The Kettering Foundation is a nonprofit, operating foundation rooted in the American tradition of cooperative research. Kettering’s primary research question is, what does it take to make democracy work as it should? Kettering’s research is distinctive because it is conducted from the perspective of citizens and focuses on what people can do collectively to address problems affecting their lives, their communities, and their nation. The foundation seeks to identify and address the challenges to making democracy work as it should through interrelated program areas that focus on citizens, communities, and institutions. The foundation collaborates with an extensive network of community groups, professional associations, researchers, scholars, and citizens around the world. Established in 1927 by inventor Charles F. Kettering, the foundation is a 501(c)(3) organization that does not make grants but engages in joint research with others. For more information about KF research and publications, see the Kettering Foundation's website at www.kettering.org.

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The year 2020 will go down in history as one of the most tumultuous in the modern era. Adding to the troubles, democratic institutions have been in serious difficulty for some time. Declining public confidence has weakened their ability to respond effectively. Because Kettering research is focused on democracy, the foundation has had to look more closely not only at what it studies but also how it goes about its research. We are trying to bring about the closest possible alignment between what Kettering is trying to understand and the way it conducts its research.

At our January 2020 retreat, the foundation’s faculty and associates, along with other allied organizations...
we work with, went over in detail the most recent account of what we do and how. In many ways, “Kettering” has become not just one organization but a conglomerate of many organizations and their networks, as you can see from the photograph below. The document, as reviewed and amended at the retreat, is the basis for what I am writing here.

One point of clarification if you are new to Connections: Kettering calls itself a “foundation.” People naturally expect it to make grants; it doesn’t. Kettering is a research institute, not a grantmaker, although its methodology is not that of social science. We draw on a range of scholarly disciplines. Our job is to know something useful; however, KF isn’t a service organization either. What we contribute to knowing through our research is what we contribute to doing. We’ve been called an incubator for democracy. That fits.

A LEGACY OF DISCOVERY, INVENTION, AND RIGOROUS RESEARCH

A bit of history from the 1920s will give you a background for understanding Kettering today. It is useful to put the foundation’s origins in the context of what was happening in the United States at the end of the 19th and beginning of the 20th centuries. The upheaval of the Civil War and Reconstruction was fading, and a new age of economic growth and invention was dawning.
These inventions were both mechanical and civic. For example, the 1920s saw the birth of many of today’s major civic organizations, such as the ACLU and the League of Women Voters. A culture of discovery and innovation spread across the country and was exemplified by such people as Thomas Edison, Orville and Wilbur Wright, George Washington Carver, and Charles Kettering. It was during this time, 1927, that the foundation was founded by Kettering, who is known most notably for the self-starter used in automobiles. 

I never met any of these inventors, yet they were, in a sense, our founders, whether or not they signed the foundation’s articles of incorporation. These founders left the foundation great legacies. One of the most important was that they prized inventiveness and conducted rigorous research. Their research was the practical kind that inventors do, which fostered useful discoveries. Yet while working toward immediate, practical ends (airplanes, light bulbs, and so on), these inventors looked behind the symptoms to locate the root causes of problems—the problems behind the problems. The foundation today draws heavily on this legacy.

Into the World
I believe the Kettering Foundation, as it is now, began with the presidency of Robert Chollar (1971-1981). Bob had a very helpful board, which included Norman Cousins, editor of the Saturday Review, as well as public opinion expert George Gallup. Trustees then and now have had in common a long-term perspective and an inventor’s patience with experimentation. That legacy has continued to serve the foundation well.

Searching for a Unifying Objective
In the Chollar era, the foundation’s research was organized into three divisions: science, schools, and urban government. Chollar wanted to bring those divisions together so Kettering’s research wouldn’t be just a collection of glorified bits and pieces. Doing that became a major objective in the 1980s. And it proved to be a continuing challenge.
DEMOCRACY BECOMES THE CENTRAL FOCUS
A unifying concept did emerge, though not immediately. At first, we thought that “serving the public” would be the theme. Unfortunately, the word public doesn’t have a rich, etymological history to draw on.
So, gradually, we substituted a term that did: the “democratic public.” In time, “making democracy work as it should” would become the unifying focus for all the research. (The demo-in democracy is “the public” or, originally, the citizenry of a village.)

An Evolving Understanding
Kettering’s understanding of democracy has continued to evolve. The other half of the word, -cracy, or kratos in the original Greek, means “sovereign power.” Power is taken to mean the ability to act, to produce something. That definition encouraged us to think of citizens as producers of power themselves, not just delegators of powers to representatives.
To enrich its understanding, the foundation went back to the origins of politics by drawing from paleo-political anthropology. That literature suggests that democracy is actually much older than the word itself. It may be based on lessons learned by our earliest ancestors from their primary occupation—survival. The first lesson was that survival depends on cooperation. (We have seen this lesson in action during the coronavirus pandemic.) Cooperative, collective effort made humans more secure from ever-present dangers. Also, to survive when food was scarce, our ancestors needed to be free to forage for anything edible. And if they combined efforts to forage and hunt, the food had to be shared equitably or those who did not receive their share of the bounty would leave the tribe. That would make the group weaker and less secure.
It isn’t difficult to see how these lessons became the basis for democratic values such as justice and freedom. Along with them came a desire for the control needed to secure the things people considered most valuable for survival. Kettering has come to understand democracy, at its most basic, as collective decision-making for collective action, which gives people a measure of power and control.
For Kettering, understanding democracy has been, and still is, a journey. As the foundation continues to learn, its understanding of democracy continues to deepen.

The Problems of Democracy Itself
Democratic countries are troubled by many difficulties, and a number of these, such as the current economic crisis, also threaten countries that
Politics is about collective action, and collective action in a democracy requires collective decision-making.

aren't democratic. So as not to impair its effectiveness by trying to address all problems, the foundation has concentrated on the problems of, not just in, democracy. These are systemic malfunctions, such as the lack of civic engagement that prevents a democracy from working as it should.

Kettering research has also taken into account structural conditions like the causes of racial conflict and persistent poverty. They make it doubly difficult to deal with systemic malfunctions.

Some problems also have wicked characteristics that make them impervious to the standard problem-solving strategies. For example, people may realize that something is going wrong yet can’t agree on what the difficulty is or what should be done about it. What should be done is not something experts can decide, although they may have useful information. People have to exercise their best judgment. One of the first questions on the foundation's research agenda is how citizens can move from first reactions and impulsive responses to more shared and reflective judgment.

Another troubling characteristic of wicked problems is that there is no one cause. They are found in multiple sources located throughout a community. No one institution or group of people can be effective in countering them. Everyone has to work together, despite their differences. How is that possible, especially today, when we appear to be deeply divided? That is another important question on the foundation’s research agenda.

Connections has carried stories on all of the research questions and what has been learned.

The Work of Democracy Is Work
Given the centrality of the citizenry, it is very troubling when people today feel that they don't have the power to make a difference in our political system. So, Kettering began to look at the things people could do that are self-empowering, like their ability to form associations to combine individual skills and resources into more potent forms. We owe a debt to John McKnight, a Kettering senior associate, for that insight. In one of our meetings, senior associate Harry Boyte suggested that we think...
of what citizens do as work. Working together empowers us. This led to the insight that the work of democracy is literally work. The things that people produce by working together are powerful in their own right, and they generate a sense of ownership, as well as a sense of being able to make a difference.

**Major Themes Today**

While Kettering’s understanding of democracy continues to evolve, the foundation has reached a point where the major themes in our research can be summed up like this:

Politics is about collective action, and collective action in a democracy requires collective decision-making. And that, as I’ve explained, requires the exercise of the human faculty for judgment. Early humans survived by making sound decisions about their future. Those who couldn’t, perished. That danger helped develop the faculty for judgment. This faculty doesn’t have to get up to scale; we all have it. However, and regrettably, we don’t use all of our inherent abilities when we should; history is filled with examples of bad judgment. The foundation now is looking at the kind of decision-making that is being done to respond to multiple crises. Who is making these decisions, and how?

Another primary area of Kettering research about citizens and the work they must do in communities has been with organizations using deliberative forums to encourage sound judgment wherever collective decisions are made. Deliberation, which has also been called choice work, has proven effective in countering the divisiveness that is so destructive today. Combating wicked problems that spring from multiple sources requires people who aren’t alike, or who don’t even like one another, to work together. Deliberating has been shown to create a pivot in the public’s thinking. People become
more open to different points of view, and that changes the tone of the decision-making. Efforts to combat a problem can move forward even where there’s not full agreement.

Still another current area for research is the troubled relationship between the public and many of our authoritative governing institutions. Democratic politics operates at two levels: one at the citizen or civic level and another at the institutional level in both governmental and nongovernmental forms. It doesn’t take exhaustive research to show that institutional democracy is in serious trouble, having lost considerable public confidence despite attempts to show accountability and consult with citizens. And although civic democracy appears to be doing somewhat better, citizens have serious doubts about being able to have a meaningful influence on large, bureaucratic institutions, even the nongovernmental ones. The result is that the two levels don’t mesh; they aren’t aligned in ways that are mutually beneficial. Kettering reported on the importance of this in *The Ecology of Democracy*, which showed the ways in which civic and institutional democracy are dependent on one another.

The most recent foundation research report, titled *With the People*, suggests looking at this troubled relationship from a different perspective. We got the inspiration for the report’s title from President Lincoln’s plea for a government *of, by, and for the people*. Because of evidence that we are falling short on all three, why not add another preposition—*with* the people? Maybe more collaboration *with* the citizenry would make use of the things that citizens can uniquely produce by working together, which would help the institutions be more effective. The late Nobel Prize-winner Elinor Ostrom showed that without reinforcement by the public goods that citizens produce, even our largest and most expert institutions can’t be optimally effective. Maybe this coproduction could also help counter the loss of public confidence in our major institutions.

Ostrom believed that citizens had to be producers for coproduction with institutions to be possible. That reinforced what Kettering was learning about the role citizens must play for a democracy to be strong. As I said, people have to see themselves—and be seen by institutions—as producers, agents in their own right, not just the objects of the agency of others.

**HOW KETTERING WORKS**

While our evolving understanding of democracy has been the principal influence on the way the foundation functions, Kettering has never imag-
ined that it, itself, is a democracy. Nonetheless, the foundation can’t operate in a way that disregards what it is learning about democracy. And if the way Kettering does its work resonates with the spirit of democracy, that resonance can reinforce people’s efforts to have a better democracy.

**Working with Others**
The foundation employs fewer than 50 people full time, and of that number only about 35 are faculty directly involved in research. However, the work the foundation does reaches throughout the United States and to organizations in more than 100 countries around the world. That outreach would be impossible if only 35 people were trying to respond directly to citizens around the globe. Our outreach is possible because we work with intermediaries, organizations that work directly with citizens. These organizations have the credibility and legitimacy that an outside agency such as Kettering would not. Intermediaries have ranged from chapters of all types of national organizations to local libraries, schools, and religious institutions. Kettering research goes out through them when they find it serves their objectives.

**Research With, Not On or For:** Research is usually done on something or somebody. That is justified under certain conditions. Research is also done for some group or some cause. That can be beneficial. Kettering research, however, is done only with others. That is more consistent with the foundation’s understanding of a democracy in which citizens are agents.

**Allies, Not Partners:** Kettering depends on intermediaries to test its research. They are allies with their own ways of working. Research with partners implies the joint ownership of a single business. The foundation’s allies aren’t those kinds of partners. Kettering shares what it is learning with a worldwide host of institutions, professionals, associations, and communities. Few of them are in the research business as Kettering is. So, there is no one “business” owned in common. Intermediaries are more like “fellow travelers.” The foundation recognizes that it doesn’t know much
about their businesses and structures its relationships with allies keeping that limitation in mind.

The research on democracy has continued to grow as a result of what the foundation has learned from these fellow travelers. They have concerns related to those of Kettering, although these concerns are not always about democracy. They are usually about the self-interests of the allies. And that isn’t a problem. In fact, we’ve found that if the research we do with others doesn’t relate to the problems they face, it doesn’t have a lasting effect.

One of the first alliances Kettering made was with the network of local National Issues Forums (NIF). As many Connections readers know, these forums are organized mainly by local civic, educational, and religious organizations—even prisons—and are spread across the country. Later, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) was founded to assist these sponsors. There are also online forums that anyone anywhere can join.

Kettering’s alliance with NIFI was, and still is, based on a division of duties, with each doing what it is best able to do—with benefits for both organizations. Kettering performs research, which is used in issue guides for the forums, and it analyzes the results. This analysis of how people make up their minds on contentious issues draws on what happened in the deliberative forums. For its part, NIFI recruits forum sponsors and builds a network among them.

Other types of alliances are with national organizations that contribute research or have a mission that complements what Kettering does. All of these allies are in a relationship with the foundation that’s somewhat like the relationship among the settlers going to the American West in wagon trains. While all parties were responsible for their own wagons, they traveled together for mutual benefit.

Networks: Many allies are joined together in their own associations and networks. Relating to these networks has been both a special challenge and an opportunity for the foundation. To be in tune with the networks, the foundation learned it had to stay out of the center as an

Kettering shares what it is learning with a worldwide host of institutions, professionals, associations, and communities.
authoritative figure giving all the answers or directing any actions. What the foundation hopes to create with networks is a mutually beneficial relationship among independent parties.

**A Multinational Perspective:**
When Kettering discovered that there were organizations in other countries interested in its research, it didn’t create a separate division of international studies, as is done in academic institutions. The foundation doesn’t study other countries. Instead, Kettering forms multinational research alliances that enrich what it does study—US democracy. To be clear, the foundation is not in the business of exporting this democracy. That is because the democracy that Kettering studies requires self-responsibility, which can’t be exported or imported.

A multinational residency, or visiting fellows, program at the foundation does bring people from organizations in other countries who want to see what Kettering does. They learn by becoming immersed in the foundation’s research. The fellows also help put what Kettering
is learning about the US in a larger context.

The foundation’s oldest multinational research program is its study of the role citizens can play in improving international relations. Called Track II or Supplemental Diplomacy, by 2020, Kettering had worked with organizations in Russia for 60 years, with institutes in China for 48 years, and with foundations and civic organizations in Cuba for some 25 years. This continuity, plus that in domestic research programs, gives the foundation’s reports a credibility that wouldn’t be possible with a constantly shifting focus.

