Community Politics: A Lens for Seeing the Whole Story of Kettering Research
The interconnected challenges encountered.

David Mathews .............................................................. page 3

Engaging Citizens: Challenge One
Some research suggests that many of today’s citizens are not engaged in the collective work of community problem solving.

Disconnecting and Reconnecting with Community
Richard C. Harwood ....................................................... page 6
Reexamining “Chronic Disengagement” through Another Lens
John Cavanaugh ......................................................... page 8
Involving Ordinary Citizens in Public Work:
The Cincinnati Experience
Valerie Lemmie ............................................................... page 9
A Deeper Look at Citizen Engagement and Democracy
Anne Thomason reviews First Democracy by Paul Woodruff .... page 11

Regaining Our Sense of Community: Challenge Two
Other studies propose that the sense of community and the common good are being supplanted by self-interest, thus communities become dysfunctional and common problems go unsolved.

Engaging Untapped Community Resources
Carolyn Farrow-Garland ................................................. page 12
Coming Together to Address Wicked Social Problems
Sue E. Williams and Renée A. Daugherty ......................... page 15
Community Politics, Leadership, and International Research Connections
Maxine S. Thomas ......................................................... page 17

Reclaiming Our Institutions: Challenge Three
Further research contends that many of our institutions are distressed because citizens indicate they have lost considerable confidence in them.

Professionals, Institutions, and Community Challenges
Randall Nielsen ............................................................ page 19
Public Work and Education
Paloma Dallas explores Kettering Foundation’s recent publication:
Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy ........ page 21
Philanthropy and Public Life: A Question of Civil Investing
Scott London ............................................................... page 22
Institutional Administrators and Deliberative Democracy:
The Tittabawassee Case
Alice Diebel ................................................................. page 24

A New Book Worth Reading
Peter Levine reviews Politics Is About Relationship
by Harold H. Saunders ................................................... page 26
The piece I write for Connections usually lays out the options the foundation is considering for future research in one of its major areas of study. This issue, for instance, is about our research on Community Politics and Leadership. But I would like to do something a bit different this time. Before I describe the problems that might merit further study, I want to introduce a new project—one that sets out to tell what my colleague, Hal Saunders, calls the "whole story" that grows out of the major lines of Kettering research.

By "whole," we don't mean that the story includes everything that could be studied; we mean that it is an integrated, coherent account of how "We, the People" can exercise our responsibilities as the sovereign authority in our democracy. It is about the problems behind the problems of democracy and the practices that empower the citizenry to deal with them.

There are several reasons for capturing the story that is the totality of Kettering research. A whole story or narrative should provide coherence in ways that a catalog of individual studies doesn't. Just as the narrative or plot line of a good play gives meaning to particular events, the narrative that connects the major lines of Kettering research should reveal the full significance of particular findings. For instance, public deliberation, one of the practices the foundation has studied, can be seen as just another technique in group dynamics if it isn't presented in the context of the whole of democratic politics. Deliberation can't be understood apart from its role in redefining problems and producing sound decisions for action.

One of the ways a narrative provides context is by showing relationships. While practices that empower citizens, such as deliberation, can be distinguished from...
that contribute to our understanding of community. We think that community is one of the lenses that brings into focus the foundation’s entire research and highlights the whole story.

By ‘community,’ we mean a diverse group of people who share the same geography and circumstances. Their daily lives are affected by floods and industries relocating to other countries. They are influenced by the history and customs of their place. Communities play an important role in the American political system. They allow people to experience democracy by participating in local elections, by serving on school boards and juries, and through opportunities to lay their opinions alongside the opinions of others who are outside their immediate circle of neighbors.

While community politics is a specific area of research, information about how communities function comes from all of the other areas of Kettering research. The chart below shows the research, both domestic and international, that is used in community politics. Note, for example, how much the study of community depends on the cluster of research called Citizens and Public Choice and the cluster called Institutions, Professionals, and the Public. The research on public education has been an especially rich source of information on communities because of the effects communities have on schools and other educational institutions—and vice versa. To look through the lens of any of these other areas of study is to look at the whole of Kettering’s research.

Although I have only outlined the whole story in the broadest terms, I’d like to turn now to the discipline we used in reviewing the research on communities. We began this review, as we have all others, with surveys of the relevant literature and reports about what other research and community organizations are doing. Then, combining the results of these surveys with our findings, we identified the problems behind the problems that communities face. These fundamental problems aren’t the same as the immediate and urgent problems of the day. (Other organizations are better suited to provide research on those.) The problems we try to identify have the ability to shut down or seriously impair one or more of the primary operating systems of a body politic. If the electricity goes off in a building, it is a serious problem but not a

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**Reviewing Community Politics**

**Is a Review of All Research**

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**Community Research**

- **Citizens & Public Choice**
  - Deliberation on Local Issues
  - Space for Deliberation in Communities
  - Public Thinking on Local Issues

- **Community Politics & Leadership**
  - Citizens Engagement
  - Public Practices & Work
  - Local Institutions

**Civic/Economic Research**

**Institutions, Professionals, & The Public**

- Schools/Educational Institutions
- Municipal & County Governments
- Local Media
- Community Foundations
- Academic Community Development Professionals

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**International Research**
fundamental one. If the foundation cracks and the building becomes unstable, it is a fundamental problem. The building will collapse. Fundamental political problems are perennial because they are embedded in the fabric of society.

The next step in our review is to assess the capacity of the foundation to contribute to the work of communities that are grappling with fundamental problems. Although there are a number of fundamental problems in communities, Kettering doesn't have the capacity to respond to all of them. The foundation's strengths are in research on problems that have to do with the role of the public.

Part of assessing the foundation’s capacity to do useful research involves looking at what we have learned from our past studies. Sometimes we answered the question we were asking; sometimes we didn’t. And sometimes (actually quite often), we learned we had the question wrong. When that happened, we had to dig deeper into the problem at hand. And going deeper added to our research capacity.

Once we are reasonably sure that we have the capacity to pursue a line of research, our review calls for us to consider two other issues: The first is whether new research will complement or support studies done in other areas. This overlap makes our findings stronger and more credible, and it contributes to a more comprehensive and coherent whole story.

Second, no matter how rigorously Kettering has followed its review discipline up to this point, the foundation can’t go from diagnostic research to studies of remedies without finding organizations or institutions that have a self-interest in experimenting with a new approach to an old problem. Kettering wants to learn what real people do out of their own interests and resources. We can’t claim citizens are willing to do something to make democracy work better if we pay them to do it, which is why we must find fellow travelers who are struggling with problems similar to those we are studying. Their willingness to participate is an important litmus test in the review process. For instance, deliberative forums are significant because Kettering does not conduct them or pay to have them conducted.

The review we have been doing this year on our studies of communities has generated a list of fundamental problems. The next step will be to identify opportunities that might arise from matching Kettering’s strengths in research with these problems, which seem to fall into three categories.

Disengaged Citizens

Americans, it has been charged, are—for the most part—apathetic and uninformed. They are incapable of making sound decisions, even about their own best interests. Worse still, they are disinclined to make the effort to inform themselves. Shirking their own responsibilities, they blame their leaders and those in positions of authority for their problems. Citizens counter that they have been driven out of the political system by moneyed interests. Since they have little influence, there is no reason to invest their time and energy in political matters. So they remain largely disengaged, even when leaders and those in positions of authority promote civic participation.

Dysfunctional Communities

Some studies suggest that the very sense of community, of being connected to people other than family or friends, is waning. Most Americans are said to be concerned about their individual rights and well-being, rather than the common good. At most, they ally with those who agree with them, creating numerous factions that fragment towns and cities. People, on the other hand, argue that the only place where they can be secure is within small, close-knit groups. They regret the loss of a sense of community but say they really can’t count on their fellow citizens. The result is too many dysfunctional communities. Local institutions attempt to rally people around a common good that proves to be elusive, while citizens try to find some semblance of community with those they feel they can count on. The net effect is that common problems often go unsolved and stack up like uncollected garbage.

Distressed Institutions

Professionally directed institutions, not citizens, it has been argued, are best suited to solve the problems of a modern society. Citizens need only be informed consumers and give institutions considerable authority to ensure that sound policy is enacted and enforced. Citizens, however, have lost considerable confidence in all major institutions, even local ones. In the case of public schools, for instance, research shows that many Americans doubt the schools are really theirs or that they can make a useful difference in how these institutions perform. Yet if citizens are only consumers and take no responsibility, their institutions may not be able to educate, govern, or carry out any function alone. That results in even less public confidence in these institutions.

