project.

Sixth — The two EDCs have each developed a few proposals based on the needs and characteristics of their regions. For instance, in Kofarnihon, where many stock-breeding farms are located, the EDC developed proposals for the creation of a milk-processing factory in the region. By the end of the second year, donor agencies had approved some of the proposals, and both EDCs entered the stage of practical implementation of their own ideas and plans.

Seventh — Today, the Public Committee is shifting its attention to other regions of the country, creating new EDCs in the city of Kulob (south) and Biston district (north). As for the original EDCs, they themselves were responsible for defining their future: they had to decide whether to end their activities after implementation of the first grants or to continue their own development as informal associations of citizens or NGOs.

Both Kofarnihon and Shahritis EDC members have decided for now to continue their activities. As one of the Kofarnihon EDC members recently stated: “We want to continue our EDC activities because this is an opportunity for us to become more responsible for our own future and rely on our own efforts.”

During my last visit to Kofarnihon, I asked a group of local EDC members to
define the main outcomes of their work. Their answers could be summarized in the following way:

First of all, the relationship inside the EDC between representatives of different communities and ethnic groups has essentially changed. Through working together, people have established steady contacts and, sometimes, even friendships. As members of the EDC working groups, they were accustomed to meeting frequently, and for many of them, seeing each other every other day has turned into a kind of habit. As a result, the stereotypes and biases they used to have about each other have diminished. Moreover, they have begun to understand that economic and social development of their communities cannot be secured without joint efforts by all community members, regardless of their political or ethnic backgrounds.

In the future, as proposals and projects are implemented, cooperation between EDC members is going to increase. This would gradually affect more and more people outside of the EDCs. In time, the relationships between the communities and people involved should improve and become more peaceful and cooperative instead of conflictual. I suspect this would be the real and most essential outcome of our dialogue.

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Correction
Photo captions on p. 24 and p. 26 in the May 2002 issue of Connections mis-identified the country in which Cuenca is situated. It is in Ecuador.
Leadership is a topic that interests many people. Peruse any bookstore business section, and you will see books on developing leadership skills, others encouraging individuals to become leaders, and still others that confront the challenges of leadership. There are courses and workbooks and college majors in leadership. There are gurus and champions of particular styles of leadership. Even local municipalities and states provide leadership training to their employees.

The Kettering Foundation has also been exploring leadership over the past several years — leadership for communities intent on building a better democracy. We have also considered notions of “leaderful” communities. Our leadership work has focused on “catalysts,” people in communities who are seen as key partners in supporting democratic practices. Working with catalysts is important. Catalysts are usually quick learners and able to adapt new ideas about leadership to their own communities. They can spark change and determine the direction of a community, as well as share new ideas about leadership with other communities. For people to be able to assume their role as citizens and solve their own problems, it is important to engage these key people.

Networking, connecting with others, is essential, and leaders, or catalysts, are an important part of community networks. If community leaders develop democratic practices, it is much more likely that the community itself will become more democratic and more leaderful.

Our research on leaderful communities has focused on the work of getting people to tackle tough problems together in their communities. It recognizes that citizens from all walks of life have an important role in making difficult choices for their community and that everyone has something to offer — individual knowledge, perspectives, and values — to the leadership of a community. A community cannot do its work with just a few people; it needs to be full of leaders.

Kettering has been engaged in research with groups as diverse as the Urban League of the Upstate, The Green Bay Area Chamber of Commerce Hispanic Advisory Council to the Mayor of Green Bay, the Centers for Disease Control, and a group called Turning on Youth with Gospel Music. The work of these groups is championed by people who often do not consider themselves leaders but, instead, are passionate about their concerns for such things as minorities in South Carolina, Latinos in Green Bay, Wisconsin, or new directions for youth. They are people who form coalitions with others, people like Lynn Camp of Snellville, Georgia, and Richard Rusk of Bishop, Georgia. The two became aware of a terrible wrong that had been done to blacks in a small county in Georgia and joined with others to find out what they together might do about this wrong.

Some of these citizen researchers are involved in politics in a traditional sense, like Sharon Pacheco, who directs Arrive With Five for People for the American Way. Sharon was part of a group that mobilized to get out the vote in Florida prior to the 2000 elections. The voting irregularities surrounding that election prompted the group Sharon was part of to connect with unions such as the Service Employees International Union...
If communities are to become full of leaders, citizens must join together to bring their skills and knowledge to bear on the challenges that confront them. Catalysts are key to making this happen. They can point the way toward a new way of public-acting.