**DEMOCRATIC CHANGE AND LEARNING**

One of the most powerful influences that Kettering’s understanding of democracy has had on the way the foundation functions has come from realizing how democracies make changes. Without a supreme authority to dictate what should be done, people have to rely on their collective judgments about what those changes should be.

*Learning Exchanges*

Consistent with this understanding of democratic change, as the foundation began to draw on what its allies were learning, we discovered that the learning went deeper and grew richer when several different kinds of organizations, but with similar concerns, were in the same meeting. The chemistry was better if they weren’t in the same fields. The integration discouraged the usual insiders’ shoptalk. Participants could see what they were doing in a larger frame of reference, which was often insightful.

In order for different experiences from different actors to be shared, the meetings had to have a central focus on one of the fundamental problems of democracy that affected everyone—loss of public confidence, for example. That common focus made the exchanges coherent, even though the participants weren’t from the same profession or organization. When there was a diversity of experiences in the room, everyone learned more, including Kettering. Participants weren’t as prone to tell success stories. They talked about what went wrong in their work and what they were struggling with. They were learning, and Kettering, too, was learning.

**Finding Your Own Answers:**

Learning exchanges don’t depend on the foundation giving authoritative answers to questions, offering models to emulate, or prescribing best practices to follow. Consistent with the legacy left by the founders, those who benefit most from the learning exchanges are inventors in their fields. They like to challenge
their imaginations to find new ways to master old problems. Although Kettering may have relevant insights to share as appropriate, the goal of the exchanges is for everyone to learn how to find their own answers. Kettering tries to contribute to that discovery.

**INSIGHTS FOR DISCOVERING POSSIBILITIES**

Kettering's research is ongoing. Almost everything we say is provisional because what we learn on Monday may change what we say on Tuesday. So, we avoid talking about “findings” because that sounds so final. Instead, we describe what we are learning as insights or different ways of seeing the political world and our place in it.

The insights that Kettering has to offer are about possibilities, which is why they are often stated as questions. What might happen if you thought of what you were dealing with as “X” rather than “Y”? For example, one of our insights is that, while citizens may appear to be politically apathetic, they are actually very concerned about the things that human beings consider deeply valuable. (Security from danger is at the top of the list.) The research question is: Is it possible that engaging people in worthwhile civic projects might be more likely if the effort started with what citizens hold dear? That insight has to be tested by institutions and organizations trying to engage citizens under different circumstances.

Another example: The power to make a difference in the political system, which many people would like to have, might come not just from getting officials in institutions to do their bidding but also from producing things that the institutions need in order to be effective, things that only citizens can provide. The example I often use to show something only citizens can do is in health. Hospitals can care for people, but only families and friends can care about them. Clinical studies have shown that this kind of care can help people who are ill. It is a powerful “medicine.” The research question is: What happens in the health-care system if more use was made of the coproduction of health with citizens? A version
As the 2020 crises and the continuing crisis in democracy have shown, new challenges require new responses from civic associations and our major institutions. And while the current turmoil will subside, the need for lasting improvements will not. That may require different kinds of organizations. This is one of the reasons Kettering has been experimenting with how it goes about its business. If a better, stronger democracy is the objective, then we must create more organizations that are in tune with democracy.

That is already beginning to happen. At a recent Kettering exchange, by Zoom, the United States and 44 other countries were represented.

There, Tendai Murisa, an alumnus of the multinational residency program, talked about what was happening in Zimbabwe, his home, and in other African countries. He saw signs of “a new politics” of citizen solidarity trying to emerge in response to the COVID-19 pandemic. The same seems to be happening in the US. John McKnight believes we are seeing associational life being reborn.

Kettering is trying to look ahead. Murisa and McKnight are among what we hope will be a growing number of civic and institutional inventors. That is why the foundation has continued to experiment on itself in a search for better ways to do what democracy requires. We are committed to being an experiment studying experiments.

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David Mathews is the president of the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at dmathews@kettering.org.
Leaderful Communities: Exploring Citizen-Leaders

By James (Ike) Adams and Erin Payseur Oeth

We are part of several groups in different communities that are exploring questions with Kettering about the role citizens play in leadership efforts in community and implications for democratic practice. For communities to work, they need people who actively engage in community problem-solving without regard to formal position, authority, or institutional affiliation. People who do that might be called citizen-leaders, and what they are doing might be called exhibiting leaderfulness. One question we might ask is, What fosters leaderfulness?

The work we describe was part of a research exchange convened in spring 2020 and was framed around a draft of David Mathews’ new book Together: Building Better, Stronger Communities. We convened a group of 10 citizen-leaders representing three geographic communities...
Do citizen-leaders see themselves as leaders? How do they understand their role as citizens? How do they first demonstrate leaderfulness?

Through this 10-week program, several key themes emerged:

• There are small but significant steps citizens can take, e.g., picking up litter, that may counter cynicism and increase individual power and agency.

• Citizen-leaders often reflect a love of their community and inspire that love in others.

• Citizen-leaders assume the roles of both expert and citizen, often moving fluidly between these roles.

**TAKING SMALL, YET SIGNIFICANT STEPS**

An interesting thread emerged early on regarding litter. While many of our citizen-leaders were engaged in projects tackling complex community issues, many shared experiences they had in their neighborhoods picking up litter.

One participant mentioned she was frustrated seeing trash alongside her road and then one day decided to do something about it herself. Another does weekly pickups with youth, regardless of whether anyone else shows up to help. Still another talked about cleaning up around the football stadium. We were surprised at how common this experience was among our group. Many members of the cohort had engaged in this
seemingly small practice, and many continue to do it alongside their other work. In discussing their motivations, they reflected a sense of pride in their community and identified it as something that they could do.

This discussion on litter led to some interesting insights. One participant recounted her experience in complaining to leadership and leaving frustrated. She then decided to pick up trash herself weekly and afterwards felt empowered. Others resonated with this experience. It seemed that in this seemingly simple practice of choosing to pick up litter, they were finding a sense of agency and power. It was a posture that put themselves as a contributor to their community and one in which they took on an active role. It did not require any special skills or experience, no positional authority. It required only eyes to see what needed to be done and the willingness to act on it. They talked about it as almost an antidote to the frustration and cynicism they felt toward others’ lack of engagement. Their attitude seemed to reflect a choice between being frustrated that others are not addressing the issue and tackling it themselves. In choosing the latter, they seemed to see themselves as agents of change and their role as citizens as those who can make their communities better.

Perhaps in rediscovering our agency and power, we also rediscover our role as citizens. In looking to institutions to do too much, we may set ourselves up for failure, cynicism, and frustration. When we see ourselves as actors, though, even with small and simple steps, we rediscover our own agency and power.

INSPIRING OTHERS
Another theme that emerged was the love for community that our participants expressed and the struggle to inspire that love in others. In spite of the complex issues they were facing, ongoing frustrations, and a lack of engagement by others, they still talked about the beauty and strength
of their respective communities and a desire to instill an appreciation of that in others.

One citizen-leader recounted a frustrating conversation with a neighbor regarding debris and lamented that she didn’t seem to care about the neighborhood. As others nodded in solidarity, a realization seemed to surface that not everyone shared that same love of their communities. The conversation shifted to deeper questions: What does it mean to love our community? How do we help others fall in love with their community?

And further, if love for one’s community is part of the motivation for citizen work, How do we attract and engage those who do not have that love or pride in their community? What inspires others to join in community work?

Several potential answers began to emerge. One participant working on addressing youth gun violence in Tupelo talked about reaching out intentionally to violent youth offenders and talking to youth on the street to hear their voices and their ideas for engaging the issue. She talked about how important it was to hear from them and validate their voices and how she wanted to engage them in imagining a better future for themselves and their community. She saw them as potential actors in addressing the issue and as a key part of the solution, even before they identified that agency in themselves. This concern gathering, as we often describe it, brought value not only in shaping potential deliberative conversations but also in sparking engagement and agency in others.

A participant from Bolivar County offered another approach. He talked about the connections he built to support his youth program and how much of his work was inspiring others to join in his efforts as he led the way. He highlighted the importance of the ask, the intentional invitation and outreach, centered in relationship and trust. He recounted how many businesses, associates, and friends ended up contributing to his work simply because he invited them along. He found that often others were glad to contribute when asked. This theme emerged of participants intentionally engaging with other community members, reaching out broadly to those who may not yet see themselves as citizen-leaders, and inviting them to join in the work.

In doing so, these participants were paving the way for other citizens to see themselves as citizen-leaders and to discover a new love for their community and perhaps a new role for themselves as part of it. They saw themselves as door openers, not as gatekeepers, making way for leaderfulness to spread in the community.
**FLUIDITY OF ROLES**

As citizen-leaders who were accustomed to community work in different settings, many of our participants had assumed the role of experts, often educating others on an issue, why it was important, and what they should do about it. They also often assumed the role of citizen, engaging with institutions and government in collective decision-making to advocate for change. Many had become adept at role switching, walking comfortably in both.

One example of this fluidity between roles surfaced in our conversations about the start of school. Across our different geographic communities, school systems were making different decisions about how school should reopen in the fall of 2020 given the COVID-19 pandemic. Since this issue affected many of our participants directly, as parents or as citizen-leaders, it became a relevant topic of discussion.

When a local school board had voted that all classes would be held in person for the fall, several of our participants quickly mobilized alongside others to address concern in the community about a lack of citizen input. An online petition quickly circulated and put pressure on the school board to reconsider its decision.

In this scenario, it became clear that these citizen-leaders were assuming roles both as experts—other citizens were looking to them for action, relying on their expertise and experience in navigating the political action, and as citizens—being parents or community members of an impacted community, relying on school boards and state policymakers for information themselves and working with institutions to affect change. They were both citizen consumers and citizen-leader producers.

This ability to move fluidly between expert and citizen seemed to serve citizen-leaders well in their community problem-solving. It gave them several distinct advantages.

First, they were comfortable and receptive to learning from others. They were open to new insights into the issues they were addressing and seemed eager to learn new things.

“**How do we attract and engage those who do not have that love or pride in their community? What inspires others to join in community work?**
perspectives and approaches. Rather than assuming they had mastered an issue, their posture as citizens allowed them to continue to learn, bring in new voices, and engage more deeply in community work.

Secondly, this dual role also ensured that they were not just passive recipients of that information; they passed it along to others. It seemed to position them as citizens who were further along on a journey, offering their guidance to those who were coming behind them.

Finally, these shifting roles gave them a greater appreciation for other citizens. They seemed to view citizens as essential to their work and valued their thoughts, experiences, and involvement. They sought ways to engage others and were receptive to building their expertise in democratic strategies, such as concern gathering and naming and framing, that could broaden their reach. It seems they were building their expertise to position themselves better for cultivating other citizen-leaders.

**FINAL THOUGHTS**
Through the 10-week program, this cohort of citizen-leaders offered valuable insights into the role of citizens in our democracy. As we engaged with them and their community work, we gained valuable perspectives on how they understood their roles as citizens and some of the ways they demonstrated leaderfulness.

We learned that citizens can take seemingly small but significant steps that may counter cynicism and increase individual power and agency. These small steps can set the stage for future action and may offer helpful starting points for cultivating new citizen-leaders.

We also learned that citizen-leaders reflect a love of their community and often inspire that love in others. They see value in intentionally inviting others to join them and reaching out to those who may be disengaged. They want others to see the beauty in their communities and to share that sense of ownership.

We observed that citizen-leaders frequently assume the roles of both expert and citizen. Their ability to fluidly move between these roles is an advantage that positions them well for cultivating other citizen-leaders, which in turn will lead to more leaderful communities.

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James (Ike) Adams currently serves on the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) board of directors and is chair of Afresh, Inc., CDC, a newly formed community development corporation that operates in the Mississippi Delta. He can be reached at j.p.adams@uky.edu.

Erin Payseur Oeth currently serves in the Office of Community Engagement at the University of Mississippi and has done extensive work in community capacity building and public deliberation. She can be reached at elpayseu@olemiss.edu.
Historic Decisions is a problem-based approach to civic education that supports the development of skills needed for active participation in democratic life. During a Historic Decisions forum, participants deliberate about the options that were available when people in the past had to make a decision about a public problem. In addition to practicing deliberation, participants discover that decisions about public problems are made not only by leaders, but also by everyday people. Looking at history through this perspective expands participants’ sense of who can be a political actor and where political actions can occur.

By Joni Doherty
Politics, understood this way, is not only about what governments do, but also about how everyday people can work together to address the challenges of living well together in a democracy.

Historic Decisions draws on Kettering’s research in community-based deliberation. For more than 30 years, deliberative forums on contemporary issues have been used across the country to address public problems involving ethical dilemmas that demand the public’s attention. Addressing these what-should-we-do kinds of questions requires more than expertise or critical thinking; it requires a kind of moral reasoning that recognizes our responsibility to one another.

Building on this, over the last five years, museums across the country have been creating guides for deliberation about historic issues. The guides do not offer a counterfactual or hypothetical history. The information presented is historically accurate, including actions that were being considered at the time. While these forums can be part of a museum’s public program, and some have been used in college courses, this article focuses on the experiences of students in grades 4-12.

Both historic and contemporary issue forums offer frameworks for deliberating about options for addressing a problem that are grounded in things people value in democratic communities. Examples include:

- being free to act according to one’s wishes,
- feeling safe from harm,
- being treated fairly by others, and
- living in a secure and stable community.

Although everyone wants all of these things, people may prioritize one thing over another, depending on where they are in their lives, particular life experiences, or the historical context. For example, just after 9/11 in 2001, most people prioritized safety; 10 years later, many wondered if too much freedom had been given away.