We welcome comments on these and other problems. We also welcome suggestions about where Kettering’s strengths may be put to best use and information about communities that are struggling with the absence of a collective public.

David Mathews is president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached by e-mail at dmathews@kettering.org.
Listen carefully and you can hear the dominant narrative of our times: We are a nation divided between red states and blue states, church-goers and non-church-goers, as well as urban and suburban and rural voters.

But in conversations I have held with Americans over the past 15 years about their relationship to politics, public life, and to each other, it is clear that this conventional wisdom is wrong—and dangerously misleading. Rather, our dilemma is that people have retreated altogether from politics and public life into close-knit circles of family and friends. They have thrown up their hands in dismay; they have walked away and turned inward.

There are many reasons for people’s retreat. Here are two key drivers: The first is that when people look out into public life and politics, they do not see their reality reflected. This leaves people with the feeling that they are on their own, without the confidence that their concerns will be understood or addressed.

The second reason is even more troubling and potentially harmful: the actual distortion of people’s reality. Today, people believe that their concerns and hopes are being mercilessly abused and mangled in the daily iterations of public life and politics. The source of such manipulation is political leaders who are more focused on their own personal interests than the common interest; news media that are more concerned with hyping and sensationalizing the news than in illuminating the tough issues we collectively must face; and even community, civic, and neighborhood leaders who are obsessed with protecting their own turf and shrinking budgets and jockeying to claim credit for good deeds.

People are unable to see and hear and feel themselves in the public square, and much of what they do experience seems unreal. In this way, we must know that people are robbed of the vital sense of coherence that we, as human beings, so urgently seek—especially in times of significant change. A sense of possibility...
and hope is now missing from our public affairs.

But there is more. At every turn it seems that we Americans—that is, each of us as individuals—have taken on the title of the “almighty consumer”—expecting to get what we want, when we want it, at the highest quality and the lowest cost. It can seem at times that we hold limitless expectations, and that we’re on constant high alert, ready to complain the moment we perceive that our desires are not being fulfilled.

And yet, how is it that we will cultivate the collective understanding and will necessary to address a host of public concerns if so many of us have retreated and think of ourselves as isolated consumers freelancing through society?

When I have asked people in different communities to give me a motto for the nation, one person responded by saying, “I’ve got mine and to heck with you.” Another individual said, “I’m for me and you’re for you.” And a third person gave me this motto: “I’m for me and you’re for me!”

Unfortunately, those of us working on issues of public concern often reinforce people’s vision of themselves as footloose consumers. We employ customer-service models in our work, consistently asking people, “What can we do for you?” Too often we fail to ask people to consider the whole of the community; and too often public discourse focuses on people’s demands and complaints and claims rather than on identifying common aspirations and tapping into people’s sense of obligation to one another.

What’s more, too many of us pursue advocacy approaches—on issues such as school vouchers, health care, social security, and others—that employ the same divisive tactics people see coming from their political leaders, all the while masquerading as “civic engagement.” I can’t begin to recount how many times people have described to me their efforts to “engage” Americans on public issues, that add up to nothing more than selling to “engage” Americans on public issues, to imagine the possibilities for what can be achieved when we come together to act in the public realm.

If you believe, as I do, that we must find better ways to foster the collective will and action among people to create change in our communities, then we must pursue an alternate path for politics and public life. There are three building blocks that I believe must be at the heart of any and all efforts to create such change.

• First, we must square up with the reality of people’s lives. By this I mean we must understand why people have retreated and under what conditions they will step forward.

• Second, we must tap into people’s desire to be part of something larger than themselves and to work for the public good not just their own good. Our task is to forgo engaging people as isolated consumers and reinstitute a sense of purpose and meaning in our public affairs. Otherwise, we will be unable to bring people together to address our common concerns.

• Third, we must affirm our commitment to hope. But meeting this challenge requires that we make a clear distinction between false hope and authentic hope. People do not want to endure more disappointment.

People often say to me that the challenge of reversing people’s retreat can feel overwhelming. My own response to them is the following: If each of us believes that we alone can reverse this retreat, then we will be overwhelmed. But if each of us takes our part of the challenge—that part which is near to us and over which we have some control—then change is possible.

My own experience tells me that, if we remain on our current course, too many of us will remain on the sidelines, spectators of the public square, just at a time when we are needed most. Too many of us will buy into the assumption that we are powerless, when action is possible. Too many well-meaning efforts will fail to adequately address the great challenge of people’s disaffection that now confronts us. Worse yet, too many endeavors will be designed and implemented to further divide politics and public life and diminish people’s hope.

I vividly recall a woman in Richmond telling me 15 years ago that, “If we say we’re frustrated and not going to do anything about it, then we won’t. But if we keep trying, we might make a difference.” The people’s voices tell us that we must see ourselves differently if we are to find hope in an era of retreat. They tell us that, to find an alternate path, we must act with authentic hope, and they urge us to step forward.

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Challenge One

Reexamining “CHRONIC Disengagement” through Another Lens

By John Cavanaugh

Across the country there is a fundamental condition that consistently undercuts even the most successful community development efforts: chronic disengagement. In most cities, public or civic life is a hostile environment for the average person, ruled by cynicism and division, and dominated by entrenched habits of isolation and detachment.

William Traynor and Jessica Andors
Lawrence CommunityWorks

Our review of the Community Politics and Leadership program area has provided us with a unique opportunity to demonstrate the internal connectivity of the foundation’s research strategy. Our challenge here is to reexamine findings from our studies of Citizens and Public Choice as well as our research on Institutions, Professionals, and the Public in order to derive additional insights that may have implications for our future Community Politics research. Given that communities are comprised of various local institutions constantly searching for new and innovative ways to solve public problems, we can now draw upon several previous reports from our Public-Government program that clearly illustrate the foundation’s interdependent research methodology.

As Traynor and Andors note in the opening quote, local agencies and community organizations struggle to create more hospitable environments for effective civic engagement. This is exactly what the Kettering Foundation is looking for in our studies called “factors that affect the willingness of organizations to provide space for public deliberation” under Citizens and Public Choice. In this instance, Lawrence CommunityWorks in Massachusetts is attempting to confront the problem of “chronic disengagement” at the local level by means of a “network organizing strategy that connects people to each other and to opportunities for people to step into public life—from the neighborhood group to the City Council—in a way that feels, safe, fun and productive.”

But what if the local problem is highly complex with a raft of technical details? Can local citizens from various socioeconomic backgrounds engage in a deliberative discourse and reach reasoned public judgments about a hazardous-waste cleanup? These questions were addressed recently by KF Visiting Scholar, Alice Diebel, in a study of how federal, state, and local agencies worked with a Central Michigan community confronted with dioxin-contaminated sediment in the Tittabawassee River. While the major findings from this research related to public administration, this report also yielded key findings about the “unorganized” public’s capacity to deal with extremely complicated issues.

Similar conclusions can be drawn from an experiment conducted several years ago by Mike Pompili when he worked for the Columbus Health Department. In this case, the complicated local problem involved high levels of smog and ground-level ozone in Columbus and Central Ohio. In an effort to reduce the pollution that contributed to the formation of smog, the Columbus Health Department developed “Community Leadership to Effect Air Emission Reductions,” or Project CLEAR.

As Pompili notes, the health department attempted to move beyond the traditional public education campaign: The Project CLEAR outreach and education effort needed to be more than building awareness of the issue and informing the public about the technical aspects of ozone and health effects. We wanted to involve citizens in consideration of public policy actions that could affect the future of air quality in Central Ohio.

From October 2000 to June 2001 we held 22 forums. The two-hour forums were held in community locations in urban neighborhoods, suburban and outlying county locations within the Central Ohio attainment area. We developed an issue guide to present four generic public policy approaches. By involving small groups of people in a high quality facilitated discussion, we obtained exceptionally detailed public feedback. They told us how they perceived the issue of ozone, what actions as individuals they would do and not do, what responsibility and actions they expected from government and business, as well as revealed the underlying assumptions they brought to the table.

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But what if the local problem is highly complex with a raft of technical details? Can local citizens from various socioeconomic backgrounds engage in a deliberative discourse and reach
Likewise, the Hamilton County Regional Planning Commission provides us with a third Public-Government research experiment to review anew through the lens of Community Politics and Leadership. In the Fall of 2002, the commission initiated a comprehensive master plan for Hamilton County, Ohio. The core goal was to create this plan using “collaborative decision making” open to the public. HCRPC staff developed “Community COMPASS (Comprehensive Master Plan and Strategies)” which included an issue-framing/public-deliberation component to address the problems of “governance” in the county. This resulted in Hamilton County’s first master plan since 1964.