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Community Leadership participants

commissioned the Harwood Institute to complete research that we hope will help us understand more about the nature of traditional leadership programs.

Our work so far indicates that traditional leaders may talk about democratic practices, public life, and engaging the public, but often they are slow to really embrace these ideas. Notions of democratic politics are antithetical to their understanding of their role in society, which many see as that of problem solver for their communities. They help lead the community to solutions but really do not consider the possibility of sharing leadership.

If communities are to become full of leaders, citizens must join together to bring their skills and knowledge to bear on the challenges that confront them. Catalysts are key to making this happen. They can point the way toward a new way of public-acting. When citizens engage in this new kind of politics, it results in better decisions for their communities and, ultimately, enables them to better carry out their responsibilities in a democracy.

(which includes the many nursing assistants who are associated with Florida’s nursing homes) to engage people who previously had no voice. Carolyn Coleman of Jackson, Mississippi, uses her talents to connect with young people, helping them develop their leadership skills through music. These are the people we learn from.

And there is also other research. For instance, the Kettering Foundation has
Research being conducted by the Harwood Institute looks at the assumptions that underlie a number of key leadership programs and how these programs and assumptions align with the teaching of democratic practice. Following are some of the preliminary findings, as reported last December by Richard Harwood and Michael Remaley.

◆ *Most programs pursue a limited definition of what it means to “know the community.”* Leadership programs vary considerably in how they define what it means for someone to “know the community.” For some programs, “knowing the community” simply means knowing the players and assimilating into the existing power structures through which issues get addressed. For others, exposing individuals to experiences in the community that will increase their knowledge and understanding of complex issues is the priority. For these programs, “knowing the community” is primarily an observational exercise — community learning occurs over a time-limited period through field trips, panel presentations, and data intake. Still others — mostly the “alternative” leadership programs — encourage participants to “know the community” by joining with others, especially leaders indigenous to the community who emerge as a result of personal experience with community challenges, to talk about issues and learn together. The emphasis of these programs is on developing leadership traits in individuals. Indeed, none of the programs name “community deliberation” as an important practice for learning about communities or allude to such practices in their programs.

◆ *Many programs focus on “skills” but not explicitly on democratic practice.* Leadership programs focus almost exclusively on building “leadership skills” (such as conflict resolution, working with media, moving issues through government channels, etc.) and knowledge of community challenges. Democratic processes, to some very limited degree, may be embedded in the ideas these programs present to participants, but they are definitely not discussed in any explicit way or afforded dedicated time for practice and learning.

◆ *There appears to be an inward/outward split among leadership programs.* Leadership programs, both traditional and alternative, seem to fall into one of two camps — either engaging participants primarily in an examination of the self (notions of self-awareness, service to the community, stewardship, and contacts with other leaders) or engaging participants in a closer examination of the external (notions of understanding community capacity and strengths and how to tap into community strengths).

◆ *There is an emerging group of programs that challenges visions of leadership.* These programs pursue a different vision of leadership that is distinct from, and often oppositional to, traditional leadership programs. They are working to expand awareness of “who is a leader,” who has capacity in communities to lead, and how community challenges should be addressed. The emphasis of these programs is on bringing new voices to the table. These programs generally have strong feelings about the perceived inadequacies of traditional leadership programs and are designed to provide avenues to leadership for those who are often overlooked by the traditional leadership programs.

◆ *Most programs stay at Leap One.* (See “Make the Leap,” p. 26.) They are not deeply transformative, though many describe themselves as such. They promote themselves with testimonials by participants who proclaim how significantly the programs impacted their lives. Other programs, on the other hand, are aware of their more basic role — that of simply helping people “open up” to new ideas. They point to the limits that time constraints and program structure place on their ability to engage people in transformational learning. But, importantly, the research conducted to date suggests that virtually none of the programs engage in the kind of deep personal examination, assisted practice and reexamination, and ongoing support in the operating environment that would lead to personal transformation of ingrained reflexes and old working assumptions.
Make the Leap

By Richard C. Harwood

Last week, a community leader wondered aloud to me, “Why is it that people get so excited at training sessions but then don’t do anything differently when they go back home?”