More typically, disagreements arise over what strategies should be
used, not the things valued. For example, the issue guide developed by the National Center for Civil and Human Rights offers three options for how residents of Montgomery, Alabama, might reduce tensions during the 1956 bus boycott. One option supports immediate integration (fairness); a second, that individuals should make their own choices (freedom); and the last focuses on the safety of all residents. During a forum, many associated safety with increasing police presence, but, as an African American participant observed, this may cause others to feel less safe. In that moment, participants became aware that their lived experiences differed, and the tone of the deliberation shifted. Advocates for immediate integration understood that, while they may be willing to risk their own safety to achieve it, they saw more clearly how it might harm others. Those who thought everyone should be free to make his or her own choices were more aware of the trade-off: in a segregated society, some people have more choices available to them than others. As participants consider the trade-offs of each option, the complexity of the problem becomes apparent. And the ethical dilemma that people wrestled with more than 60 years ago became relevant to contemporary life.

Students who actively deliberate about the problem discover there is no “right” answer. Middle school participants in the Autry Museum of the American West’s annual Day of Deliberation demonstrated this in their reflections after the forums about how to make the best use of our natural resources in Yosemite’s Hetch Hetchy Valley. After listening to a variety of perspectives, students found coming to a decision was difficult. Sarah Wilson, the director of education at the Autry, shared some student responses:

- “No option would be fair.”
- “It’s hard to decide because there is no right decision.”
- “A moral dilemma about thinking about yourself or others.”
- “I feel bad for Congress; they have to make hard decisions!”

**INSIGHTS AND CHALLENGES**

1. **At first, students may wonder how they can contribute to a historical deliberation.** The premise of Historic Decisions forums is that people, whether or not they were recognized formally as citizens, or even if they were enslaved, were deliberating, both privately and publicly, about what the best possible outcomes would be for themselves, their families, and their communities.

   Making connections between the students’ lives today and the
historical issue by inviting them to share a personal experience related to the issue today is a helpful entry point. Then, students can more easily imagine the issue faced by people in the past. Encouraging them to occasionally make comparisons between the past and their contemporary life experiences throughout a forum also enriches their thinking. For example, in *A New Land*, a Historic Decisions forum about the development of the Constitution, a moderator may encourage participation by saying, “While our forum is set in 1787, if a personal experience or contemporary issue seems relevant, please share it.” They may then go on to ask questions such as, “Given what people cared about in 1787, what was the best way to address the problem at that time?” and “As you think about what we care about today, what kind of government should we have now?”

Initially, museum staff and teachers were skeptical about the ability of students to balance between past and present, but after a forum, they are typically surprised at how well it went. Students deliberate successfully about a historical issue with relatively few, but strategic, historical facts. Because the things people value remain consistent over time, the options serve as a bridge between past and present. Autry Museum educators who spoke with teachers after the forums reported that one observed, “They [her students] enjoyed the chance to discuss the issue more deeply.” Another noted, “Students were more engaged and more likely to participate [than in a regular discussion].”

2. Teaching history and moderating forums about historical problems are two different animals. Ideally, teachers will spend some class time in advance of a Historic Decisions forum laying out the historical groundwork and explaining what deliberation is and why it is important in a democratic
During a forum, participants are decision-makers, not students. Turning a forum into a lecture about history disrupts the students’ development of deliberative civic skills. The forum creates a dynamic through which civic education and historical education are mutually reinforcing.

During a forum on the Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo, Abby Pfisterer, education specialist for the Smithsonian Institution’s Museum of American History, observed a high school teacher prompting students to make connections between that issue and what they had learned throughout the course. She noted, “Specifically, he asked them to identify similarities between the offer of citizenship to the Californios in 1849 and [other course content]. . . . Afterwards, the teacher talked with us about how the deliberation was an important platform to activate students’ prior knowledge and build their historical thinking skills.”

3. Contemporary participants can find thinking through options that are now almost universally rejected to be challenging. Not including these kinds of options in issue materials would erase important parts of our history, but the options can easily be dismissed if students impose their contemporary views on the past. To counteract this, participants need to keep in mind the distinction between the things people value and strategies to achieve them, which change over time. Presentism—the interpretation of the past in terms of contemporary perspectives—is avoided through explicitly acknowledging differences between then and now.

Deliberating about why strategies now shunned but that were once acceptable can lead to greater insights into pervasive contemporary problems. Deliberating about the options can also bring to light some of the trade-offs we live with today and challenge contemporary moral complacency.

One example of an issue guide containing options that would be unacceptable today appears in Slavery or Freedom Forever: What’s at Stake in the Kansas-Nebraska Act? As students wrestle with the question...
of slavery in the territories, they consider three options: Remember Our Ideals (treat everyone fairly), Affirm Individual Choice (the settlers should be free to decide for themselves), and Protect Our Prosperity (national stability). The trade-offs raise disconcerting but productive questions about power, absolutist positions, the dangers of civil war, and the dangers of unlimited individual choice and self-interest.

After a forum using the Separate and Unequal in 1963 issue guide, Gabrielle Lampugh, education director for the Mathews Center for Civic Life, wrote about how students came to understand the risks associated with taking action. One student questioned whether the group would really be willing to put their lives on the line for something they believed in. In response, some acknowledged their fears about disappointing their families or damaging their families’ reputations. One student observed, “It’s easy to say you would stick your neck out to do the ‘right thing,’ but there is a reason very few people actually do that.” The moderator concluded, “It’s really easy to say what should and should not be done when it isn’t you doing it. But they recognized the question the deliberation was posing: ‘What are you, personally and collectively, willing to do to impact change?’ And they were
deeply self-aware and introspective about their own strengths and weaknesses as they answered this question."

4. The museum staff who participated in a multiyear research project using Historic Decisions concluded that role-playing is not effective. Role-playing undermines the civic purpose of Historic Decisions because it requires students to act out the views of historical characters instead of wrestling with the problem themselves. Instead of doing the actual work of deliberating, they are stuck in an imaginary role. In addition, and quite harmfully, role-playing can result in caricatures or in reinforcing stereotypes.

Intellectual flexibility and honesty are hallmarks of a deliberative frame of mind. Mark Wilson, director of the Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities at Auburn University, shared a story about how one fourth grader changed her mind as she deliberated about an action she had initially supported during a forum on the Creek War of 1813-14. When she realized the consequences of that action, she stopped mid-sentence and said, “No, that’s not what I think we should do. Never mind!” Deliberation helps participants to hear others, but often, as she demonstrated, it helps us hear ourselves.

HISTORIC DECISIONS ISSUE GUIDES

1776: What Should We Do?
National Issues Forums Institute

A New Land: What Kind of Government Do We Want? (1787)
National Issues Forums Institute

The Creek War of 1813-14: What Would You Do?
The Caroline Marshall Draughon Center for the Arts & Humanities, Auburn University and the David Mathews Center for Civic Life

The Treaty of Guadalupe Hidalgo: What Do You Do When the Border Crosses You? (1849)
Smithsonian National Museum of American History

Slavery or Freedom Forever? What’s at Stake in the Kansas-Nebraska Act? (1854)
The New England Center for Civic Life

Bleeding Kansas: How Do We Grow Our Fractured Nation? (1857)
Lancaster History

Moving Towards Freedom: What Rights and Opportunities Should Be Afforded to African Americans? (1866)
National Underground Railroad Freedom Center

Hetch Hetchy: How Do We Make the Best Use of Our Natural Resources? (1913)
The Autry Museum of the American West

World at War: What Role Should the United States Play in International Conflicts? (1915)
National WWI Museum and Memorial

Woman Suffrage and the Great War: What Should Woman Suffrage Advocates Do in Response to the Great War? (1917)
National Woman’s Party

Forging a New City: How Should We Shape Modern Pittsburgh? (1946)
Heinz History Center

The Long Road Home: How Should We Help People Still Suffering Because of World War II? (1952)
The Lower East Side Tenement Museum

What Should Be Done to Ease Racial Tensions in Montgomery in 1956?
National Center for Civil and Human Rights

Historic Decisions issue guides are available for download at www.nifi.org/historicdecisions.
BEYOND THE FORUMS

Integrating Historic Decisions into museum programs and school curricula has led to closer relationships between museums and local schools. A number of museums, including the National WWI Museum and Memorial and the Senator John Heinz History Center, have begun offering workshops on deliberative practices to teachers, often in the summer, so they can better understand the ideas and practices that are the foundation of this approach to learning about history and about democracy. The Heinz History Center has experimented with using primary materials from their archive to create frameworks with both students and teachers. Some museums, including the Autry and the Smithsonian’s National Museum of American History, have developed websites with supplemental materials for teachers and students.

In addition to the existing materials, the Smithsonian is working with students and teachers to create four new issue guides. One of these addresses the Pueblo Revolt of 1680. Native American students and their teacher have shared critical insights about their history and its contemporary connections. During a test of the draft, they engaged in a challenging conversation about the complexity of this history and the best approach for inviting others to grapple with it. The students shared their concerns about what cultural information could enable non-Native American students to thoughtfully and respectfully engage with this content. While the students did not come to a shared agreement, they used the Historic Decisions issue framing as an entry point for an important conversation about their history and relationship to others.

In Teaching History for the Common Good, Keith C. Barton and Linda S. Levstik recognize that the past can be used “in a variety of ways, and for a variety of purposes.” One of these is to use history’s “potential to prepare students for participation in a pluralist democracy.” The Historic Decisions research over the past five years has demonstrated how this potential can be realized.

Joni Doherty is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at jdo@kettering.org.

Integrating Historic Decisions into museum programs and school curriculums has led to closer relationships between museums and local schools.
Traditionally, science and politics are taught separately—rarely in the same classroom. There is a fear, I have observed, that if we admit too readily that scientific matters and political matters are not distinct from each other, these hybrids will proliferate, to invoke language used by Bruno Latour in his book, *We Have Never Been Modern*. Once this hybridized and politicized science exists in the world, it will be impossible to make decisions, to come to conclusions, and to seek out the kind of fair and objective truths we imagine science will bring us.

However, as Latour predicts, it is the denial of these hybrids that causes them to multiply in ways that feel out of control. In order to reckon with the world as it really is, we must acknowledge that science and
In order to reckon with the world as it really is, we must acknowledge that science and political matters—civic matters—are intimately connected. And then we must find a way to teach them together.

That is the crux of college courses such as Science and Civic Action. Courses like this one provide a path toward our reckoning with the science/politics hybrids as they really are. Such a course knows that teaching only the technical issues surrounding gene editing (for example, how do cuts in DNA strands work?) or just the social implications and reactions (for example, who is the imagined patient for gene editing procedures, and how do actual people feel about it?) is not enough. Rather, both must be taught simultaneously, for the technical choices and the social and political interests surrounding them are impossible to disentangle. Science and Civic Action is aware of this and seeks to foster in students an appreciation for both, together.

In addition, it is appealing to me to teach such a course because it fosters particular kinds of thinking in the classroom—thinking that I strongly believe is necessary in our current political climate. One is the notion that knowledge is important but does not exist in a vacuum. The notion that people perceive or take up knowledge in certain ways is just as significant as knowledge creation. Another is that technocratic, top-down solutions are overwrought, and students looking to make positive changes in the world need to develop alternative values. That is to say, Science and Civic Action aims to teach a kind of scientific mind-set that is attuned to the needs, values, and lived experiences of people in the world.

CIVIC SCIENCE IN ACTION

In fall 2019, as part of my Civic Science Fellowship at Tufts University, I joined Dr. Jonathan Garlick in teaching his course Science and Civic Action. The goal of this course, as we state in the syllabus, is to “explore the ways in which science practice and knowledge can serve as tools of empowerment for science literacy,
respectful dialogue, collective deliberation, social action, political advocacy, and community revitalization on science issues that are important to our lives and our communities.” As part of this exploration, our course centered on the development of issue guides. Students worked in groups of six and developed an issue guide about one of four controversial science topics: sports-related traumatic brain injuries, nuclear vs. renewable energy, gene editing, and opioid addiction. In a course that develops civic skills, the goal was for students to use these issue guides at a public forum they would convene at the end of the semester.

First, students heard expert presentations on each of the four topics. After each presentation, students engaged in discussions with these experts about the issue at hand to become grounded in the most up-to-date information on each topic. We introduced the students to the format and purpose of the issue guide and explained its relevance in the context of key readings on public deliberation. Students began to think about what the issue guide meant to the creation of productive deliberative venues.

We sent them on their way to gather concerns outside of class. They spoke with family members and friends and became aware of the limitations of the concern-gathering process at the university. However, a couple weeks later, the students
arrived back in the classroom with a hefty array of concerns. During class, students broke into their topic-specific groups and then embarked on the process of “grouping like concerns.” The exercise provided us—students and instructors alike—with more clarity about the structure of each of these four scientific controversies and the framing devices that allowed us to unpack the complex, uncertain, and polarizing aspects of scientific controversies in community-based settings.

After creating options, consequences, and trade-offs linked to the major themes underlying their collections of concerns, each group created its issue guide. Garlick and I were impressed with how these turned out and particularly with how thoughtful and clarifying they were. Two-thirds of the way into the semester, we held a deliberative conversation around the issue guides during class. Our goal, of course, was to pick an issue guide around which to plan a deliberative forum. However, after each group presented its guide, the students had another idea. They decided that they would rather choose a forum topic based on the strength of a single question rather than an issue guide in full. This was an astute choice. The students then spent the rest of the time mining the guides for a single framing question upon which an entire forum could hang. They continued this process outside of class and on Canvas, our virtual course site. Ultimately, the students developed nearly 100 possible forum questions in person and virtually.

During our 12th week of class, Garlick and I hung all of the students’ questions around the room on giant sheets of paper. We provided students with colorful stickers, each color representing a different point value, ranging from one to four points. Students walked around the room, carefully reading each potential question. When they thought one
was an especially good candidate, or perhaps even the best candidate, they placed a sticker of corresponding value next to that question. Garlick and I added up all the point values and then eliminated all but a handful of the highest-scoring questions. The students then voted once more to choose their winning question: “How can we draw the line between uses of CRISPR gene editing for enhancement vs. uses for therapy to cure disease?”

We held the forum on the last day of class. The students expressed, as we planned the forum, that they wanted participants to sit in groups and discuss the question at hand with a smaller number of people. Participants included the students, of course, but they were also encouraged to bring friends, which they did. A small stack of gene editing issue guides produced by our students sat on each table, and attendees used them as a helpful guide to their question on enhancement vs. therapy.

REFLECTIONS ON THE EXPERIENCE

In contemplating the role of the issue guide as a pedagogical tool, a couple of things have emerged for me.