Again, we have here another example of a report that originated in the foundation’s Public-Government area migrating to our Community Politics/Leadership work group. Based on the Hamilton County evaluation, David Mathews made this observation about Government Planning and Public Politics: “We have reason to believe that public deliberation produces a broader sense of a problem, which encourages multiple actors. But can those actors produce effective action by each person or each group doing their own thing without attention to enlisting other actors, marshalling resources, considering steps or timetables? If they must, should citizens adopt bureaucratic techniques? Or is there a public way of planning and implementing?”

This essay provides three short examples of past Public-Government research studies that have helped us shed new light on questions from our Community Politics and Leadership program area. More important, it demonstrates that our research projects are “not separate studies, but one research design with multiple components.” Thus, from a methodological vantage point, the research capacity of the foundation will only increase when we take a fresh look at previous findings from new perspectives. By relating to past research, new research can build upon past findings and allow us to understand interrelated political phenomena.

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One

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of proactive crime fighting—addressing
roach as it is grounded in a philosophy
approach to crime fighting is best illus

to call when there was a problem. This
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government. In the past, citizens were
a far more evolved role than citizens have
involved, including faith-based organiza

and feel alienated.

police officers, and city staff who meet
regularly to map out ways to reduce
crime and the associated violence and
economic destabilization which results.
Often, other community stakeholders are
involved, including faith-based organiza
tions, business owners, and community
activists.

The goal of Cincinnati’s CPOP initiative
is to move responsibility for fighting crime
from police alone to a shared responsibil
ity between police and citizens. This is
a far more evolved role than citizens have
historically been asked to play by their
government. In the past, citizens were
looked to as the eyes and ears of the
police, and they were simply expected
to call when there was a problem. This
approach to crime fighting is best illus
trated with programs like Neighborhood
Watch and Crime Stoppers.

CPOP offers a radically different app
roach as it is grounded in a philosophy
of proactive crime fighting—addressing
problems before a crime is committed,
rather than simply responding through
enforcement after a crime has occurred.
For citizens, CPOP means less reliance on
police and government and more respon
sibility for themselves.

There are currently 31 neighborhood
CPOP teams (the city has 52 recognized
neighborhoods). It is expected that all
52 neighborhoods will have CPOP teams
over time. On average, there are 15 citi
zens involved per team.

In keeping with the theory of Broken
Windows, most of the teams are address
ing problems of drug trafficking, littering,
prostitution, loitering, illegal drinking,
and disorderly conduct. A combination
of directed code enforce
ment, specifically tailored
police response tactics,
environmental barriers, cam
eras, streetlights, property
transfers, and liquor license
objections have begun to
make visible differences in
the quality of life in Cincin
nati neighborhoods. This has
encouraged more delibera
tion among citizens, busi
ness, and government on
other projects and initiatives.
Cincinnati’s CPOP teams
have been successful because they pro
vide a means for citizens to address those
problems that made them feel alienated
and angry. The problems the teams work
on are those identified by citizens and
citizens deliberate with government and
others about what to do, how to do it,
and when it should be done.

For example, in several neighbor
hoods, citizens launched letter-writing
campaigns in which they complained
to property owners about code violations
in an effort to alleviate the adverse impact
of these derelict properties on the value
of their properties and the overall quality
of life in their neighborhoods. Whereas
judges originally saw such crimes as minor
and usually just gave violators a “slap on
the wrist,” once citizens got involved, the
response from judges was completely
different—it became more economical
to comply with code requirements than
to pay stiff fines, serve a possible jail term,
and face public ridicule.

Another example is in the Over-the
Rhine neighborhood. Here, a CPOP team
tackled the problem of youth loitering,
littering, and selling drugs. Once neighbors
got involved and worked with property
owners and police to address concerns, the
problems ceased. In one instance, residents
put up a street banner and signs saying
drugs would not be sold here anymore;
and they joined police in patrolling their
corner, and the drug dealing stopped.

CPOP teams often tackle the “lower
hanging fruit” problems first in order to
have some quick wins, before they tackle
larger problems. For example, in the
Kennedy Heights neighborhood the CPOP
team sought to stop drug dealers from
using a pedestrian bridge to sell drugs.
Citizens decided they needed to find a way
to make it uncomfortable for the dealers to
sit on the bridge while they were waiting
for customers. They came up with the idea
of making an aesthetic barrier using plastic
eggs with concrete poured on one side of
them, resulting in bumps that were oval on
one side and flat on the other. They then
glued them to the bridge. The drug dealing
on the bridge stopped.

CPOP teams have not simply drawn
up “city-do” lists. Rather, citizens offer their
perspectives and suggestions along with
those of other community stakeholders,
police, and city administrators to offer more
comprehensive and creative solutions to
problems. Team members have learned
that by sharing information, all gain knowl
edge and, through knowledge, all gain a
better understanding of the nature of a
problem and the degree to which given
problems plague a community. This shared
understanding moves the group to delib
eration on how best to fix problems. From
this understanding comes action—specific
steps each party must take to fix a problem.

While much has been accomplished,
much remains to be done as the com
munity wrestles with these tough issues
and problems. Yet, an important accom
plishment has risen out of the chaos of
Cincinnati’s unrest—a new collaboration
between citizens and police directed at a
reduction in both crime and disorder.

Valerie Lemmie is a scholar-in-residence at
the Kettering Foundation. Previously, she was
city manager for the City of Cincinnati and a
signatory to the Collaborative Agreement. She can
be reached by e-mail at lemmie@kettering.org.
A Deeper Look at Citizen Engagement and Democracy

First Democracy: The Challenge of an Ancient Idea

by Paul Woodruff
New York: Oxford University Press, 2005

Do Americans truly practice democracy? We often speak with pride of our democracy and rarely question as to whether our system is, in fact, a democracy. But do we truly practice it? Paul Woodruff, in his recent book, unmasks certain practices that look like democracy on the surface but are instead ideas that actually represent failures of democratic practice. He calls them “doubles.”

He makes his claims by going back into history and examining Athenian democracy and the seven core ideas of democracy that he found there. According to Woodruff, these ideas include harmony, freedom from tyranny, rule of law, natural equality, citizen wisdom, reasoning without knowledge, and education. These ideas are what make Athens the “first democracy.”

Athenian democracy at times went astray, during times of war in particular, but Athenians endeavored to cultivate a clear vision of democracy—what it meant, how it should work, and what it should ultimately accomplish. According to Woodruff, the vision and constant debate over the ideas of democracy are absent in democratic societies today.

Woodruff identifies three of democracy’s doubles. These include the practices of voting, electing representatives, and majority rule. For example, he argues that voting is not democratic in a system in which an elite chooses the candidates. Indeed, dictators have often used voting to solidify their own power.

The democratic double of electing representatives is closely related to the fallacy of voting as democracy. Elected representatives often find themselves required to curry favor with their wealthy benefactors and special-interest groups rather than the public as a whole. Not only will such elected representatives not represent the will of the people, but, as we have seen in the United States, people lose confidence in the government when special interests seem to have endless lobbying power with both the legislative and executive branches.

Finally, Woodruff states that out of all the doubles, majority rule is most often confused with democracy and is thus the most “seductive” of all three. Majority rule is “merely government by and for the majority.” As Woodruff says, “it’s not freedom if you have to join the majority in order to feel that you are free.” Majority rule leads us away from the democratic idea of freedom from tyranny. Freedom from tyranny not only frees the people from a dictator, but demands active citizen participation to allow people to achieve their own destiny.

Thus each of these democratic doubles is the result of ignoring one of the seven democratic ideas, as expressed in Athenian democracy. All seven of the democratic ideas are interconnected, particularly harmony and rule of law. Harmony requires three things to function in a democracy: “adhering to the rule of law, working together to seek common goals, and accepting differences.” No citizen can be above the rule of law. When the rule of law is ignored, such as when a rich man escapes punishment for his crime while a poor man is sentenced to jail, harmony will be upset. Athenians came to the realization that they could disagree about anything as long as they adhered to the rule of law and respected these differences.

Woodruff argues that citizen wisdom is essential in order for ordinary people to possess the wisdom to govern themselves. How do people acquire this wisdom? It is part of human nature, personal experience, tradition, and education.