Most people and organizations that try to bring new ideas and practices into public life have asked themselves this question or one similar to it. Those of us in this line of work often feel as though we are banging our heads against a wall when seeking to generate change. But we often create such frustrations ourselves:

- We think it is far easier for people to genuinely learn new ideas and practices than it is.
- We fail to understand people’s “readiness” for learning — and what constitutes readiness and how it evolves.
- We simply focus our attention on the wrong kind of people.
- We make big plans for learning but then feel the need to plow ahead so fast that our plans take a back seat.
- We say we are committed to change but do not fully understand what it will take.

We confuse proclamations and plans with the exercise of true, sustained efforts. It is time to stop banging our heads against the wall.

The Public Learning Journey: What It Takes, How to Make It is about the process by which people learn new public ideas and practices. And it is a process. It is based on years of Harwood Institute experience working with communities, organizations, and individuals. It calls for sponsors of the learning journey to be more vigilant about their goals and expectations, their audience and the context, and the overall process of public learning.

The Third Leap Is the Charm

There are three leaps people make in the Public Learning Journey. Each leap is separate, critical, and builds on the others:

Opening up. The first leap takes place when people personally open themselves up to something new. But “opening up” is not just about hearing a new idea and thinking, “Yes, that’s a great idea!” It occurs only when people are engaged in looking inward to question their existing beliefs about the challenge being addressed, think about individual responsibility for what they can do to improve things, and take ownership of the need to personally change.

But most people resist this kind of deep introspection, which prompts questions about how and why they do what they do. People are more likely to open themselves up to the learning experience if they can discover a gap between their existing knowledge/practice and the challenges they face. And not just any idea will propel someone forward; we find it must be a “reorienting idea” — a compelling idea that turns accepted thinking around, crystallizing a new way of seeing something pivotal. Reorienting ideas have an intuitive language (not academic or theoretical) and ready-made coherence.

Opening up is fundamentally important to the public learning journey but is actually the least challenging among the three leaps. The problem is that many programs stop at the first leap, assuming they have met their goals. Seldom do deep practices emerge from the first leap.

New practice and personal turmoil. People make the second leap when they earnestly enter into an ongoing cycle of learning a new set of practices. But this part of the journey is far easier said than done.

In learning new practices, individuals need to be able to reflect on what they are learning and figure out how to put into play new approaches to their everyday work. This requires providing people with the room to ask questions as they try new approaches; room to be highly skeptical; and room to think in concrete, practical, and even political terms about how they can use the new ideas and practices in their daily lives.
As the learner begins to put new practices to work, he or she will have to come to terms with the reality of a resistant environment and face the choice of having to either revert to old ways of working or buck the tide. This choice creates within people even more internal turmoil. This second leap is higher and farther than the first, requiring important levels of discipline and vigilance — among both individual learners and those who sponsor learning.

Integration. The working focus of leap three is quite literally the personal transformation of ingrained reflexes and old working assumptions. This transformation is not just about changing a few ways of doing things, but about applying a new lens to how individuals think and act in public work. Indeed, as they make the third leap, people find they can readily translate their newfound knowledge to new situations as they arise.
For this leap to occur, the learning process must actively engage people in creating and implementing mechanisms in their daily life that institutionalize the new ideas and practices. This suggests that people must not only make the new thinking and practices their own, but also must reshape the work or community environment itself. Many people are unwilling or unable to take on this challenge. Instead, they change only some of their ways of thinking and acting, and so a full transformation does not occur.

In this third leap, sponsors of the learning journey must also find new ways to actively support people — and do so over time. Without this active support, most people end up feeling isolated in their struggle to integrate new ideas and practices into their work and lives. One last point: Much of the work in leap three must focus on the active cultivation of five key personal traits: courage, humility, discipline, stamina, and personal accountability. These traits, which some onlookers might see as being “soft,” relate to people’s ability to sustain their efforts and continue to learn at deep levels. We find that leap three ultimately revolves around these traits.

**Obstructions, Obstacles, Impediments, Bumps, Hurdles, Stumbling Blocks, Hitches, Catches, and Disincentives**

There is a second set of factors, a kind of overlay, that affects the public learning journey. The challenge for sponsors of public learning is to engage with these factors, be strategic about them, and work them. But far too often we find these factors are not genuinely considered or are given a kind of perfunctory lip service. When this occurs, the entire public learning process can be undermined.