1. Knowledge is an outcome of community.
The issue guide is an effective tool for encouraging collectively produced thinking rather than individually centered thinking in the classroom. An academic system based on final papers and tests, all with the purpose of boosting one’s scores and/or forwarding one’s career trajectory, de-emphasizes the importance of collective thought and of community-produced scholarship. The issue guide, with its focus on framing issues for public use and its necessarily community-based workflow, asks us to rethink success in the classroom, redefining it toward community-centered purposes.

2. Knowledge is process driven.
The issue guide is not just a final product; it is also highly valuable as an example of process-oriented scholarship. The slow, semester-long process—of learning about scientific controversies, gathering concerns, grouping concerns, framing concerns in terms of overarching values,
and then imagining which framing devices will provoke the best kind of public discussion—de-emphasizes public knowledge as finite. Rather, public knowledge is ever-changing— influenced by communities, circumstances, and choices. The process of understanding how this happens is an important takeaway for students, perhaps as important as holding a physical document. In a final reflection of the year, one student wrote the following:

It was not until the issue guide project that I really learned not only the value of the collaborative process but also that my own success actually depended on the help from and input of my group members. The larger lesson I learned during this experience, one that also happens to underlie the purpose behind an issue guide, is that dialogue and deliberation really do go hand in hand. Group work frees students to build a foundation of trust on which meaningful discussions can occur and from which actionable outcomes are not only possible but practical.

Another student shared:

Putting together an issue guide allowed me to take ownership in this process of creating our forum. I ultimately found it really valuable to do the qualitative data analysis of figuring out what people care about. Not only did it help with the general skill of qualitative data analysis, but listening to people’s concerns was such a compassionate way of conducting research. Bringing compassion into science and politics has made me view medicine through an entirely different lens.

These values of knowledge as both an outcome of community engagement and as a thing driven by process, upheld by the issue guide as a classroom fixture, are also values that reinforce the spirit of a civic science mind-set. The course syllabus outlines what such a mind-set could look like: that it “is intended to create an environment for an exchange of ideas through inclusive discourse that can best prepare citizens to participate in productive conversations and make informed choices on issues that connect science to daily choices we face.” The focus on collective, process-oriented reflection on controversy, as introduced by the issue guide, reinforces our commitments to prepare students for inclusive discussions and collective decision-making.

Samantha Fried was previously a postdoctoral fellow in civic science at the Jonathan M. Tisch College of Civic Life at Tufts University and is now a program manager for science, technology, and society (STS) and civic studies at Tufts. She can be reached at samantha.fried@tufts.edu.
From Opinions to Judgments: Insights from the First 40 Years of the National Issues Forums

By Jean Johnson and Keith Melville

In 1980, when several of us started working with Dan Yankelovich at the newly formed nonpartisan research organization called Public Agenda, we looked at the value and the limitations of public opinion analysis. It's a field in which Dan—along with other pioneers including Lou Harris and George Gallup—was a nationally recognized figure.

Well aware of the strengths and weaknesses of traditional polls, Dan was reflecting on a fundamental question in a democracy: How do we advance and support the public's capabilities and its role in democratic life?

THE PUBLIC'S STARTING POINT

What fascinated Dan, and what he wrote about in a seminal book called Coming to Public Judgment, was how the public could move toward more considered and stable views after they have had a chance to weigh options and their costs and downsides. In that book, he laid out the main insights that shaped Public Agenda's work and subsequently provided the framework for what we and our colleagues have been examining in an almost 40-year-long exploration called the National Issues Forums (NIF).

As Dan suggested, elected officials, news media, and experts do a reasonably good job of bringing major problems to the public's attention, but the public's starting point
on issues is typically quite different from that of leaders. In most cases, leaders in government, the media, and the corporate and academic sectors have invested years weighing problems and various solutions and tend to talk about them in terms that are unfamiliar or uncompelling to most typical Americans.

Dan recognized that when leaders face important decisions, they think them through by using choice frameworks that lay out the competing options with their risks, costs, and trade-offs clearly delineated. He proposed that the public needs a similar choice framework on major issues.

THE PUBLIC LEARNING CURVE

However, coming to public judgment involves more than laying out choices and providing reliable information from an unbiased source. Because of his background in psychology and psychoanalysis, as well as philosophy, Dan was well aware of the importance of moving through the steps of emotional acceptance of choices, each of which imposes certain costs and involves certain sacrifices. This recognition was the basis for a different understanding of how people think through issues, recognize the downsides associated with each choice, agree over time to accept the costs and consequences of making certain choices, and move toward more considered and stable judgments.

In his writing and in the course of work we did together at Public Agenda, Dan proposed a distinctive, stage-specific “public learning curve” consisting of various obstacles (such as mistrust and leadership miscommunications), needs (for more context, and a choice framework), traps (such as wishful thinking), and impediments (such as a lack of urgency).

Moving toward public judgment, as he concluded, requires people to listen to a variety of views and reflect on what should be done about pressing concerns. At its core, public judgment reflects what people can live with in order to make progress—not just what they themselves personally support.

TESTING THE IDEA

As intriguing and innovative as Dan’s thinking was about public judgment, it was a theory—a set of ideas and insights that were largely untested. In the early 1980s, David Mathews proposed and the Kettering Foundation played a key role in developing the National Issues Forums, a nationwide network that was one of the first initiatives in what became the deliberative democracy movement.

The public forums that have taken
place over nearly 40 years as part of the NIF network have offered a unique opportunity for participants to engage in a different kind of public deliberation. As Mathews writes in *The Ecology of Democracy*, “To deliberate is to carefully weigh possible civic actions, laws, or policies against the various things that people hold dear in order to settle on a direction to follow or purpose to pursue.”

These NIF forums have also served as a research site. We have tried to understand how people’s thinking about major issues evolves. In effect, we have been testing Dan's idea and in doing so have become clearer about what happens in the course of public deliberation. Today, at a time of intense polarization and when public attitudes about many issues are short-circuited by partisan lockstep, it is more important than ever to understand the obstacles to moving toward public judgment, in part by considering a range of options and talking with and listening to people who reflect different points of view.

On the eve of the National Issues Forums’ 40th anniversary, it is a good time to step back from the wide range of issues that have been the focus of public forums and return to the questions Dan Yankelovich raised in the early 1980s. By taking into account the impediments laid out in his learning curve, is it realistic to...
Based on 40 years of observing forums, a clear pattern has emerged. Rich, meaningful deliberation on complex political questions builds on five specific aspects of public talk.

1. Wrestling with choices and trade-offs
Most NIF participants know something about the issue at hand, but few have followed it closely or have a full grasp of the various “sides” of the policy debate. They are not experts or analysts.

Consequently, supplying more information—more facts and statistics—doesn’t mean participants can organize it into a coherent package to think about. In fact, faced with too much information and wildly disparate opinions, many people tune out.

NIF forum deliberations center on “choice work,” much as Dan Yankelovich and David Mathews describe. NIF issue guides lay out three or four long-term strategies, each reflecting contrasting priorities and aspirations. Each strategy requires different courses of action, such as legislation, public investments, or individual change. And each comes with risks, costs, and trade-offs.

Over 40 years, choice work has demonstrated several advantages. It reassures participants that a range of views are welcome and will be discussed. It helps them quickly grasp
the overall breadth and shape of an issue. Perhaps most important, it spurs reconsideration and second thoughts by directly asking participants to weigh risks, costs, and trade-offs.

2. Listening to the personal stories of others

Experts often dismiss anecdotes—and for good reason. An individual's story may or may not reflect the overall trends experts and policymakers must address. But within the context of choice work, personal stories can provide powerful, indispensable testimony.

Participants come to forums exhausted by partisan bickering and information overload. Consequently, many see the personal stories told by other participants as more trustworthy and comprehensible than what they hear in the media.

In an economy forum, a small business owner might explain the challenges of making payroll twice a month. In an immigration forum, an immigrant might describe the system's complexity and red tape. In forums on safety and justice, minority parents might talk about counseling their teens on interacting with the police while a police officer might recount his or her own experiences.

In the context of choice work, these personal stories offer genuine food for thought and help participants understand and weigh competing perspectives.

3. Clarifying common political slogans

For policy wonks and news hounds, terms like “affirmative action,” “universal coverage,” “Medicare for all,” and “defund the police” are a useful shorthand. But NIF forums have shown time and time again that these and other seemingly familiar policy slogans are frequently misunderstood by typical Americans.

In fact, participants’ views on popular policy ideas often shift once they begin grappling with what these proposals mean and how they would work. Sometimes, participants have become more open to policies once they understand them (as has happened regarding affirmative action). Sometimes, participants develop reservations (as has happened regarding Medicare for all).

The specifics are less important than the takeaway. The public’s starting point on issues is often dramatically different from that of policy experts, journalists, and activists, and assuming that people understand these slogans and policy proposals is a recipe for miscommunication.

4. Focusing on practicalities

We all have goals and fears about how our society addresses problems, and it is, of course, important to talk about them. But NIF forums suggest
For nearly 40 years, NIFI and Kettering have explored a number of issues repeatedly as the public conversation about each has shifted and citizens are faced with new choices.

In 2020, Kettering published reports outlining some of the insights and themes that have emerged over decades on health care, the economy, and foreign policy. Many more topics have been covered repeatedly by NIF, including immigration and the national debt and budget, and Kettering continues to explore what can be learned from those as well.

**Recent Reports on Deliberation Over Time**

### Health Care

**Latest report:** *Fixing the Health-Care System: What People See—and What They’re Willing to Do—After Deliberating*

**NIF Health-Care Issue Guides**

- **2020** *Health Care: How Can We Bring Costs Down While Getting the Care We Need?*
- **2015** *Health Care: How Can We Reduce Costs and Still Get the Care We Need?*
- **2008** *Coping with the Cost of Health Care: How Do We Pay for What We Need?*
- **2003** *Examining Health Care: What’s the Public’s Prescription?*
- **1994** *The Health-Care Cost Explosion: Why It’s So Serious, What Should Be Done*
- **1992** *The Health-Care Crisis: Containing Costs, Expanding Coverage*
- **1984** *The Soaring Cost of Health Care*

### The Economy

**Latest Report:** *NIF Forums on the Economy: Changing Concerns and Enduring Values*

**NIF Economy Issue Guides**

- **2020** *Back to Work: How Should We Rebuild Our Economy?*
- **2016** *Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity?*
- **2010** *Economic Security: How Should We Take Charge of Our Future?*
- **1998** *Jobs: Preparing a Workforce for the 21st Century*
- **1995** *Pocketbook Pressure: Who Benefits from Economic Growth?*
- **1992** *Prescription for Prosperity: Four Paths to Economic Renewal*
- **1990** *Regaining the Competitive Edge: Are We Up to the Job?*
- **1984** *Jobs and the Jobless in a Changing Workplace*
- **1982** *Jobs and Productivity*

### Foreign Policy

**Latest Report:** *On Second Thought: How a Deliberative Public Talks about America’s Role*

**NIF Foreign Policy Issue Guides**

- **2019** *Keeping America Safe: What Is Our Greatest Threat? How Should We Respond?*
- **2005** *Americans’ Role in the World: Building a More Secure Future*
- **2003** *A Relationship at the Crossroads: What Kind of Relationship Do We Want with Russia?*
- **2002** *Terrorism: What Should We Do Now?*
- **1995** *Mission Uncertain: Reassessing America’s Global Role*
- **1991** *America’s Role in the World: New Risks, New Realities*
- **1987** *The Superpowers: Nuclear Weapons and National Security*
- **1985** *The Soviets: What Is the Conflict About?*
- **1983** *Nuclear Arms and National Security*
that people learn more and think more seriously when they focus on practicalities: How would this idea work? What would it mean for me, my family, and my community? What could go wrong if we do this?

Moving from what we want to what we should do and what we can live with in order to make progress is the heart and soul of deliberative forums. Everyone should have good, affordable health care, but who pays the bill? We want good jobs at good wages, but what steps could our community and state take to create them? Substance abuse destroys lives and communities, but what policies reduce it, and do they have downsides?

Deliberating on practical steps seems to convey two seemingly contradictory, but crucial ideas: (1) big issues like those addressed in forums are not simple to solve; and (2) there are concrete steps we could take to move the ball. Over decades and across multiple issues, participants have developed a sense of realism and empowerment by deliberating about practicalities. Participants often leave forums commenting that their community and the country needs more conversations like these.

5. Talking about what individuals and communities should do

Political candidates generally promise to fix problems, but there is an unspoken reality behind even the sincerest campaign rhetoric. Elected officials can’t deliver positive change simply through passing laws and allocating money. People and communities must do their part.

Forum participants have repeatedly accepted and relished this idea. In health-care forums, participants often spontaneously raise the idea of encouraging healthier lifestyles. In forums on the economy, people often bring up the need to live within one’s means and be conscientious workers and students.

When people deliberate, most endorse the proposition that government can’t—and shouldn’t—do it all. Most want to talk about what they can do themselves and with their neighbors.

THE NEXT 40 YEARS

In NIF forums on multiple issues in hundreds of communities and settings nationwide, we have witnessed and documented the public’s capacity to deepen its thinking about complex problems, listen to the concerns of others, and begin to move from top-of-the-head opinions to more realistic, stable judgments. In a democracy, that capacity enables a country and its various communities to confront and wrestle with problems realistically in order to put solutions in place.

Jean Johnson and Keith Melville are both senior associates of the Kettering Foundation. Johnson can be reached at jjohnson@nifi.org, and Melville can be reached at kmelville@fielding.edu.
The Library as Community Hub

By Marie Pyko, Lissa Staley, and Debbie Stanton

At the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Topeka, Kansas, our Community Impact Goals are ambitious and are meant to describe societal issues that we all must address for the success of our citizenry. For the past decade, one focus of our community work has been on embedding librarians in the community. Librarians are uniquely positioned to work this way. CEO Gina Millsap invested in facilitation training for librarians and often offers our services to local groups, saying “If one of our librarians is at the table, your process is better because we’re trained facilitators who know how to ask key questions, and your product is better because we...
bring our skills as information professionals to provide solid data and fact checking.” In a recent survey, our customers responded that the most valuable resource the library brings to their community is “a trusted community anchor,” ranking that highest and above digital or print collections or any other resource. Libraries are known for being neutral, nonpartisan spaces. As we reimagine how to best serve our community, we continually ask ourselves: Once the library is invited to community tables as a trusted resource, what can we do to be effective agents of change?