Closely connected to citizen wisdom is the idea of reasoning without knowledge. To be done well, it requires open debate. It is working out that which is most reasonable to believe. He argues that “adversary debate, followed by a vote, is a rational way of handling murky issues.”

Woodruff offers substantial challenges for our current educational system, which focuses on preparing people for jobs, but fails in teaching good citizenship. Students are not asked to consider the tough questions of democracy. Woodruff speaks gravely about fear—the public media has done a wonderful job creating “shared ignorance, shared fear, shared outrage” but not “shared compassion, shared commitment to justice, or shared reverence.” These are qualities, he argues, that could be cultivated through education.

Athenians did not succeed in all of these areas of democracy. They did, however, debate and attempt to base their democracy upon these ideas. Woodruff contends that, in the United States today, we fail to even consider these ideas, much less debate and dream about them. His book is a call for us to reexamine the struggles of democracy today through the experiences of ancient Athens.

—Anne Thomason

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Regaining Our Sense of Community

**Challenge Two**

Other studies propose that the sense of community and the common good are being supplanted by self-interest, thus communities become dysfunctional and common problems go unsolved.

Engaging Untapped Community Resources

By Carolyn Farrow-Garland

What does it take to solve community problems? What does it mean to tap community resources? Can public deliberation and dialogue catalyze the resources among people in minority and low-income communities? What are people in these communities willing to do? Research on untapped community resources seeks to answer these questions.

Kettering Foundation contends that people in minority and low-income communities represent an untapped community resource that could add value in the addressing of public problems. Racial and ethnic minorities, immigrants, and poor people are rarely consulted by government and political leaders when community issues arise. Their associations with government institutions oftentimes place them on the receiving end for services and assistance. Rarely are they viewed as having anything meaningful to contribute. The result is that people in these communities lose confidence in their capacities to engage in community problem solving, and they become disconnected from civic discourse in the wider community.
There are many people in these communities who are willing to engage in the meaningful public work necessary to resolve common problems. For example, one major focus in some of these communities has been improving education, which is one of the primary reasons that alternatives, such as charter schools, have gained credibility in inner-city communities. People contribute something important to the very fragile community infrastructure. Churches and youth centers serve as public spaces, where people provide after school care, tutoring, youth recreation, and other services. Too often, however, these efforts are unnoticed and undervalued. John Kretzman and John McKnight of Northwestern University were among the first scholars to map the assets in these communities. Their work with residents in low-income neighborhoods in inner-city Chicago illuminated the overlooked potential of community institutions.

These community institutions lack bridges to the broader community, to political networks and places where decisions are made. In the 2001 publication entitled, *Dry Bones Rattling: Community Building to Revitalize American Democracy*, author Mark Warren highlights the disconnect between local community institutions and our political systems. He argues that, in addition to focusing on the institutional life that still exists in communities, effective strategies are needed to enhance the leadership of community members and to bridge social capital across communities, especially those divided by race.

In a recent Kettering workshop series, participants engaged in a community discovery process designed to better understand how people actually engage in problem solving related to education. Participants were from six communities: a rural community in Kentucky; a Native American community in South Dakota; and African American communities in Dayton, Ohio, Helena, Arkansas, and Montgomery County, Maryland.

The purpose of the workshop series was to explore what community members might do to deal with the problems of education. Our hope was to identify how work by people in these communities might serve as a bridge to establishing better relationships with the schools in the community.

This research informs Kettering’s understanding of public practices related to research on the Public and Public Schools. However, the results also provide relevant insights into research in areas of Community Politics and Leadership and for how people develop connections with public institutions.

The workshop participants have used different approaches in attempting to engage their communities. All have been involved in convening public forums on community issues and are viewed as civic leaders or community organizers. We began by using questions outlined in *Hard Talk*, a guide developed by Kettering Foundation to stimulate dialogue. *Hard Talk* is designed for community members interested in engaging in dialogue and interrogating their own experiences pertaining to learning and education. The questions encourage people to think about their learning experiences, to reflect on something important they learned, and to describe the person who taught that lesson.
The important question is what lessons can be drawn from the experience of connecting with untapped community resources?

Most of the grandmothers are recent immigrants to the community and speak very little English. When the grandmothers deliberated, they discussed the value of education and contrasted the experiences in their former country with their experiences in the United States. They noted that, many times when they visited schools, teachers were busy with extraneous tasks that left little time for teaching. So, the grandmothers stepped forward and volunteered to help in classrooms with classroom organization work, such as making copies and other similar tasks. Their presence in the schools has contributed indirectly to fewer discipline problems and better communication between schools and working parents.

In Montgomery County, Maryland, African American community leaders and activists, who provided leadership in breaking down education discrimination barriers almost a half century ago, convened a forum to reflect on the significance of the Fiftieth Anniversary of the Brown v. Board of Education decision by the United States Supreme Court. Their reflections led to a series of dialogic conversations in which they determined that they had abandoned the cause of education, leaving the responsibility of education to teachers and other school professionals. This insight has resulted in a renewed commitment to focus on education issues and continue the work of bringing about educational equity.

In both rural Kentucky and Montgomery County, when the public stepped forward, there were institutions that reached out to accommodate these initiatives. For example, when the Latina grandmothers were unable to produce the long list of documents required to volunteer in schools, the school administrators accepted alternative documentation, such as letters of reference from the parish priest. In Montgomery County, the local community college had been trying for months to reach out to the African American leadership in the county when the men and women from the Brown v. Board dialogue stepped forward and requested a meeting to learn how they might work together to improve public education. Efforts in Helena, Arkansas, and Cincinnati, Ohio, met resistance.

The important question is what lessons can be drawn from the experience of connecting with untapped community resources? Our research helped to reveal that opportunities for dialogue within communities are limited. The need for what the foundation calls “public space” is vitally important. These local spaces provide opportunities for people in communities to engage in public dialogue. Public space is a necessary precondition for public work. What people decide to do will depend in large part on their capacities and their sense that it is possible for them to do something to address a problem. To the outside world, their efforts often appear to be small, tentative steps. Yet, such steps build on one another.

We also learned that these communities need leadership. But the leadership must emerge from within the community. Community leaders encourage others and keep the process going even when attention is directed elsewhere and the pressure of busy lives takes over. People in communities need willing partners—people in formal institutions, such as schools, that recognize the advantages inherent in developing these types of relationships within their community.

It is clear that these elements are important for community-building. Yet these community initiatives raise many new questions concerning the overall effects of this type of public work. As Mark Warren noted in Dry Bones Rattling, revitalizing democracy requires community-building, but it also requires something more: creating institutional links between stronger communities and our political system.

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Each year several million adult women and men experience violence at the hands of their intimate partner. The violence may be physical, emotional, or both and may involve husband and wife, ex-spouses, boyfriend and girlfriend, or co-habitating adults. Economic costs of intimate partner violence are estimated to be nearly six billion dollars each year. The emotional costs are uncounted.

The Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation (OPPD) was formed in 2000 in response to a documented interest and need for addressing challenging social problems in a way that included citizen perspectives and judgment. One of the mainstays of OPPD is workshops in which adults and older youth learn skills and strategies for public deliberation. OPPD also convenes deliberative forums throughout the state.

In late summer 2004, OPPD expanded their efforts to foster public deliberation both conceptually and geographically by framing the issue of intimate partner domestic violence to be used in communities throughout the nation. Domestic violence, particularly intimate partner violence, is a problem in Oklahoma that has frustrated law enforcement, the judiciary, social-service agencies, and most important, the individuals and families touched by this problem. Our state is not alone in this frustration—it is a national problem.

For almost two decades, the works of Ronald Heifetz, as well as Rittel and Webber, have been cited when describing social problems that are suited for, if not demanded for, public deliberation. Heifetz indicates that our most serious political problems are those in which the very definition of the problem is unclear and the nature of the treatment undefined. These are problems that governments and experts cannot fix by themselves. For these problems, without an engaged public, there is little hope for finding a workable solution. Rittel and Webber call these problems “wicked problems.” The issue of intimate partner violence certainly fits the description of a wicked social problem—one that has permeated our social fabric for centuries—one that experts and social activists have tried to address with little success—an issue plaguing communities across our country.