**Personal Capacity.** At the individual level, there are personal-capacity factors that combine to accelerate or hinder public learning. In structuring public learning, it is essential to gauge people’s core capacities (their experience, training, and maturity), individual readiness, and ingrained biases. Too often, those trying to engage people in public learning are unwilling to take these factors into account and structure inappropriate learning processes as a result.

**Context.** It almost goes without saying that sponsors of public learning need to take into account the context in which the learning is to take place; but it must be said. It is essential to unpack a web of factors that include: the incentives and disincentives to learning within an environment; collective narratives that drive a community or organization; the core stability of the environment; the community or organization’s developmental stage and its capacity to change; and the culture and norms that support experimentation, new ideas, trial and error.

People often “talk” about these factors, but then overlook them once they get started on a public learning journey. Context is critical.

**Audience.** In seeking to generate change, civic efforts often set out to “change” the greatest number of people in the shortest amount of time. It is a common trap. But we find that initial efforts should concentrate on identifying and running with Early Adapters™, people who combine idealism and down-to-earth practicality with risk taking. Such people seek tangible outcomes and help others see what is possible; these outcomes are vital if others are to engage. Identifying such Early Adapters™ is not always a straightforward process, but it is critical.

**Prepare to Leap**

We can keep banging our heads against the wall — or leap over it. Engaging people in learning new public ideas and practices is nothing short of a journey; there is no easy fix. Far too often those who fund, manage, and promote such efforts fail to properly structure and support this journey. But with a deeper understanding of what it takes — three leaps, together with the factors that affect them — we can begin to reframe how we work with people on the public learning journey.

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Few issues in modern political debate have proven as contentious as environmental protection. Often the debate is framed as a typical polemic of environmental crusaders versus evil money-grubbing corporations or local communities against an imperialist government. In *This Sovereign Land: A New Vision for Governing the West*, Daniel Kemmis takes a new look at the politics of land management and environmental protection in the western United States.

Many Americans in the East never question what Kemmis cites as one of the primary challenges of the West: changing the imperial nature of the existing land management system. He argues that federal management of lands in the West is a legacy of the naturalist and imperialist policies of Presidents Thomas Jefferson and Theodore Roosevelt and is supported by the mythology of the West created by western writers such as Bernard DeVoto. Kemmis uses this book as an opportunity to examine closely the history of land management in the West, how the system that exists today came to be, and some of its glaring inadequacies.

There is hope for the West, however, as Kemmis points out. He suggests that today’s changing global political climate offers new opportunities for westerners to become personally responsible for the lands on which they have sustained themselves and to create “institutions appropriate to a democratic people inhabiting a unique landscape.” He cites numerous authors, such as Joel Garreau, Robert Kaplan, and Kenichi Ohmae, who suggest that globalization is making local accountability and regional cooperation more important than arbitrarily drawn national and state boundaries. Kemmis also examines numerous regional partnerships for land and water management, including the Toiyabe Wetlands and Watershed Management Team in Nevada, the Applegate Partnership in southern Oregon, and the Malpai Borderlands Group in Arizona and New Mexico, all of which demonstrate the capacity for regional action. Several of these partnerships challenge old myths about westerners and their capacity to govern themselves and their land, and introduce a new way of maintaining sustainable ecosystems and local economies.

This book is an insightful look at a part of the country that for many holds the sort of mystical power that Kemmis claims makes the West unique. The depth and breadth of information on the deep roots of the “irrepressible conflict” between stakeholders in land management issues is staggering, but presented in a way that is inviting and easy to assimilate. The book concludes with several suggestions about how political parties and individuals in the West can further cooperate to create space for local land-use management.

These examples provide students of community-based politics concrete examples of bottom-up planning and coordination with governmental entities. Lessons learned here could be applied to other circumstances in which powers are devolved to states and local governments and communities find themselves with new responsibilities or in cases where local groups must contend with federal bureaucracy. These new forms of cooperation demonstrate that the West is shaking old regional stereotypes and will continue to come into its own politically.

— Kelvin Lawrence
In *Making a Place for Community: Local Democracy in a Global Era*, the authors argue that current community revitalization and local democratization movements fail to fully consider the importance for healthy, engaged communities of local economic stability. In addition, community revitalization efforts often fail to take into account economic and political policies that hinder a community’s economic stability.

The authors argue, with sound theory and empirical evidence, that the stability of democracy depends on the stability of the community economy. They identify three key threats to community health: (1) globalization; (2) the movement of capital and jobs within the U.S.; and (3) suburban sprawl. Part I draws on interdisciplinary theory and research to elucidate the links between these three threats and community economic stability. The remainder (and majority) of the book is dedicated to describing practical ways to counter these threats.