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

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

“Libraries are known for being neutral, nonpartisan spaces. As we reimagine how to best serve our community, we continually ask ourselves: Once the library is invited to community tables as a trusted resource, what can we do to be effective agents of change?”
By strongly encouraging many library staff members to participate in deliberations, we began integrating deliberative thinking into our internal organizational conversations.

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

**GOING ONLINE**

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

So far, our online conversations are advertised as opportunities to learn and practice deliberation, but as more people in our community become familiar with this process, we hope to work more closely with groups actively seeking to work with those with whom they haven’t
worked before. By strongly encouraging many library staff members to participate in deliberations, we began integrating deliberative thinking into our internal organizational conversations as well. Staff and community members are interested in decisions being made about reopening the building during the pandemic, and with this shared language of options and actions and trade-offs, our internal decision-making is stronger and better articulated, especially when values are in conflict.

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

FOSTERING COMMUNITY DELIBERATION

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

We are also learning how to name and frame issues with others in our community, beginning with the concern-gathering conversations, focusing on the question, “What concerns you most about living and working in Topeka/Shawnee County?” Entering into the concern gathering without a clear idea of what issues would emerge initially felt risky. We started by working within a community engagement group that is supporting the county development organization’s strategic plan, with which one of our librarians had been building trust within the group by chairing it for the previous year. The structure of concern-gathering conversations, and issue framing more generally, can help the group raise awareness of barriers to
community pride and find common ground with various potential partners while considering possible unintended consequences. The pandemic has disrupted the meeting structure of this initiative, but we laid the groundwork for rethinking how we identify the challenges we face in the community and introduced deliberating possible actions as a strategy we can all use in any conversation.

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

No organization wants to draw attention to their individual weakness or limitation. In many organizational plans, interventions are often chosen to affect their targeted populations instead of engaging community residents in identifying needs and deliberating around possible actions. But using deliberative frameworks, or other structures such as guiding questions, can create environments in which people acknowledge that the solutions and actions to current challenges may come from outside their sectors and outside the people currently at the table and that the problems are bigger than what these few organizations can solve. And, while professionals and organizations have roles to play, the challenges ultimately must be addressed by the community.

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

Debbie Stanton, public services supervisor, moved to Kansas recently. She observed, “So often it takes a great deal of time to build trust enough in a new community to begin having deep conversations with
And yet, the work we are doing in the community continues to influence collective decision-making and encourage deliberative thinking. In these times of limited gatherings, much of the work is less visible to the public, and we focus on observing and surveying news, providing encouragement and connections, gauging where people are so we can engage appropriately, and acting on opportunities for deliberative thinking as they emerge in conversations. Even informally, we are helping individuals and groups see the issues differently or helping the groups see themselves differently.

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

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

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

Much of what we learned from community deliberations in 2019 is informing how we engage in the ever-evolving work of 2020.
The only constant may be change, but we are hopeful that we can support careful consideration of trade-offs while the community makes decisions about changes.

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

In our next series of deliberative conversations, we are testing the new policing issue framework. All summer, we monitored the local situation, weighing trade-offs of partnering with certain groups over other groups in a divisive situation, looking for possibilities to help center the work, and pulling back as things escalated. Many of the meetings in our community are being held in person, in a county with currently high community transmission during the pandemic. We are advertising Zoom forums and hoping to engage and include voices who haven’t participated, along with those who are the current faces of organizations and movements. The week after we started to contact potential partners, our police chief announced his upcoming retirement.

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

Marie Pyko is the public services director at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Topeka, KS. She can be reached at mpyko@tscpl.org.
Lissa Staley is the community connections librarian at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Topeka, KS. She can be reached at estaley@tscpl.org.
Debbie Stanton is the public services supervisor at the Topeka and Shawnee County Public Library in Topeka, KS. She can be reached at dstanton@tscpl.org.
Faith and Democracy

By Elizabeth Gish and Ekaterina Lukianova

Many churches and other religious organizations are engaged in efforts to improve their communities and help people face challenges such as homelessness, hunger, or addiction. Yet, even though significant resources are put into these efforts, they find that service-oriented initiatives don’t address the underlying problems communities face. Often volunteers get a sense of accomplishment, and there are individual success stories of people who overcome major challenges. But the fundamental problems remain.

For several years, a group of religious leaders have been meeting in research exchanges at the Kettering Foundation to talk about how they might try something new. Both lay leaders and religious professionals from a range of contexts have been meeting regularly, in person and online, to support one another in improving community capacity building, both within their religious communities and in the geographic areas where they are located. Some churches have experimented with integrating democratic practices into the life of their religious communities and inviting others to take part. They have found that this often helped to get at some of the underlying issues that make addressing community problems difficult. This article discusses a few of these efforts and highlights some of the ways these initiatives have been helpful.
Lutheran minister Leah Schade found that, in many churches, congregants and pastors did not feel comfortable talking about the complicated issues at the intersection of religion and politics because they did not want to risk upsetting others or alienating congregants. It was one thing to staff a food pantry or volunteer to clean up a local park, but when it came to discussing and moving forward on deeper problems of hunger or the environment, they were at an impasse.

Schade developed a way to approach these problems called the sermon-dialogue-sermon method in which the pastor preaches sermons that prepare the congregation for an upcoming deliberation on a topic that might otherwise be controversial or feel risky. After these preparatory sermons, members of the congregation take part in the deliberation. Churches have used National Issues Forums issue guides such as Making Ends Meet: How Should We Spread Prosperity and Improve Opportunity? and Safety and Justice: How Should Communities Reduce Violence? Churches have also used issue guides such as The Church’s Role in a Divided Society developed by a group of religious leaders who have created materials specifically for religious contexts.

As Schade explains in her book, Preaching in the Purple Zone, she has found that this approach allows those in congregations to find “shared values and, as a result, [look] for common direction, or at least next steps [that] the group might take together.” We know that houses of worship are one of the institutions that citizens still feel a part of, where they have strong ties, and where many people still have high levels of trust. Using deliberation in the context of religious communities can help create spaces where these already strong relationships can be used to dig more deeply into the challenges of shared life. Schade teaches this sermon-dialogue-sermon method to students at Lexington Theological Seminary,
where she is a professor. Seminary students from around the country have used this method in their communities to begin the process of getting at the “problem behind the problem” so that they can work together with others to find common ground on which to act.

Another effort at using deliberation to strengthen community capacity has been led by Leslie King, a Presbyterian pastor from Waco, Texas, whose congregation has been holding regular forums in conjunction with the Hidden Common Ground initiative, a joint effort that includes USA TODAY, Public Agenda, and the Kettering Foundation. For the church’s June 2020 forum, King thought that her congregation would want to discuss issues related to COVID-19. Several others who have participated in Kettering’s faith-based organizations research exchanges also shared that their congregations were looking for resources about how to talk and act together in the context of a “new normal.” Some congregations were specifically interested in deliberations about how and when to reopen their churches, while others were interested in hosting broader deliberations about how to move forward together as a larger community.

Collaborators across five states worked quickly to develop a resource for a June forum. Through conversations in their communities, they gathered concerns that people had about COVID-19 and the challenges the pandemic had brought to community-building and local problem-solving efforts. Over a series of Zoom calls and online collaborative writing efforts, the group developed an issue guide, Living Together through Covid and Beyond. Those who joined the forum said that they appreciated a framework in which to discuss ways to move forward and some of the trade-offs that came with the various approaches. Others in the network are considering ways to adapt the guide to their own contexts. Several of those involved in creating the guide have noted that this issue is often framed in dualistic terms—open things up or keep things closed—and it can be difficult to engage in productive conversation about the topic and to discern what course of action may be best to take. The group hopes that the guide will provide a more nuanced framework in which to discuss what’s happening around us and to identify some concrete steps for action even if we don’t all agree on everything.

A final example comes from Jacksonville, Florida. St. John’s Cathedral has been using issue guides for several years to deliberate about issues ranging from end-of-life care to immigration. One of the strengths
of regularly using deliberation in a religious context is that not only does it strengthen the church’s ability to be a node in a network of civic organizations seeking to strengthen a community’s democratic capacity, but also it strengthens the “civic muscle” of the citizens who are taking part in the regular deliberations. It helps to normalize deliberative talk as an important political and religious practice, allowing citizen-congregants to think together about what they hold valuable and to weigh trade-offs together in a spirit of discernment.

St. John’s recently had the opportunity to collaborate with others in their neighborhood, known as the Cathedral District, to help with neighborhood development plans. The Cathedral District is a 36-block, 118-acre area in downtown Jacksonville. There are five historic churches in the neighborhood and many parking lots that are used by parishioners on Sundays.

Early in the process of assessing what to do about some of the challenges of the Cathedral District, a local nonprofit interested in neighborhood development and revitalization, Cathedral District Jax (CDJ), sought help in addressing what they thought was a clear problem: too much parking and not enough
Yet, CDJ was open to naming and framing exercises with residents and church members from the district, and, through this, discovered more to discuss. This is a pattern that many communities find: when people are given the opportunity to name and frame issues together, it often uncovers more to the story.

Led by a member of St. John’s Cathedral, a small group of representatives from several of the historic churches, a resident of the neighborhood, and a person rehabilitating homes in the neighborhood met. After a lot of back and forth, many hours of brainstorming, and gathering concerns, the team developed an issue guide that would be used in deliberations about the future of the district. Residents of the local condominiums and members of the five churches—Historic Mt. Zion AME, First Methodist, First Presbyterian, Basilica of the Immaculate Conception, and St. John’s Episcopal Cathedral—met for a series of forums to discuss the future of the Cathedral District.

The final report from the deliberations included the following: “Forum outcomes revealed significant interest in relationship building among District stakeholders through community festivals, tours, collaborative church events, and possibly establishing a community association to complement CDJ, Inc. efforts.”

It turns out the problem wasn’t too much parking per se, but that people longed for more green space, more trees, and more relationships among the various stakeholders.

The CDJ board took the forum outcomes seriously. The first major initiative to come from the deliberations, Christmas in the Cathedral

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District, took place in 2019. There were lights, live music, a live nativity, a Bethlehem Marketplace, refreshments, shuttle transportation, and security. Several hundred volunteers and more than 1,000 visitors came to the district. There are ongoing efforts to plant trees, create a more walkable neighborhood, and develop more opportunities for the churches, church membership, and residents to work together to grow a more vibrant and connected community.

In each of these cases, deliberation has served several purposes. First, it has helped religious communities to engage in meaningful conversations about some of the polarizing topics of our time. Very often, public discourse about political topics is either a debate between people who talk past each other or a discussion among people who all agree. Those who have taken part in the deliberations repeatedly say how important it is that they are able to authentically engage across differences with an eye toward finding common ground on which to act. In addition, while service is an important part of many religious communities, understanding deliberative habits as an equally important part of religious practice has helped these faith communities to make progress on the problems that they would like to “make better.”

While service is an important part of many religious communities, understanding deliberative habits as an equally important part of religious practice has helped these faith communities to make progress on the problems that they would like to “make better.” Along with the deliberations themselves, the naming and framing process has created space in neighborhoods and communities to engage together around the challenges they face. Many involved in the work have noted that this has helped expand on their service mindset and facilitated movement toward a more collaborative framework for addressing community issues.

Elizabeth Gish and Ekaterina Lukianova are program officers at the Kettering Foundation. Gish can be reached at egish@kettering.org, and Lukianova can be reached at lukianova@kettering.org.
COVID-19 Community Response and the Appetite for Civic Engagement

By Michele Archie

Kettering research has noted that community resources and the way that a community functions are essential for survival and recovery from natural disasters. The foundation has begun studies of how communities are deciding to respond to COVID-19 and what they are doing. We are especially interested in learning from community decisions that lead to sustained public work to support and rebuild community institutions and economies.

This research is driven by a strategy that asks, What inhibits or strengthens communities’ ability to make decisions and act under the constraints and challenges of the pandemic? How are communities innovating and learning? How is what’s learned passed on between different places and actors? Who are they? What organizational forms do such collective efforts take? How are efforts to sustain, rebuild, and reimagine communities organized?

As a part of this research, the foundation asked Michele Archie to track what she sees happening in communities across the country. Many of these places will be part of further research initiatives. This is Michele’s account of her research so far.
Since March, I have been scanning traditional and social media, dropping in on Zoom meetings, and engaging in a bit of good, old-fashioned conversation by email and phone, looking for ways communities are coming together to respond to the COVID-19 pandemic. It may be heartening to know that such community-driven responses are not in short supply; I have found an inspiring variety of examples, ranging from the simplest of grocery delivery services to an entirely community-generated COVID-19 testing effort.

In May 2020, the New Yorker published “What Mutual Aid Can Do During a Pandemic,” an article about COVID-prompted mutual aid. In it, author Jia Tolentino quotes Harvard political scientist Nancy L. Rosenblum: “There is little evidence that disaster generates an appetite for permanent, energetic civic engagement.” Instead, a temporary “ungoverned reciprocity” is what’s left when “government and politics disappear from view.”

But the COVID-19 pandemic is no ordinary disaster with a time-limited event (such as a hurricane, flood, or wildfire) followed by a period of recovery. While the community responses I am seeing may not be permanent, they also may not be fleeting. Indeed, Rosenblum told Tolentino that “because it had been clear from the beginning that the pandemic would last indefinitely, many groups had immediately begun thinking about long-term self-management, building volunteer infrastructures in order to get ahead of the worst of the crisis, and thinking about what could work for months rather than for days.”

What gives these efforts staying power? Many of the examples of community response and collective action that seem to have found the strongest legs build on existing community capitals, character, and habits. These can be as fundamental as a “we’re going to do this ourselves” attitude or as structural as a strong, functional network of community-based organizations.

Many of the examples of community response and collective action that seem to have found the strongest legs build on existing community capitals, character, and habits.
Here are several examples of community-driven COVID-19 responses that may be building themselves to last.