Currently communities and states are dealing with domestic violence, and specifically intimate partner violence, in many ways. In several instances, communities choose to ignore the problem, contending that it is a private issue. Other communities and states are aggressively addressing the problem from single perspectives like criminal justice, law enforcement, or social-service action. All of these approaches are proving to be unsatisfactory, thus allowing a serious common problem to go unsolved; a reflection of the dysfunctional nature of today’s communities.

Given this situation, OPPD concluded that public deliberation is essential in order to impact social change related to intimate partner violence in communities across our nation. Thus the partnership accepted the challenge of framing this wicked problem. A work group, including OPPD members and individuals interested in issues related to domestic violence—including community activists, social-service providers, educators, researchers, and the abused—convened to design a project for framing for public deliberation the issue of intimate partner domestic violence.

One of the most challenging aspects of the framing effort was to name the problem in public terms. During a second work group session, participants struggled...
with questions such as: How do citizens understand the problem? How do people talk about the problem? What other problems do people seem to link with this problem? What about this problem is really important to people? What are the different points of view with respect to this problem? This intense work session included some frustration on the part of individuals, but ultimately, a clearer understanding of individual and collective perspectives on a wicked issue emerged.

The problem was named Intimate Partner Violence (IPV) and described as violence between adult couples in American society. IPV may be physical, emotional, or both. The costs of Intimate Partner Violence are huge. The work group experience of struggling to name and describe the issue in public terms helped this diverse group realize that their perspectives and experiences were rich but limited. So the work group decided to gather additional perspectives on the issue.

Web-based, e-mail, and paper surveys were distributed throughout the National Issues Forum database and to any group identified by the work group. From across the nation, over 530 responses were received in a two-week period. Respondents came from all walks of life, a wide range of socioeconomic and ethnic groups, and virtually every age and educational level. People responded with concern and passion about the need to address the heinous problem of Intimate Partner Violence.

A group of twenty-nine individuals from Oklahoma and seven other states were invited to participate in framing the issue of IPV for community consideration. The challenge before the group was to frame the issue in a manner that minimized polarization, which can prevent positive social change. Individuals represent concerned citizens, victims of abuse, members of the judicial system, members of law enforcement, educators (public and higher), social-service providers, leaders of the religious community, representatives of advocacy groups, and convenors and moderators of National Issues Forums. The framing team drew on the resources from the work group, the survey, and the experiences and perspectives of those participating in the framing session.

Large group and sub-team work during a two-day period created a preliminary framework. Framing group members participated in an exercise in which they were asked to describe various Intimate Partner Violence scenarios to determine how people perceived the severity of each scenario. This was an experiential way of helping the group realize how people perceive and define the problem differently. Further, this experience helped participants grasp the wide range of situations that exist within the Intimate Partner Violence problem.

Three sub-teams, lead by experienced NIF moderators with extensive issue-framing experience, worked independently, using different framing approaches to identify three or four themes that emerged from the voices on the issue of Intimate Partner Violence. The whole group then convened to discuss common themes that emerged from sub-team work and draft approaches. From these themes, three approaches were drafted. After approaches were identified, each sub-team worked to identify possible actions associated with each approach, the voices of those who would speak for the approach, the voices of those with contrary views, and likely tradeoffs for each approach. Ultimately a preliminary NIF issue map was created—Intimate Partner Violence: What can we do?

Pilot forums were conducted across Oklahoma and the United States to test the preliminary framework. Three-hour pilot forums tested the framework to determine whether it fostered public deliberation in a variety of settings and queried participants about its “user-friendliness.” Framework revisions were based on these pilot forums.

After the issue-framing session, it was clear that important voices on this issue were missing—the voices of perpetrators and abusers. To address this situation, pilot forums included abusers in both mixed settings and homogenous settings. Input provided by perpetrators and abusers provided valuable perspectives for additional framework revisions.

Framing a wicked public problem is a time-consuming, challenging, and often frustrating experience. Individuals who are very passionate about a given issue must be willing to hear the voices that may not be heard on that issue. Individuals with experience and commitment to public deliberation and issue framing must listen carefully to the voices of those who care very much about an issue.

Only time will tell if the work of the many dedicated individuals associated with the Oklahoma Partnership for Public Deliberation and the National Issue Forums will help to change communities that are struggling with IPV. Issue framing is about community-building in a unique sense. It attacks the dysfunctional aspect of today’s communities in which common problems go unsolved with a counteraction that attempts to solve these problems by balancing self-interest with a sense of community and the common good. It is the bringing together of a community of people who care very much about the well-being of others and believe in the importance of building viable, sustainable communities capable of making decisions about challenging, everyday problems.

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Community, Politics, Leadership, and International Research Connections

By Maxine S. Thomas

Kettering Foundation research focuses on finding ways to help democracies make the fundamental changes needed in today’s rapidly evolving political and economic climate. In every community, one fundamental question is whether citizens can build the capacity to solve their own problems through engagement with institutions and professionals. This is true whether the community is in Grand Rapids, Michigan, or Buenos Aires, Argentina. With democratic reform dominating much of the last century, Kettering has been able to learn from the experiences of a broad network of practitioners both here and abroad. We also consider the impact of these efforts on emerging democracies through common research with practitioners from many of the countries challenged by these changes.

Realizing that deliberative democratic practices have the potential to help democracy work as it should, Kettering has developed two workshops at which participants from more than 50 countries have come together to focus on ways that democracies make the fundamental changes needed in today’s rapidly evolving political and economic climate. Deliberative Democracy Workshops (DDW) I and II introduce international participants to the concept of deliberative democracy and provide a space for them to explore the organization of citizens’ political efforts in their home communities.

Participants in the workshops come from organizations that have a particular interest in democracy. These organizations engage in common research with the foundation so we can both better understand the processes that might improve democracies. Participants have also recently engaged in an international effort that we hope will create an international network to encourage deliberation on important international issues.

But it is in communities where this work is most apparent. Emmanuel Akwetye of the Institute for Democratic Governance (IDEG) in Accra, Ghana, felt that his country needed to engage its citizens in decision making so they could create and support the kinds of communities they wanted. This work began after he participated in DDW and explored how to make it a reality in his community. Subsequent participants from Ghana came to DDW and several members served as International Civil Society Fellows at the Kettering Foundation. In this way, IDEG built critical skills in its staff leadership to engage the many communities in Ghana.

Similarly in Russia, a nonprofit director, Igor Nagdasev, and a political science professor, Denis Makarov, have partnered to encourage these ideas in Russian communities. Both Nagdasev and Makarov attended and now teach DDW. They both served as International Civil Society Fellows, and they now work together in building democratic communities in Russia.

Roberto Saba is from Argentina. He, too, has been a part of the Deliberative Democracy Workshops and an

Deliberative Democracy Workshop participants from all over the world explore and share ideas that they take home to their communities.
Every summer, the Kettering Foundation holds an international event. These are the Deliberative Democracy and the Public Policy workshops. More than 200 people from all over the world are invited to attend. The participants come from diverse professional and academic backgrounds, as well as diverse nationalities. But this year, there was someone unique among the participants. A Queen! Olori Grace Faduyile, wife to Abodi, the paramount ruler of Ikale Land, Ondo State in Nigeria.

Faduyile is a busy woman. As the Olori (King’s wife) her responsibilities include receiving and welcoming an endless stream of visitors to the palace daily and her traditional role of raising children. But, Faduyile is also a school principal.

Why would the wife of an African king leave the life of royalty to attend the deliberative workshops? She has already experienced the impact of the deliberative method in her work. “When we use deliberative democracy, we are all working together to reach the same goal,” she says. Faduyile participated in the first Deliberative Democracy Workshop in Nigeria, which drafted an issue book on truancy, a major problem for the schools in her area. She then went on to apply deliberative skills to address this problem in her school. “It is a good system and I feel I need to extend it to cover the whole community.” Besides truancy, she believes the method can be used to resolve other problems, such as early marriage and HIV/AIDS.

In Nigeria, the queens do not just sit in the lavish comfort of their palaces. They are always out in their communities working, to improve sanitation facilities in the villages, to build markets, and to attend to other important projects.

Faduyile is well respected among the women in her village. She is the overall Olori, therefore the senior most, among the queens. This, she believes, plays to her advantage, as she seeks to gather support from others in her country to use the deliberative method as a means of addressing important problems.

—Martin Ocholi

In 2005, Kettering had its first royalty attend DDW. Olori Grace Faduyile came to learn something that could help her community become more democratic. Faduyile straddles two worlds, the vibrant continually more westernized communities in Nigeria and the tribal order that is the history of Nigeria. She is the wife of a king, a mother, a woman, and a leader in her community. She is also an important part of the governance of her community. She comes to this work with multiple interests in how her community can work better and how women can play an important role in the leadership of their communities. This is why many other participants come, but it is the royal context that makes Faduyile different. (See sidebar story.)