The first chapter offers an excellent primer on the impact of globalization on community health and democracy, with critiques of the free trade ideology and the doctrine of comparative advantage. In essence, the authors argue that globalization and the attendant capital fluidity increase the power of firms relative to states and workers. This imbalance of power compromises local political autonomy and creates economic instability at the community level.

The second threat to community economic stability is the “chase for jobs,” or the movement of jobs within the U.S. due to business relocations. Local and state governments often operate under the assumption that relocations are not based on market factors, but rather on which locality can offer the best “welfare” package in the form of relocation incentives. (The book includes a list of common tax and loan incentives offered by cities and states.) The authors call into question the wisdom of this practice, citing research that finds tax incentives are not the primary reason — or even among the top five reasons — for company relocation.

They argue that the number of jobs created is often overestimated and the cost to the locality is often underestimated. The jobs created by such relocations are also devalued because they are unstable; there is little to prevent relocation again in the future to another part of the country or world. The authors conclude that the resources devoted to chasing jobs would be better spent investing in locally grown business, infrastructure, and education.

The third threat to community identified by the authors is suburban sprawl. They offer an excellent overview of the hidden costs and consequences of sprawl, as well as a discussion of the causes, which focuses on the often-neglected policy initiatives and public subsidies that drive suburban expansion and acknowledges the private market choice involved.

Throughout the remainder of the book, the authors successfully link strong interdisciplinary academic research to praxis. They describe dozens of broadly based approaches to stabilizing local economies through confronting the three threats. The strength of this monograph lies in the breadth and holistic approach of the place-based policy alternatives described. Potential policy changes at the community, state, federal, and international levels are discussed. Examples of successful (but small-scale) institutions and practices supportive of community economic stability leave the reader hopeful and optimistic, for the most part. However, the recommendations are at times overly ambitious, particularly at the international level. For example, one recommendation is for an “overhaul of the International Monetary Fund and the World Bank to put an end to structural adjustment policies.”

That said, most of the recommendations are practical and well thought-out. The authors call for the expansion of already successful place-based development programs, such as the Ohio Employee Ownership Center. Such centers fund worker-ownership feasibility studies before a fac-
Stephen Goodlad has given us a much-needed contribution in the study to understand why a democracy is important and what conditions either contribute to or take away from building a democratic society. The book, which consists mostly of contemporary writers on democracy, explores the important connections between democracy and education, the tensions between democracy and markets, education and the external political environment, law and justice, and “democratic character” and the “mass” man.

The Last Best Hope is divided into seven different parts that moves from a discussion of whether democracy is a good thing, through a discussion of citizenship and democratic character, to a conclusion that focuses on democracy’s future. Throughout this discussion there are several very strong chapters that provoke critical thinking. Among those chapters are two timely contributions on the danger of corporate power to a democratic society from Noam Chomsky and Howard Zinn. In the wake of recent revelations of corporate excesses, these two chapters cause us to refocus on the inherent tensions between the market and democracy.

Two important themes in the book are worth noting. The first is the danger of balkanization when building a democratic society and the second is the role of the university to challenge our fundamental beliefs.

Examples of the first theme are demonstrated by Wendell Berry and Philip Green. Berry challenges the university to focus on nurturing citizens and citizenship and away from the parochial interests of academics. He argues that the “com-modification” and “compartmentalization” of education is detrimental to civic values. Green, on the other hand, takes on those interested in identity politics. His claim is that a focus on the unique identity of various groupings makes it difficult, if not impossible, to develop what Putnam refers to as “bridging” capital — the ability to break out of like-minded groups and to connect with those groups that are different.

Examples of the second theme are found in the contributions by Boyd H. Bode and Martin Buber. Both authors point out that educators fail their students and the goals of a democratic society by not challenging students’ deeply held values. This is especially timely in light of the recent controversy on the campus of the University of North Carolina at Chapel Hill over the requirement that incoming freshmen read Michael Sells’ book Approaching the Qur’an: The Early Revelations (Ashland, OR: White Cloud Press, 1999).

Stephen Goodlad has edited a book that is appropriate for any college course on democratic theory or practical politics as well as organizations and individuals that are interested in the study of how to build stronger democratic practices.

— Christopher Kelley
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