**MUTUAL AID MEDFORD AND SOMERVILLE (MASSACHUSETTS)**

The Mutual Aid Medford and Somerville (MAMAS) COVID-19 mutual aid network in Medford and Somerville, Massachusetts, grew out of an idea a group of friends in their 20s had to form a snow-shoveling brigade to help elderly neighbors keep up with the legal requirement to shovel snow from their properties. The winter of 2019/2020 was mild, so no shoveling was needed, but the idea of supporting neighbors created fertile ground for a mutual support network when the coronavirus emerged.

Since its early days, the group has operated in a distributed way, through a collection of Google documents, forms, and groups; a Slack group; and email and phone connections. The MAMAS website outlines the core features of its work: offering and requesting support, connecting in “neighborhood pods,” and a roster of working groups and initiatives. There are no rules about what can be offered or requested. The website notes, “There is no offer or ask too big or small here. We support each other through grocery shopping,”
deliveries, monetary support, childcare, housing justice, political education and more. We encourage you to offer or ask for whatever you need.”

Not content to create just mutual support transactions, their aim is to support longer-term community connections for resilience in the face of future challenges. Over time, the shift they want to see is neighbors self-organizing to help other neighbors when they see a need. MAMAS encourages people to connect directly to give and receive assistance and asks people who have received aid what they have to offer, recruiting them to work with the money team and other working groups. Each working group has a volunteer coordinator to keep it going. The money team, which spearheads fund-raising and coordinates transfers of funds from givers to receivers, also has “money coordinators” who help support these aid connections. Anyone can become a money coordinator through a simple process of trust-building conversations about visions and values of the group, privacy of information, and other norms.

**BETHEL STRONG (VERMONT)**

By mid-May, many Vermont mutual aid groups were reporting far less demand for basic grocery delivery and financial support and assistance than they had anticipated. Bethel Strong, which was created from scratch by local volunteers in response to COVID-19, is one group that turned its attention to a longer horizon, acknowledging the uncertainty about the needs and responses that might emerge as the pandemic goes on. Rebecca Sanborn Stone, one of Bethel Strong’s core organizers, referred to the “civic infrastructure” needed to recover from lost economic activity: “If we can build that infrastructure, then we’ll be much more prepared to collaborate and solve problems when they happen.”

Bethel Strong has also made gardening and growing food a centerpiece of its work. These efforts are about more than just providing food during the pandemic. They are aimed at building resiliency into the local food system. The group created a teaching garden to show locals...
the gardening ropes and to grow vegetables they give away at community concert and food pickup nights. Bethel Strong distributed donated raised-bed garden kits and volunteer gardening assistance to interested residents affected by COVID-19. And they encouraged gardeners and farmers to join the Grow an Extra Row campaign and donate extra produce to the local food pantry and school.

BORREGO SPRINGS CORONAVIRUS TASK FORCE (CALIFORNIA)

Borrego Springs, California, is a small desert community whose population more than doubles in the cooler months with tourists and part-time residents. It faces particular COVID-19 challenges having to do with managing visitor numbers and behavior, a lack of hospital services, and highly vulnerable populations of seniors and low-income Latinos.

In the early days of the pandemic, the Borrego Valley Endowment Fund (a local community foundation) created a volunteer coronavirus task force that helps coordinate a loosely structured larger community effort to focus community resources on controlling the spread of the virus and supporting the local economy.

While it was begun as an initiative of a local institution, the task force has developed its own independent identity and has gone beyond simple coordination. The group has developed a range of mechanisms for resource sharing. Among its first efforts were an online coronavirus resource center, a related Facebook feed, and community letters distributed by email and mail and at local food banks. Initially, the focus was to provide a source of reliable information about COVID-19 in general and community medical resources in particular and to encourage people to abide by public health restrictions and guidance. Over time, that focus has expanded to promoting a community culture of health that includes COVID-safe behaviors. A new series of online town hall forums is a key part of that effort.

The task force has been influential in considerations about how and when to reopen businesses, schools, and the state park that surrounds the town, helping revitalize a stagnant community collaborative called the Borrego Valley Stewardship Council to provide a broader forum for COVID-19 collaboration that seeks to put the community more firmly in the driver’s seat rather than simply responding to outside directives. One idea is to seek “pilot community” exceptions to state and county regulations and develop a robust testing program to allow Borrego Springs more flexibility in how its businesses, schools, and community gatherings are run.
It may be that some of the nascent or evolving associational life we are observing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will be more than temporary and will become part of the ongoing resources available to community members.

**CAN’T STOP COLUMBUS (OHIO)**

The seeds for Can’t Stop Columbus (CSCBUS) were planted by tech business leaders who came up with the idea of an online community COVID-19 hacking event at which anyone could “contribute by defining challenges, building projects, and sharing resources.” This idea grew into a wide-ranging collection of resources and activities spearheaded by this citizen-led initiative supported by two nonprofit organizations, Smart Columbus and the Columbus Partnership.

Can’t Stop Columbus has positioned itself as a project-incubation organization that helps bring community ideas to life. Its Requests for Help page differs from other community-driven COVID efforts because it is aimed at providing resources and guidance for emerging projects, not for people who are in need of food, financial, or other assistance.

As part of its preparation for a mid-August virtual “community rally,” CSCBUS produced a volunteer stories video in which several volunteers talked about who they were, why they were involved, projects they were leading, what they were proud of, and what they had gained from being involved in CSCBUS. Projects include:

- A website for the Westerville Chamber of Commerce to support its online arts festival;
- “Remembering Columbus,” which helps people whose loved ones have died with funeral planning, grief, and emotional health;
- “Keep Learning CBUS,” which is addressing the digital divide to connect people in need to the internet and computers for educational access; and
- “Come Together Columbus,” a new community organization focused on racial justice, equity, and police reform that connected with CSCBUS for organizational support and partnerships.
SAN FRANCISCO LATINO TASK FORCE (CALIFORNIA)
A number of Latino community-based organizations in San Francisco’s Mission District organized themselves as the Latino Task Force for COVID-19 and were instrumental in forging a partnership with UC San Francisco researchers, the City and County of San Francisco, and the San Francisco Department of Public Health to organize voluntary COVID testing for residents in the Mission District and other strongly Latino parts of the city.

Test results illustrate the exacerbating effects of San Francisco’s shelter-in-place ordinance on existing ethnic and socioeconomic disparities in health. By late April, the vast majority of the city’s new COVID-19 infections were occurring in the Latino community, with infections also strongly associated with the need to work outside the home, frontline service work, unemployment, and household incomes under $50,000 per year.

Beyond testing, the task force listened to what the city’s Latino residents said they needed and then used its connections with other community-based organizations across the city and the City Department of Human Rights to channel support to meet these needs. The task force has committees on food distribution, education, and communication that engage with interested residents to do the work and then report back at weekly meetings. Its multilingual website provides links to a wide range of community resources.

SEEKING LEARNING RELATIONSHIPS
Some of these and other community-driven COVID-19 responses I have uncovered since March are built on the foundation of an existing organization or involve new alliances of existing organizations. Others have been created from whole cloth in direct response to the pandemic and the impacts of public health measures that have been taken to control it.

It may be that some of the nascent or evolving associational life we are observing in response to the COVID-19 pandemic will be more than temporary and will become part of the ongoing resources available to community members. Kettering is seeking to develop relationships with these and similar initiatives to exchange insights into how they emerge, where and how decision-making takes place, how they approach coordinating community actions, and more.

Michele Archie is principal of The Harbinger Consultancy. She can be reached at michele@harbingerconsult.com.
W hile the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has brought many devastating consequences and exposed inequities in American education, it has also exposed the necessity for meaningful partnerships between families, communities, and education professionals. Parents and other custodial guardians with students at home are having to substitute as teachers, friends, and coaches. There is a growing recognition that educators are, even under normal circumstances, engaged in work that often reaches far beyond the school day. But beyond the role that educators can and must play, families and others in the community have important roles in educating youth as well. Communities and educators alike are beginning to acknowledge the need for complementary, coproducive partnerships.

Kettering researches ways that the community can be seen as an environment for the education of youth. The increased awareness and immediate needs brought on by the current crisis provide an opportunity to reimagine how this might be so.

Indeed, the education of youth is conventionally thought of as the responsibility of professionals, while, in fact, it is the responsibility of the entire community. This looks different from one community to the next and isn’t limited to traditional classroom lessons. It is shared work.
limitations and demands of the pandemic continue to make more and more apparent the need for a shared approach to addressing the diverse educational needs of youth and their families.

From systemic inequities revealed through resource deficiencies to general communication challenges and social-emotional student health, citizens are daily faced with the startling reality that institutional education is, in many ways, closed to the public. Why, one may ask? If we look at institutional system design, professionalized silos, systemic racism, and the litany of additional boundary-shaping attitudes and behaviors between educational institutions and communities, one sees a hand-me-down mode of operating that carries with it deep limitations. This system might be considered an emblem of a past in which homogenous groups of professionals and decision-makers shaped institutions. The unfortunate consequences of this reality are evident everywhere, especially as more parents must try to engage directly with public education systems. These consequences are especially vivid in minority communities—particularly Black and Brown neighborhoods. This institutional structure and the systems that buttress it have failed generations of Americans and continue to diminish the public’s role in the education of youth.

“While the coronavirus pandemic of 2020 has brought many devasting consequences and exposed inequities in American education, it has also exposed the necessity for meaningful partnerships between families, communities, and education professionals.

In Democracy and Education, John Dewey wrote that the “imagination is as much a normal and integral part of human activity as is muscular movement.” Civic atrophy and institutional barricades may have eroded our imaginative impulses. But the global pandemic, for all its negatives, provides an opportunity to reimagine what an open, equitable education system might be. This requires an openness of mind that demands of professionals and people in communities that each move beyond limited understandings of “engagement” activities to a more robust system of complementary acting and
coproduction. In this view, communities would be fully integrated into the life and structure of schools—and vice versa.

The specific role these groups would play looks different from one local community to the next. To understand the role of the community in education is to also understand that education is more than a student’s performance in school. Learning happens in school hallways, community gyms, homes, sporting fields, school buses, street corners, bodegas, school board meetings, and town halls. Seeing the community as an environment for education means the deployment of the fullest set of resources to support the education of young people. An open system looks across the entire community to determine how to meet the moment.

In *Is There a Public for Public Schools?* David Mathews argues that “schools can’t simply be institutions in our communities the way a distribution center for a chain of retail stores is in a community. Schools are meant to be an integral part of a community, so strengthening the public is actually strengthening the [public’s] schools.” The educational inequity experienced in communities due to systemic limitations is an immediate reason the reimaging of how our educational system works is so necessary. The particularities of communities require approaches of complementary acting that give attention to the unique assets and resources available (or missing) in addressing the task of education as communities and educational institutions share responsibility.

From 2014 to 2017, I served as executive director of an education equity organization in Bridgeport, Connecticut. I worked closely with a group of grandparents caring for grandchildren who were no longer in the full custody of their parents. This group called themselves “Grandparents, Here We Go Again.” This name, according to the group’s leaders, captured their frustration with “the system” and the emotional toll of shouldering the responsibility of care for children that, in their words, they “did not choose.” The

“Seeing the community as an environment for education means the deployment of the fullest set of resources to support the education of young people.”
compounded challenges of navigating the education system and providing for their grandchildren were “two full-time jobs,” in the words of one grandparent.

These grandparents’ material conditions and general lack of access to basic resources, particularly those that best positioned them to care for their grandchildren, gave them little choice but to find community among others who were in similar situations. They sought, created, and cultivated community with one another. Their success and survival depended on the sharing of all kinds of resources, including food pantry information, knowledge regarding state grants, and free childcare services. There were approximately 25 in this group, some with custody of up to 5 children. Their shared challenge was getting the schools and the systems, institutions, and folks in leadership that surrounded them to understand their limitations but to also recognize that they themselves had resources to offer. These grandmothers and grandfathers were industrious and driven by imagination—the potential of what could be. They created resource guides and shared them with parents and other custodial guardians who had children in the schools their children attended.

They persisted. The grandparents group organized a public conversation with elected officials and education leaders. They partnered with teachers and families and shared their needs, desires for policy changes, and a plan for better relationships with schools. The conversation was a transformative moment for them. They recognized and felt a sense of agency they hadn’t before. This was a moment in which boundaries were broken; the grandparent,
community members in attendance, school leaders, and elected officials opened up to the possibility of another way of being in relationship. They were honest and heard each other in a new way, as partners in a shared effort to educate and prepare for the promise of a fulfilling future.

No one community has the prescription for how another reimagines the work of educating youth. But the public work and goods of one effort can be instructive for others. Resuscitating our civic culture to the benefit of education demands that we recognize the complementary relationship of people in community and institutions of education. It is a work of collective imagining that will require humility and a willingness to unite both expert and community knowledge to produce the best possible educational outcomes for young people.

As Dr. Martin Luther King Jr. noted in his *Letter from a Birmingham Jail*, “We are caught in an inescapable network of mutuality, tied in a single garment of destiny. Whatever affects one directly, affects all indirectly.” While we work and imagine locally, we must simultaneously keep our eyes fixed on a high vision in which all young people have access to education that enables them, in King’s words in an article written while he was a student at Morehouse College, to “become more efficient, to achieve with increasing facility the legitimate goals of [their lives].”

Kettering is interested in learning with others who are trying to reimagine ways to foster more complementary production when it comes to education—ways of seeing it as a shared concern and shared responsibility among various people and organizations in community as well as formal institutions, both local and national. We are trying to learn what actions such innovators undertake, what forms the organizations pursuing them adopt, what they learn, and how they make sense of it. We invite those who are engaged in this work of educating youth to contact us.

Damien Conners is a program officer at the Kettering Foundation. He can be reached at dconners@kettering.org.
The average American adult makes 35,000 decisions each day. Most of them are small and affect only the decision-maker—What socks should I wear? Should I walk or take the bus? Should I put half-and-half or skim milk in my coffee? But a significant subset of those decisions affect other people. And yet another subset of decisions must be made with other people, in families and workplaces, in churches and synagogues, and in communities, states, and nations. This spring, the Kettering Foundation brought together a group of long-time partners and associates for a half-day learning exchange about the role of deliberation in everyday life and in everyday conversations. This exchange was a follow-up to earlier Kettering research that examined how the practices nurtured in formal deliberative settings might enhance the quality of day-to-day conversations.