As David Mathews has said, “The Kettering Foundation doesn’t do research on or in other countries . . . we have joint-learning agreements with organizations in the U.S. and around the world to learn what citizens themselves are learning about self-government as they struggle with its problems.” Deliberative Democracy Workshops provide space for these citizens to engage in this common work. In fact when these 50 to 60 people join us at DDW, we find that what’s so important is not that they are internationals (from many different countries) but that they are all concerned about building democracy through communities, through leadership programs, through preparation of materials, through engagement with government officials; work that covers the broad spectrum of Kettering’s own research ideas.

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Reclaiming Our Institutions

Challenge Three

Further research contends that many of our institutions are distressed because citizens indicate they have lost considerable confidence in them.

Professionals, Institutions, and Community Challenges

By Randall Nielsen

A fundamental obstacle to dealing with the challenges people face in communities is that the practices of professionals and their organizations often fail to recognize people and their civic organizations as actors. This, in part, explains the widespread reports that people feel less confidence in the legitimacy of professional institutions. Perhaps more important, it can explain the lack of confidence people report in the capacity of their communities to effectively engage the problems they face. The Kettering Foundation has documented this in its research into the ways people interact with institutions of journalism, higher education, public administration, philanthropy, the law, and public schools.

In the last year, the foundation convened a workshop to explore the efforts of some professional organizations and associations to relate more effectively in—and thus strengthen—the civic life in communities where they work. Participants are motivated by the sense that the problems they face in communities are increasingly of the type that cannot be solved by unilateral institutional actions or traditional political organizing. Issues like drug and alcohol abuse, economic development, and the education of young people cannot be dealt with through institutional means alone. To use a term familiar to readers of Connections, workshop participants are trying to establish and support more effective forms of public acting in communities. We can report this as part of a larger finding: a growing set of professionals, professional associations, and professional organizations are coming to see limits to their ability to unilaterally deal with the challenges that define the missions of their profession.

Perhaps due to their distinct locus in communities, administrators of public schools have recognized these difficulties for some time. The last decade has seen a growing interest in public engagement. This term has come to include a wide variety of interpretations. Not surprisingly, many amount to old wine in new bottles. They focus on parents, with the terms of the engagement being the school-based issues faced by educators. The promise of such efforts is clear: given the current tendency to view education as a consumer good, it is helpful to be better connected to the customers. However, the downside is equally clear: a focus on parents leaves out the majority of people in most communities. That can be critical at times when larger levels of community support are needed. For example, when a school levy is up for renewal, parents alone do not decide the issue.

Seeing public schools as providers of services to otherwise passive consumers...
has additional dangers for administrators. In the absence of a widely shared sense of responsibility for the challenges related to education, schools are often held accountable for responsibilities that they simply cannot fulfill. Unless people—parents as well as non-parents—come to recognize and choose among the tradeoffs inherent in the decisions that they and school administrators face, efforts to improve communication can result in ever-increasing sets of conflicting demands. Most administrators know from experience that, in the absence of a community of people that are willing and able to make coherent collective choices regarding obstacles related to education, increasing opportunities for engagement with individuals can do as much harm as good.

That insight—seen in similar ways across a variety of professions—is what connects the participants of the foundation’s Civic Engagement Workshop. The focus is on what has been termed public capital—the structure and practices through which communities work. In some communities where public capital is lacking, the symptoms are seen as a lack of civic participation. Acting on community challenges tends to be thin, ephemeral, and disconnected. In other communities, the symptoms are quite different—rather than a lack of interest or participation by individuals and interest groups, communities can be paralyzed by distinct, competing actions that pull against each other. The difficulty is to bring what often seems to be a cacophony into a harmonious concert of activities. What is missing in either case are civic, professional, and institutional efforts that complement and support each other. The challenge faced by many professionals is more one of “public building” than public engagement.

Across the professions, we are seeing a growing recognition of the power of the role professionals play in naming and framing issues.

How do professionals and their organizations impact the capacity of people to deal with the challenges they face in communities? Kettering Foundation research has developed a lens for understanding how communities work that focuses on a set of key practices that together constitute public working. The research has helped professionals to recognize that the ways that issues are named and the ways that options for acting are framed are keys to the qualities of the interactions that follow.

Professionals and their organizations play a key, though often not self-conscious, role in naming issues and laying out options for their engagement. The effects they have on communities’ capacity to act is not always positive. That point and the general lack of self-consciousness is worth noting because it highlights a way for professionals to positively affect communities’ ability to collectively recognize and deal with challenges. Across the professions, we are seeing a growing recognition of the power of the role professionals play in naming and framing issues.

In the reports from workshop participants, we have seen two types of experiments. One type involves distinct projects to name and frame issues of professional interest and organize the convening of public forums. The resulting “public voice” is used to inform the organization’s work and, in some cases, used to encourage complementary acting by people and civic organizations. Another type of experiment focuses less on new “projects” per se, but involves a more general interrogation of professional routines. Rather than ask, How could we engage the public? they ask, How does what we do affect the capacity for effective engagement to occur in the public? The results are explorations of the roles they can play in creating public capital that will remain beyond any distinct project.

Attempting to change professional routines is difficult. The most immediate challenges for most of the workshop participants are the incentives that govern the routines of their own organizations. Organizations trying to do something different run headlong into habits embedded in techniques that are resistant to change. Given the increasing number of professional organizations that are attempting some type of public engagement, more research into their motivations and the obstacles they face promises to make a valuable contribution.

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There is a fundamental, and insidious, problem in America—the growing divide between citizens and the schools created to serve them. Since 2001, much of the discussion about education policy has revolved around the No Child Left Behind Act. At the center of the discussion are concerns about the best way to measure student achievement, the adequacy of federal funding, and the problem of who should be held accountable for poor student performance. Although important, this discussion tends to ignore the fact that citizens are feeling both estranged from their schools and helpless to do anything about it.

In the Kettering Foundation’s latest book, Reclaiming Public Education by Reclaiming Our Democracy, David Mathews describes how citizens, educators, school board members, and even policymakers might overcome this divide. There is no doubt that all have work to do, both to bridge the divide and to ensure that children receive a good education. What this book focuses on, however, is the work that the public must do. Reporting on the last ten years of Kettering research, Mathews offers the foundation’s most in-depth analysis to date on what sort of work this is; how the public can do it; and why it is essential for strengthening public education, rebuilding the public’s commitment to the public schools and, ultimately, reinvigorating and reclaiming our democracy.

Since so many of the most entrenched issues affecting public schools today stem from larger societal problems (such as poverty), educators have long recognized that they need public support, or at least parental support, in order to teach the children in their care. But many complain they cannot get the support they need. At the same time, Kettering research has found that citizens feel increasingly alienated from the public school system and powerless to change it. This sense of powerlessness, writes Mathews, lessens people’s sense of ownership over the schools and thus their sense of responsibility for what goes on inside them. Citizens become more like consumers purchasing goods or services, and they forget the critical role that communities once played in creating and supporting the public schools.

One of the central issues that contributes to the divide between citizens and educators (and also citizens and policymakers) is that they often see problems differently, and therefore use different names to describe them. Political hot button names for issues, such as the achievement gap and accountability, don’t actually resonate with most citizens’ real concerns. The names either fail to capture the problems that people experience every day, or they fail to take into consideration the conflicting desires and frustrations that people wrestle with. In order to truly represent their concerns, problems need to be articulated and named by the people themselves. When a problem is named in a way that captures people’s true concerns, they are more likely to get involved in solving it.

Kettering Foundation research has found that naming collective problems in public terms is incredibly powerful in helping citizens regain ownership of their problems. Therefore, “naming problems in terms of what is most valuable to citizens” is the first of what Mathews calls the six democratic practices. He goes on in the book to provide a detailed description of the other practices, which include framing, deliberation, making commitments, public acting, and civic learning. Taken together, these practices both make up public work and help “build” the kind of public that schools and communities need.

Rather than a set of techniques or methodologies, Mathews’ description of public work and the various practices that make it up is actually a description of the way people naturally engage one another if given the opportunity to help solve common problems. For those familiar with Kettering research, this is a subtle departure from earlier thinking. The focus here is on the larger, organic process of public work; the description of the separate practices is merely an attempt to help people recognize the various aspects of this work.

The key to all of the practices is that they engage the public, both in identifying common problems and in working to solve them. All problems are identified or named by someone; however, when the naming is done by the public, it encourages public ownership of the problems, making naming a democratic practice.
Ironically, many public engagement efforts inadvertently ignore this, treating the public instead as a group that must be rallied or enlisted around a previously established problem. Yet this undermines the public’s role in its own self-determination. “Our Constitution says that ‘We, the People’ are the sovereign power in the country,” writes Mathews. Therefore, as citizens of a country governed by self-rule, people must be active in determining their collective destiny—an obligation that goes beyond voting for elected officials or approving or rejecting ballot initiatives.

The important link that Mathews makes is that taking ownership of collective problems is essential to taking ownership of the public schools, and also of democracy. As citizens become engaged with the problems that concern them, schools will benefit. Often, addressing a community problem will help mitigate the effects of that problem on the schools. Other times, communities of citizens engaged with one another will be able to offer other kinds of educational support. Mathews reports that people and communities are much more confident about educating young people than they are about fixing the schools because they don’t see education as occurring solely in the school building. In the book, he reports on a number of examples of people around the United States who have creatively used community resources to help educate children in everything from math and science to languages and the arts.

Ultimately, however, bridging the divide between citizens and schools will require acknowledging that public schools are an intrinsic part of our democracy and that citizens are truly the ones responsible for making democracy work as it should. What this book offers is a new way of thinking about how all of us can contribute to this process. After all, as Mathews writes, “Only a citizenry that rules itself can restore the public schools to their rightful place as democratic institutions still needed to complete the great work of our Revolution.”

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Philanthropy and Public Life: A Question of Civil Investing

By Scott London

The following essay was adapted from a report sponsored by the Kettering Foundation and the Pew Partnership for Civic Change. Written by Scott London, the full report, Investing in Public Life: A Report from the 2003-2004 Dialogues on Civil Investing (2005) is available from the Kettering Foundation.

Foundation Executives and Civic Leaders Compare Notes on How to Build Strong and Sustainable Communities

Over the past decade, civil investing has emerged as one of the most important new developments in American philanthropy. Not quite a philosophy, not quite a grantmaking strategy, and not quite a type of grant, but something of all three, civil investing can be broadly defined as the use of philanthropic resources for building community and strengthening public life.

The theory and practice of civil investing can be traced back to a series of
groundbreaking dialogues, first convened in the fall of 1993 by the Council of Foundations, the Kettering Foundation, and the Indiana University Center on Philanthropy. The meetings brought together a small group of foundation executives to explore the deepening divide between philanthropy and civil society.

At the time, there was growing concern that the foundation world, despite its best efforts, had done very little to stem the decline of civic engagement and the crisis of confidence in many of the nation’s public institutions. In some cases, philanthropy had actually exacerbated public cynicism and mistrust by pursuing its own ideas about advancing the common good without cultivating a genuine dialogue with the communities it was bent on serving.

The seminars, which continued over the course of eight years, stimulated a rich and lively discussion in the grantmaking community, one that spread to the pages of the Chronicle of Philanthropy, Foundation News & Commentary, and other places, and inspired an array of new and innovative funding initiatives.

Today, the idea of civil investing has taken hold in the foundation world. Terms like social capital, public will, and civic infrastructure once brushed aside as abstract and academic, seem more relevant than ever and now crop up regularly in trade journals, mission statements, press releases, and even grantmaking guidelines.

Yet the perception remains that conventional funding strategies, for all their good intentions, too often fail where they matter most. Rather than tapping or cultivating the inherent strengths of the communities they wish to support, grantmakers fall back on tried-and-true formulas and copycat prescriptions. Instead of backing comprehensive community-building strategies, they invest in short-lived projects and piecemeal measures that may bring temporary benefits but seldom produce lasting changes. And rather than developing indigenous leadership and building strong, working relationships, they rely on institutional partners with different agendas, working styles, and degrees of commitment.

In 2003, ten years after the launch of the civil-investing seminars, the Kettering Foundation and the Pew Partnership for Civic Change convened a second round of dialogues, aimed at addressing these issues. The purpose of the talks was to tap the insight and experience of not only foundation executives but also community leaders and nonprofit directors whose work in the field holds promise for a new and different kind of grantmaking. The planning team recognized that while philanthropists and civic leaders tend to work side by side, both striving to build community and promote robust democratic practices, they rarely come together to identify common concerns and develop joint strategies for change.

Over the course of three day-long gatherings spread over twelve months, the group examined a number of pressing questions:

- **What is civil investing and how is it different from other types of grantmaking?**
- **How do communities come together to identify their problems and frame potential solutions?**
- **How do government agencies, service providers, grantmaking institutions, and other outsiders enter into relationships with communities, and to what effect?**
- **What is the relationship between community-building and accountability?**
- **How do current trends in American philanthropy, such as the growing emphasis on measurable outcomes and the rise of new donors, affect grantmaking initiatives aimed at revitalizing community and nurturing public life?**

The questions spawned a rich and wide-ranging conversation about the public purposes of philanthropy and the practical challenges facing grantmakers bent on building strong and sustainable communities. At its best, the group agreed, civil investing is rooted in a commitment to strong democratic practices. It emphasizes doing with, not simply doing for, communities. It focuses on long-term change, not merely short-term development. It attempts to span boundaries and bridge sectors. And, perhaps most important, it puts a premium on relationships—relationships between individuals and organizations in the community, to be sure, but also between grantmaker and grantee.

The participants stressed that not all community-development efforts fall under the rubric of civil investing. In fact, conventional giving patterns often act as a hindrance rather than a help to civic renewal, they said. Short-term funding cycles and misguided systems of evaluation routinely get in the way of long-term community development. Programs also fall short of their goals by not tapping into vital civic resources and energy, building effective relationships with the public, developing broad-based networks and coalitions, or simply sustaining the commitment over the long haul.

Civil investing is rooted in a commitment to strong democratic practices. It emphasizes doing with, not simply doing for, communities.
brought citizens affected by the toxic waste together in deliberative forums to work through possible solutions. Public administrators and citizens both expressed frustration with the status quo of public-engagement practice. The research suggested that public forums might be useful in addressing technical issues, such as toxic-waste cleanups.

MSU interviews with the public administrators involved in the toxic-waste problem illuminate the barriers between public administrators and the citizens they serve. Public administrators revealed frustration in their efforts to find ways to meaningfully engage the public in important community issues. Our research showed the citizens feel similarly constrained. Public meeting rooms are largely empty unless an issue is “hot” and raises an outcry. The traditional mechanism for citizens to engage in civic life—the public hearing—has limited benefit and, many say, is ineffective.

While public administrators may be stymied by the “how to” of successful public participation, they do see it as a basic right and important to democracy. But these
highly educated, experienced professionals can feel like failures if the public meetings they convene don’t produce positive results. They follow the rules for holding public meetings; however, they find little value for their efforts. These experiences have led public administrators to view the public at its best as uninformed, and at its worst, as outraged, unreasonable, and obstructionist.

When the public is uninformed, public administrators spend their time educating those present, often presenting information only about the technical issues. In the Tittabawassee case, public administrators presented the technical details of the problem with the expectation that the information would influence public opinion to support the direction administrators were crafting for the cleanup. Instead, many citizens responded with anger directed toward the administrators. Educating an uninformed public or hearing opinions from the most outraged public is “one-way talking in two directions.” Scarcely meeting time could be spent building understanding about the community’s shared values that would influence the direction of the cleanup.

The citizens interviewed for this study also saw little value in traditional public participation efforts. To examine the citizen perceptions, MSU focused on a specific subset of citizens, those affected by the hazardous waste, but unaffiliated with any of the already-established citizen groups that developed in response to the Tittabawassee issue. People affiliated with government or the responsible industry were also excluded.

These “unaffiliated citizens” saw the public-meeting format as dominated by the “usual suspects”: the polarized voices affiliated with interest groups that don’t necessarily represent their own views. They see the process as one designed for articulate elites or special interests and don’t believe they will be heard if they do participate. They also find the focus on technical issues to be intimidating. It is hard for them to know how to argue about scientific evidence. They lack trust in the credibility of data presented, believing it can be manipulated to support either side of the argument. As a result, they don’t participate at all.