This spring’s learning exchange sought to continue that work by “flipping the script” to ask whether deliberation shows up in everyday life and—if so—what it looks and feels like. The exchange also sought to explore how deliberation in everyday life might be similar to or different from deliberation in more formal settings such as those forums using National Issues Forums materials and how everyday deliberative practices might benefit the quality of deliberation in those more formal settings.

**THE ANSWER IS YES**

Kettering program officer Nick Felts opened the day by asking the simple question, “Do you think there is deliberation in everyday conversation?” The response was unanimous:
Citizens are deliberating all the time—in families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and nonprofits.

yes. Citizens are deliberating all the time—in families, schools, churches, neighborhoods, and nonprofits.

Betty Knighton, from the National Issues Forums Institute, suggested that everyday deliberation is easy to recognize because it is marked by the need to make a decision. As she put it, people need to make decisions, and they need to talk about those decisions. Not every decision—or even every conversation—is deliberative, but there is a tremendous amount of deliberation happening all around us.

DELIBERATIVE LABORATORY
We are living in a particularly deliberative moment. As the world faces the rapidly changing circumstances brought about by COVID-19, individuals, families, communities, and organizations must decide how to respond. And because the nature of the disease is communal, the response is also necessarily so. Mark Wilson, of Auburn University, noted that while governments set a baseline for closing and then reopening institutions, those high-level decisions are only the beginning. Institutions and organizations must engage with trade-offs between health and economics, between safety and freedom, and between individual desires and communal responsibilities to make the day-to-day decisions brought on by COVID.

Derrick Hammond, from the Oak Ridge (Tennessee) City Council and Oak Valley Baptist Church, told the story of an inter-church deliberation about how best to feed hungry community members. The regular soup kitchens had to be closed, leaving many citizens without regular access to food. Representatives of the local churches discussed how to feed people without further spreading the virus and decided collectively to host drive-through pizza parties.

URGENCY AND EFFICACY
The group also observed that everyday deliberation has a sense of urgency and efficacy that is often missing from formal deliberative forums. Because day-to-day deliberation typically arises out of the need to make a decision, it often carries a real-world urgency with it. Deliberation in a forum, on the other hand, often has
a more theoretical feel; the questions at issue are important but removed from the decisions citizens make in their homes and communities. As a result, even efforts to replicate the trade-offs that decision-makers face can feel more like a simulation than a real-life dilemma that requires citizens to roll up their sleeves.

The other factor that often drives everyday deliberation is personal efficacy. In other words, citizens usually deliberate about questions that they have the power—at least in part—to solve. As Patricia Harbour, of Center for Quality Education, characterized it: when citizens are deliberating about something in their day-to-day lives, they bring their resources and they take action. This focus on efficacy differs from the experiences that citizens have in many deliberative forums, where it often feels as though there is a gap between the deliberation and decision-makers.

**DELIBERATION IS NOT A STRAIGHT LINE**

Several people noted that it is sometimes harder to catch deliberation “in the wild” because it is often intertwined with other conversations. Of course, not every ordinary decision requires deliberation, and even those decisions that could benefit from deliberation do not necessarily get a full airing. But ordinary speech often meanders in and out of deliberation. Conversations follow their own paths, some parts of them deliberative and some parts of them not. Also, friends and acquaintances are more likely to pick up and put down deliberative conversations over time.
As a result, the wisps of deliberation that blow through everyday conversation will sometimes be harder to detect than the crisp trade-offs that show up in formal deliberative forums.

The group also noted that the boundary between formal deliberation and informal conversation is often a porous one. Cristin Brawner, of the David Mathews Center for Civic Life, described an instance in which she and her colleagues hosted a formal public forum for “What’s Next, Alabama?” The next morning, they walked into the local coffee shop where they found a group of older men continuing the previous night’s conversation in somewhat louder and more colorful terms.

THE STORY IS THE THING
Another distinct characteristic of everyday speech is storytelling. Day-to-day conversation is full of personal stories. While a broader point can often be extrapolated from a story, that extrapolation is often not the reason for telling the story. The story has its own arc and its own emotional satisfaction for both the teller and the listener. As Knighton put it, in everyday conversations, “the story is the thing.”

That is not to say that stories don’t play a role in formal deliberative forums. They do. But because rationality and linear argumentation are valued in formal forums, stories are often offered to dramatize an argument rather than as narrative events in and of themselves. That clipped version of storytelling may not meet the emotional needs of the participants. As Brawner put it, sometimes people just need to share their stories, even in formal forums, and it is important to let that happen before deliberation begins, especially if the stories are rooted in trauma or struggle.

EMOTION AND EXPRESSIVENESS
There was consensus among the group that everyday deliberative speech is marked by emotion and expressiveness. Knighton noted that forum participants in formal settings often feel that they are “supposed to” be guided by reason and logic, while in their everyday lives, their conversations are filled with anger and surprise and frustration and joy. As Derrick Hammond put it, in an everyday conversation, the rules and expectations are intuitive, or at least implicit, and there is a more natural and fuller flow between the participants. As he described it, there is an “organic dynamic to true deliberative conversations.”

Of course, this distinction is not universal. As Pat Harbour pointed
out, the subject matter of a public forum might well hit an emotional chord with all or some of the participants. As she noted, though the structure of the forums makes it less likely for discussions to get heated, sometimes the topic will produce heat in and of itself. In her experience, issues that touch on education and youth are likely to “generate fire.”

Participants in formal deliberative environments do often express anger, particularly anger directed at government or public officials. Even so, the emotional range of formal public deliberations is narrow compared with the emotional range of ordinary conversation, in which participants are more likely to express joy or confusion or grief in addition to anger and frustration.

THE VALUE OF FORUMS
With all that said, it would be easy to romanticize the deliberativeness of everyday speech and conclude that forums should mimic day-to-day life as much as possible. But the participants in this learning exchange did not come to that conclusion. Rather, they reaffirmed several very important and valuable aspects of formal deliberative forums.

First, several participants noted that in the same way that borrowing characteristics of everyday conversations could help make forums feel more authentic and urgent, the intentionality of a well-designed forum can also improve the quality of everyday conversations. Wilson noted that everyday conversations are “enlivened” by the practices people learn in deliberative forums.

Second, Knighton noted that it is actually very unusual to have a deliberative conversation with true strangers and that well-designed deliberative forums are some of the few places that happens.

Finally, there was the suggestion that deliberation among strangers can be quite liberating. While citi-

In the same way that borrowing characteristics of everyday conversations could help make forums feel more authentic and urgent, the intentionality of a well-designed forum can also improve the quality of everyday conversations.
zens might be more emotionally free with friends and family members, they also might be more reluctant to disagree with people they know well because of potential risks to the relationships. Formal, moderated environments can sometimes help people be more willing to air potential disagreements.

OPEN QUESTIONS
Though there was a fair amount of agreement among the participants, a number of questions for future exploration were identified:

- What is the role of information and expertise in everyday deliberation? Where does that information come from? How are people using it?
- How are emotion and urgency playing out in everyday deliberation?
- Are there cultural or demographic drivers that affect deliberation in everyday conversation? If so, how do they affect both the likelihood and the form of deliberation?
- What topics tend to generate deliberation in everyday life? What topics do not?
- Has the nationalization of news and politics affected deliberation in everyday life? Are there issues that citizens do not regularly consider or deliberate?

- How can we learn more about the connection between deliberation and decision-making in everyday settings in order to make formal deliberative forums more connected to actual decision-making?

CONCLUSION
It is clear that deliberation happens regularly—daily—in ordinary conversations among citizens in a wide variety of settings. Deliberation is often marked by urgency, efficacy, storytelling, and emotion. It is often intertwined with all sorts of other types of speech, and conversations often weave in and out of deliberation. Everyday deliberative conversations are often guided by intuition and unspoken ground rules.

That is not to suggest, however, that formal deliberative forums should be abandoned. In fact, forums play an important role in providing space for citizens to express disagreement, and they provide an essential training ground for practices that extend into citizens’ everyday lives. It is a virtuous cycle. The learning flows both ways—from everyday conversations to formal deliberations and back again.

Wendy Willis is a writer, a lawyer, the executive director of the Deliberative Democracy Consortium, and the founder and director of Oregon’s Kitchen Table, a program of the National Policy Consensus Center in the Mark O. Hatfield School of Government at Portland State University. She can be reached at wwillis@pdx.edu.
In March 2020, Kettering decided to postpone its usual spring multinational research exchanges until later in the year because of the coronavirus pandemic. Emails went out to registered participants around the world that the April meeting was being moved. Many of the participants were already under quarantine orders in their home countries. We, in Dayton, would be quarantined the next week. At the time, it seemed we would only have to tweak the rest of our 2020 calendar to accommodate the delay caused by the virus, but it soon became clear that 2020 was going to offer an abundance of new challenges and opportunities. The only thing that remained unclear was how we would respond.

Our largest international meetings happen annually in July at the Deliberative Democracy Exchange (DDEx). By mid-March, planning for these meetings was well under way. We knew that 2020 DDEx would be very different, and the possibility of moving it online was daunting. For several years, a small committee had been at work designing an online curriculum for participants who were attending the Deliberative Democracy Institutes (DDI) meetings, part of DDEx. We were over-subscribed each year and still others could not come due to visa issues or other situations. Now a new team would have to move everything online and do so quickly. We successfully moved DDI and DDEx online. In the process, we gained important insights about both our in-person and our online sharing of democratic ideas.

For the last several years, we have been working to transform DDI from a large meeting led by Kettering staff to a truly multinational meeting led by leaders from around the world. This made it easier for us to pivot...
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to online learning. We were already accustomed to working together, and we easily formed small multinational teams to carry out the work.

**NEW OPPORTUNITIES, NEW CHALLENGES**

While the task now would include online constraints, in many ways it brought out the best of what was already a collaborative process. With this core multinational DDI leadership group, we created 2-member leadership teams to work with groups of 8 to 15 participants so that every participant would be a part of a small DDI pod for meetings. This meant the groups could be divided up among those who were in similar time zones, or who spoke similar languages, or who were in countries geographically nearer to the members of each leadership team. This new intimacy allowed deeper conversations and clearer understandings due to shared experiences.

The new approach also created challenges. In such small groups, it was hard for people to get a sense of the whole of DDEx or, indeed, even of DDI. One of the key elements of Kettering meetings in Dayton is the plenaries that include all participants. We saw the need to offer similar opportunities and responded by creating early in the DDI experience a chance for all DDI participants to join a Zoom plenary during which they could become aware of the whole of DDEx.

Once we realized that we were all going to meet on Zoom, a new opportunity presented itself. Kettering has long tried to improve connections with the multinational network. The Zoom call provided an opportunity for us to invite multinational network alumni to that opening plenary. We also invited them to additional plenaries on framing the pandemic for deliberative conversations. It was amazing to have so many from the network that we knew as former residents, DDI members, or multinational associates. It was, for me, a highlight of DDEx 2020.
An early decision by the DDI leadership team was to extend DDI to six weeks. The thought was that this would provide more time than the usual week in Dayton for participants to exchange, reflect, and think together. While it did allow for such reflections, what we did not consider was the multitasking that completing DDI during a pandemic—while working, caring for family, and/or experiencing internet connectivity issues—would expose. In the end, we realized that for many, even though they were very excited about the ideas, six weeks during a pandemic

“Last year was overwhelming. This year we had time to process the information. It gave me an opportunity to share with my family.”

– DDI II participant from Italy
was too long for participants to give their undivided attention. But we also learned that some preliminary online work was exceedingly helpful in allowing participants to connect with small groups. When we hold DDI in Dayton, it is often extremely difficult for participants who do not get over jet lag before it is time to go back home to truly process the experience. Clearly, some combination of online work, both pre and post, even when we have an in-person DDI, would be preferred.

Another advantage of the Zoom-based DDI is it allowed participants to share the experience with those with whom they worked or to connect with alums who were in their communities. If the network is to grow, these kinds of connections are critical. Because we were meeting by Zoom, we decided to invite multi-national alums to join our framing
work. They participated in the Zoom calls and worked in small breakout groups to consider how to frame an issue on the pandemic. DDI members would go on to continue this effort, and at the close of the program, we invited yet another group of alums to engage around the framings. We closed DDI 2020 encouraging any who were interested to get together and move these or other framings forward. We wanted to see what would happen organically if Kettering was not in the center. We have been delighted at what we have learned about the vibrancy of the network. Small groups met over the summer and into the fall developing framings. Our hope is that we can come together to reflect on what allowed this to grow naturally. What we learn, then, will inform how we network with multinational alums in the future.

CONNECTING IN SPITE OF LIMITATIONS
But we must realize that for many around the world who are on the frontlines, even DDI online is a challenge. Often people complained about others’ internet connectivity issues. We must ask ourselves, How can we better connect with those who will not and cannot have stable internet? Don’t they deserve to know of these ideas as well? Our challenge is to understand nonexclusive ways of sharing these ideas. David Mathews has written several books and publications that are central to understanding this work, and we have worked to make sure that these are translated for use in communities around the world. But translations are not enough. Networks both global and regional will be an important part of this mix, and local and regional meetings or pods are part of it as well.

I am eternally grateful to all those who worked so hard this summer as leadership teams, participants, and Kettering staff. I was reminded each time I joined an early Zoom that many others had participated at odd times of day for them as well. We ended the experience tired yet enthusiastic. It provided an opportunity to see just how these ideas were being received and to test the strength of our networks. Again and

“[This] changed my perspective on how to work.”
—DDI I participant from India
How Kettering would respond to 2020 is now very clear. We have taken the challenges as an opportunity to innovate and to reinvigorate networking, to ask new questions, to begin new research, to find new answers, and to explore new hypotheses, in short, to break new ground while we stay the course. Again, we were made aware of alums who were continuing to work in their communities and to reach out to newbies to join DDI and this work. The emails of alums interested in the organic pandemic framing were even more exciting. Kettering has invested deeply over the last 30 years in a network that we now see is vibrant and alive and continuing to explore the role of deliberative democracy in communities.