Alternatively, public administrators can broaden the conversation by bringing the unaffiliated public together to talk about the issue in their own terms through the use of deliberative forums. The approach to public deliberation used in the MSU research was based on the National Issue Forums (NIF) process. An NIF-style issue guide provided background information on the toxic-waste problem and offered several choices and their tradeoffs to begin redressing it.

Local groups of unaffiliated citizens were convened to participate in the forums. By working through the choices outlined, the groups sought to better understand each other’s perspectives and find common ground. Establishing common ground helped to reveal how they saw the problem and its impact on themselves and others in their community. Further, common ground can help identify an approach that is most likely to serve the public good rather than a single interest, as forum participants begin to see the issue from the perspectives of others.

Interviews after the forums indicated that the deliberation was a very positive experience for participants, a stark contrast to the public hearing typically used in environmental controversies. The participants preferred deliberative processes in which they could talk together, learn from each other, and begin to understand the issue in their own terms without concern for the technical details. They felt the discussion was respectful and gave them hope that a large, complex problem could be solved. Participants connected the issue to their broader vision for the community.

The research may bring hope to public administrators who believe in the right of the public to participate but see the effort as a waste of time. How then, might the deliberation benefit the public administrators dealing with a controversial environmental issue? Without significant experience in deliberative democracy techniques, it is the rare public administrator who would consider turning to the public for help. This research, however, demonstrated several ways deliberative issue forums might be useful to public administrators dealing with such problems.

First, public administrators who are frustrated about an absent public or a very vocal public may change their approach to engagement so that deliberation can occur. Rather than citizens being asked to offer the best technical solution to the problem, they are invited to connect the issue broadly to their lives; they just need the space for real deliberation in their own language. A deliberative approach will yield a more thoughtful result.

Second, public administrators would benefit from recognizing that the public has something different to offer than the technical fix for the problems facing their communities. Understanding how citizens engage in decision making of the kind used in issue forums will help public administrators understand how the public thinks about a given problem. Understanding what is important to citizens can guide crafting the eventual policy choice so it is consistent with public values and presented in public language. Daniel Yankelovich describes this understanding as finding “the boundaries of the politically permissible.”

Finally, this research reflects the power of the voice of the unaffiliated citizen. By seeking a different public, one that is not part of an interest group, public administrators can gain greater legitimacy to act. The authority a deliberative public provides public administrators shifts their accountability toward the public good rather than special interests. Deliberative democracy helps public administrators serve a more effective role within the political system so they are not hamstrung by the culture of polarized, interest-group politics.

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Politics Is About Relationship

by Harold H. Saunders
New York: Pelgrave Macmillan, 2005

Picture a classic diplomatic scene—perhaps Stalin, Roosevelt, and Churchill side by side at Yalta, or Nixon and Mao in China. It’s easy to interpret these scenes according to a “realist” theory of politics. The leaders have power and are in a position to make decisions. They represent their countries, so it is almost as if the nations themselves were sitting down to negotiate. The countries’ interests are their own security, prosperity, and influence. The leaders negotiate rationally to maximize those interests.

Hal Saunders, Kettering Foundation’s Director of International Affairs and a senior American diplomat who flew with Kissinger himself on the “shuttle” flights that advanced peace between Israel and Egypt, is very familiar with that kind of politics. In his new book entitled Politics Is About Relationship, he argues that the realist model has never been adequate, either as an explanation of the way the world works or as a normative framework for deciding what we should do. Inadequate even in situations like the “carefully managed” relationship between China and the United States of the early 1970s, the realist theory fails utterly to explain such critical developments as the construction of a democratic society in South Africa, the sustainable economic development of poor countries, or the evolving relationship between the U.S. and China today.

The realist account is in fact quite unrealistic, because it ignores the following factors (among others). First, political identity is complicated. Roosevelt at Yalta and Nixon in China did not represent a unitary entity called the “United States” with a known set of interests. Rather, these men had complex identities (as individuals, members of parties and administrations, representatives of their countries, and human beings). Insofar as they represented the United States, its identity was complex and constantly contested. They, like their fellow citizens, had choices about how to define America and its interests. Subjects of totalitarian states have fewer evident choices. Yet even Russian and Chinese Communist officials had identities that were subject to change. As soon as Soviet diplomats stopped identifying as representatives of Communism or of the U.S.S.R. and began seeing themselves as Russians, the Soviet Empire was over.

The realist picture also focuses too narrowly on the few people who hold the conspicuous power to issue orders—especially orders to armies and navies. There are always other players and other forms of power. Again, the U.S. opening to China represents an apparent example of realist politics, since just four men initially drove the diplomatic process, operating in near secrecy, and thinking mainly of national security interests. Yet it mattered enormously that U.S. public opinion had already turned in favor of peace with China. Millions of Americans were played. Moreover, the relationship between the United States and China had already been launched by decades of missionary activity, immigration, trade, and cultural exchanges. These interactions created perceptions, stereotypes, habits, and modes of relating between the two nations that had enormous impact on Kissinger, Nixon, Zhou Enlai, and Mao, despite the apparent power and freedom of these leaders.

What was true when Nixon went to China applies much more clearly today. Now that the Chinese government has relaxed control over many aspects of Chinese life and there is a net annual flow of almost $200 billion from individual American consumers and firms to Chinese companies, the relationship is evidently between two complex “bodies politic” and not simply between two sets of national leaders. Identity, culture, perception, and modes of interaction are essential.

In Chapter IX, co-written with Philip D. Stewart, Saunders examines the evolving relationship between Russia and the U.S. since 1989. By observing public deliberations about Russian-American relations, Saunders and Stewart learned that a major issue is the enormous consumption of U.S. popular culture in Russia. Hollywood-produced movies and American popular music threaten to erode Russian civilization; at the same time, they present the U.S. in a light that many Americans may resent. (In our movies, we appear to be violent, sexually prurient, and spiritually vacant.) The flow of pop culture is a significant problem, but not one caused by governments. “While American companies certainly produce these films, it is Russian television executives who choose to show them. These decisions are normally made on commercial grounds, that is, the
want something—not always money or power, but sometimes a particular vision of their community. Nevertheless, some citizens should strive for neutrality so that they can create trusted forums in which other citizens can talk and work. The West Virginia Center for Civic Life is a perfect example.

Betty Knighton is the center’s director. She says, "We have defined the Center for Civic Life as aggressively neutral." Knighton’s stance might be better described as ‘open-ended.’ She surely has goals for her state; she’s not neutral. The work that she promotes is likely to favor certain political outcomes over others. Nevertheless, Knighton is willing to create a good democratic and deliberative process and then let the chips fall where they may. One of Saunders’ South African sources, Pravin Gordhan, similarly “insists” that the peace process that ended apartheid “was a way of acting, not a well defined or carefully mastered strategy.” Such openness is crucial.

In my view, Saunders brilliantly demonstrates the power of citizen politics in the twenty-first century. The most realistic view is that millions or billions of people now shape international affairs through their talk, their opinions, and their behavior. It is, however, a different question whether citizen politics is inevitably better than state-centered power politics.

South Africa is an inspiring example, but it’s also worth considering Yugoslavia. Under Marshall Tito, a few ‘bosses’ met to negotiate scarce economic goods. The country was undemocratic and not very dynamic, but it was at peace. Once many Yugoslavs became involved in politics, once national identity became a topic of discussion, and once people began to think about their overall relationships with other ethnic communities, “hell” broke out.

In general, citizens don’t negotiate fine points; they consider fundamental problems and debate their own identity. Unfortunately, for many Serbs, the fundamental “problem” was the alleged trampling of Serbian identity ever since the battle of Kosovo Polje in 1389.

To be sure, Saunders would have handled the dialogues among Yugoslavs infinitely better than Slobodan Milosevic and his peers. He would have worked for relationships “based on equality, mutuality, accountability, input, access to decision-making, shared and accountable stewardship of resources.” Nevertheless, I think it’s fair to say that the civil war in Yugoslavia accompanied an increase in the role of citizens and a broadening of public discourse to include identities and relationships. I can imagine a darker version of Saunders’ book, one that predicted a shift from elite economic negotiations to broad citizen engagement on matters of culture and identity—with lots of bloodshed along the way.

The most realistic view is that millions or billions of people now shape international affairs through their talk, their opinions, and their behavior.

Nevertheless, it would be impossible to overstate the importance of what Saunders has achieved through his experimental engagement with actual citizen politics on several continents, his clear-sighted and eloquent analysis of cases, and his overall theoretical framework.

——Peter Levine

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