The year 2020 has provided many challenges, but if there is a silver lining, it is that it shook us out of patterns that we had been following so long we did not even realize they were patterns. It also introduced new online technologies as it reminded us that just because an app was available did not mean it should be used—Teams, Zoom, Padlets, Slack, etc., the list goes on. We must take this opportunity to discern what works best where, when a phone call is better than a Zoom call, when an email is better than Slack, and so forth. These are exciting and challenging times, and I am delighted to be a part of so much learning.

How Kettering would respond to 2020 is now very clear. We have taken the challenges as an opportunity to innovate and to reinvigorate networking, to ask new questions, to begin new research, to find new answers, and to explore new hypotheses, in short, to break new ground while we stay the course. Six months after the pandemic changed our work, in September Dayton Days we began reimagining Kettering’s multinational exchanges in 2021 and how DDI and DDEx will change, comfortable with the challenges and opportunities next year will present.

Maxine S. Thomas is vice president, secretary, and general counsel at the Kettering Foundation. She can be reached at mthomas@kettering.org.
In the summer of 2020, a nation dealing with a global pandemic faced the related challenge of an uncertain and changing landscape of public life. At the same time, an approaching election highlighted the complex and divisive issues facing the country and the dearth of opportunities to talk together and to set directions for addressing them. With the backdrop of these dual challenges, the With the People initiative was born.

With the People is based on the idea that democracy is strengthened when citizens, institutions, and governments find ways to talk and work with one another. Deliberative discussions of the public issues that impact our lives make a profound contribution to our capacity to do just that.

Using Constitution Week in September of 2020 as a kickoff point, With the People is an initiative of the National Issues Forums Institute
Conceived and designed as an ongoing national initiative, With the People encourages sustained public deliberation practices on campuses and in communities across the country.

(NIFI) and a dynamic—and growing—network of partners. Conceived and designed as an ongoing national initiative, With the People encourages sustained public deliberation practices on campuses and in communities across the country.

In imagining With the People as a national effort that could launch in the fall of 2020, it was clear that materials to support campus and community deliberation were needed on some of the most pressing and salient issues of the day—voting, policing, free speech, economic recovery, and immigration. Kettering developed nonpartisan, multi-perspective issue guides and videos for NIFI, which supplemented them with a wide range of support materials for moderators and convenors.

For the kickoff week, “Constitutional Connectors” were developed to help convenors and moderators tie contemporary issues to the study of the US Constitution.

ALIGNED MISSIONS AMONG A GROWING NETWORK OF NATIONAL PARTNERS

Higher education institutions and associations have long contributed significantly to the civic education of the students they serve and to the civic life of the communities in which they are located. Such organizations work to strengthen the democratic capacity of communities across the nation. While each works in unique ways to enhance the efforts of the networks they connect, many share a common goal: to strengthen democracy through encouraging opportunities for Americans to talk together about public issues and to set directions for addressing them. This connective tissue forms the heart of the partnership that is With the People.

The With the People national partners to-date include:

- ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge of Civic Nation
- The American Democracy Project (ADP)
- Campus Compact
- Kettering Foundation
- NASPA-Student Affairs Administrators in Higher Education
• National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation
• National Institutes for Historically-Underserved Students
• National Issues Forums Institute
• Project Pericles
• Up to Us

WITH THE PEOPLE: WHAT A DIFFERENCE A PREPOSITION MAKES

Inspired by the research of the Kettering Foundation and the recent publication of *With the People: An Introduction to an Idea* by David Mathews, president and CEO of the Kettering Foundation, the idea of “with” undergirds the concepts and practices that drive the With the People initiative. According to Mathews:

> The idea behind a *with* strategy was inspired by Abraham Lincoln’s ideal of a government *of, by,* and *for* the people in the Gettysburg Address. Today, do Americans think our government as “of” the people? That’s debatable. “By” the people? Doubtful. “For” the people? Perhaps for some, sometimes. So why not add another preposition—governing *with* the people? Maybe that would help bridge the divide separating the people of the United States from their government and from many of the country’s major institutions.

HIGHER EDUCATION FULFILLING ITS CIVIC MISSION

The challenges that arrived in the months preceding the fall 2020 semester weighed heavily on many college faculty and staff. They revised and reorganized courses and curriculum to meet the demands for flexibility and fluidity. Along with the economic uncertainty from the pandemic and the social unrest from racial and ethnic tensions, colleges and universities faced an unprecedented presidential election. Many were charged with introducing students as first-time voters. Given the significant pressures of the changing landscape and the upcoming presidential election, the introduction of With the People at the start of the semester provided the institutional support and recognition to launch a national initiative in deliberation on college campuses and in communities. At such a challenging time, college administrations and personnel were investing in their civic mission in a drastically different university landscape.

To help Americans prepare for the November election through deep examination of public issues, several With the People partners offered national webinars and workshops showing the importance of public deliberation, digital literacy, and
voter engagement. Through broad outreach to their national networks, the ALL IN Campus Democracy Challenge, the American Democracy Project, and NASPA encouraged participants to access the wide range of resources offered by the With the People initiative to support deliberation on issues of concern during the election and to integrate ongoing deliberative practices into academic disciplines and campus-community connections.

**NATIONWIDE INITIATIVES CROSSING LOCAL, STATE, AND REGIONAL BORDERS**

The need during the pandemic for continued connections when in-person interactions have not been feasible has spurred the greater use of online deliberative forums. Using face-to-face platforms such as Zoom, the chat-based Common Ground for Action platform, or a combination of both, deliberative NIF forums are being held across the country and in ways that cross geographic barriers. Organizers are finding that the current necessity for online interactions is providing an ongoing opportunity for people to talk to those whom they never would have met otherwise. The following are just a few snapshots of a growing body of work:

- On Constitution Day, September 17, 2020, the State University of New York (SUNY) system held a statewide online deliberative forum on voting. Across the state of New York, 187 students and faculty from 36 campuses met on Zoom to deliberate about safeguarding and improving our elections. Following a large-group plenary session, participants broke into smaller groups for in-depth deliberation, reconvening at the close to reflect on the issue and their experience of examining it together. The small-group assignments were designed to allow participants to talk with others from different regions of the state and from urban, rural, and suburban communities. Many students said they appreciated the opportunity to learn from others whom they would not normally have met and for the structure that allowed a productive exchange of insights. As one student reflected in the closing session, “If more of us understood that this kind of discussion is possible, we wouldn’t be so turned off by the idea of politics. Politics needs to include opportunities to think through issues in this way.” Peter Sawyer, chair of the Department of History, Philosophy, and Social Sciences at Hudson Valley Community College and a member of the SUNY Constitution Day planning team,
is working with his colleagues to provide opportunities for ongoing cross-campus student deliberation, which he believes will encourage new syntheses of thought, new insights about public policy, and new approaches to solving public problems.

- During Constitution Week, the Minnesota state system of colleges and universities, which includes 30 state colleges and 7 state universities, organized 10 forums via Zoom and the Common Ground for Action platform to allow students, faculty, and staff to engage in statewide deliberations on free speech, voting, and policing. An important goal of their work was to bring together diverse, place-based campuses in system-wide deliberations. Minnesota State Coordinator of Strategic Initiatives for Academic and Student Affairs Laura Boche described the experience: “The forums provided students, faculty, and staff an opportunity to begin on common ground around an often highly contested issue for many individuals. I participated in my first With the People forum, and it broadened my perspective on a deeply political issue: policing. What I loved about the experience is that I was not afraid to share my views and I was excited to hear others’ stories. Together, we were able to see where the commonalities exist in our views and move forward from there.”

- In November, Chris Gilmer, president of West Virginia University-Parkersburg and a founder of the National Institutes for Historically-Underserved Students, worked with other college presidents to connect students from diverse backgrounds in inter-campus deliberation on racial justice. Sinte Gleska University in South Dakota, Tougaloo College in Mississippi, Adams State University in Colorado, and WVU-Parkersburg in West Virginia all participated.

- Kara Dillard, professor of communication studies at James Madison University, used the Common Ground for Action online platform to organize a national week of cross-campus deliberations in October. Students participated in online deliberative forums on voting, policing, economic recovery, and free speech. In addition to highlighting the capacity and interest of college students to examine public issues with their peers across the country, the forums also showcased their capacity to lead such discussions. In fact, all forums were led by student moderators.
• The New England Centers for Democratic Initiatives (including the University of Connecticut, the University of Hartford, the University of Massachusetts Boston, Emerson College, and Franklin Pierce University), Campus Compact of Southern New England, and the National Coalition for Dialogue & Deliberation (NCDD) organized cross-campus forums in October in the lead-up to the election. The October forums on policing were just the beginning. According to Courtney Breese, executive director of NCDD, “This first effort included participants from Connecticut, Massachusetts, and New Hampshire. We hope to expand our partnerships to include more New England states in our future efforts.”

• In West Virginia, both the West Virginia Library Association and the West Virginia Community and Technical College System are sponsoring statewide With the People initiatives. The West Virginia Library Association introduced With the People during an October virtual statewide conference, with a focus on creating a statewide network of public libraries that bring West Virginians together to examine public issues that are impacting their lives. Statewide forums on economic recovery, connecting all community colleges in West Virginia, were held in October and November over Zoom, using an interactive version of the issue guide Back to Work: How Should We Rebuild Our Economy?, which allows the addition of local background, circumstances, and action ideas.

CONNECTING, LEARNING, AND MOVING AHEAD
The rich connections developed in the first few months of the With the People initiative have set the stage for many more—as traditional boundaries on campuses and in communities give way to boundary-spanning opportunities to connect across differences to address common problems. A “with” foundation for citizen-centered democracy can help communities create environments in which residents talk and work together productively, and it can help colleges and universities strengthen the civic capacity of their students. Together, these contributions provide an invaluable foundation for the democratic identity of a nation and its citizens.

Betty Knighton is the president of the National Issues Forums Institute. She can be reached at bknighton@nifi.org.
Kara Lindaman is a professor of political science and public administration at Winona State University. She can be reached at klindaman@winona.edu.
The Citizen Workers of Democracy

By Harry C. Boyte

In the spring of 2020, the Kettering Foundation published With the People: An Introduction to an Idea by President David Mathews, with support from the Cousins Research Group. The book calls for a shift in relationship between government and citizens from regulation and service delivery to collaboration in the work of democracy.

The same season, the United States was convulsed by the triple crises of COVID-19, economic decline on a scale not seen since the Great Depression, and enormous and sustained demonstrations for police reform and racial justice in the wake of the killing of George Floyd, an unarmed Black man, by a police officer in Minneapolis. These were inflamed by a fourth crisis, bitter polarization fed by what Trygve Throntveit and I call “the metaphor of war.” In an essay in Eidos, Marie Ström and I detail how, across the world, the digital revolution is eroding democratic education while intensifying war narratives.

The war metaphor and other crises feed worries about the future. By June 2020, 80 percent of American voters believed the country was spiraling out of control. “Given the rise of social media, [it is] much easier to denigrate and attack than it is to have the kinds of thoughtful, hard conversations that are needed,” said Meena Bose at Hofstra University.

“Democracy as usual” is troubled. With the People is an important response. The book argues that the foundation’s proposal is “just a different way of thinking,” but Mathews acknowledges that it faces major obstacles, including the declining faith that citizens have in each other and the “bureaucratism and modern professionalism [that] have combined in today’s institutions, allowing the two cultures to reinforce each other.”

These are all significant problems, but the largest obstacle is today’s story of democracy itself, understood as mainly an electoral system. Such a view is expressed in a new report by the American Academy of Arts and Sciences, Our Common Purpose: Reinventing American Democracy for the 21st Century. The report, it is important to note, sees democracy as larger than elections alone (the
Democracy is a kind of work. Citizens are workers. Government is a collaborator with citizens. This is radical, not left or right but etymologically.

definition advanced by the USAID website in 2013) or than elections and other government-related activities (the definition used in the 2004 report, American Democracy in an Age of Rising Inequality, by the American Political Science Association). Our Common Purpose includes strengthening associational life beyond government in which citizens can “assemble, deliberate and converse with each other.” It finds signs of “a yearning to believe again in the American story” and “stories of surging participation and innovation, of communities working to build new connections across long-standing divides, and of individual citizens suddenly awakening to the potential of their democratic responsibilities.” Its lens is an important advance. But recommendations for government and election reform make up the great bulk of the report, which neglects work sites, workers, and professionally based systems such as higher education, health care, cultural industries, and others as places for democratic action.

A mainly government-centered view feeds a war metaphor in which citizens are most importantly voters, volunteers, or warriors for their issues (voting is the “most important” right according to the US citizenship test). In contrast, the Kettering book, drawing on ancient roots of the concept, defines democracy as “a political system in which . . . citizens must work with other citizens to produce things—‘public goods’—that make life better for everyone.” Democracy is a kind of work. Citizens are workers. Government is a collaborator with citizens. This is radical, not left or right but etymologically, returning to roots in which We, the People are the agents and architects responsible for the whole society.

In his book After Virtue, Alaisdair MacIntyre observes, “I can only answer the question, ‘what am I to do?’ if I can answer the prior question, ‘of what story or stories do I find myself a part?’” Societies are shaped by the stories they tell of their past, present, and future. With the People
tells a different story of democracy and implies a question: How can society tell such a story?

My forthcoming occasional paper for the Kettering Foundation, *Beyond the War Metaphor: Citizen Workers of Democracy*, offers several stories of citizenship as deliberative public work, work with public purpose that is visible and valued, in the United States and the story of the Institute for Democracy in South Africa. Many stories show the ties between the Black freedom struggle, democracy’s advance, and citizenship.

**A CITIZEN THERAPIST**

Citizen professionalism emphasizes the civically empowering and educative dimensions of professions through which professionals learn to work with other citizens, rather than on them or for them, very much in the spirit of Mathews’ new book. In his book *Democratic Professionalism*, Albert Dzur has detailed how professionals’ work can be catalytic and energizing when they “step back” from the cult of the expert, chronicling “unexpected” democratic trends in medicine, law, movements against domestic violence, and elsewhere that enhance the authority and efficacy of lay citizens.

William Doherty, who founded the Center for Citizen Professionalism at the University of Minnesota with Tai Mendenhall, Jerica Berge, and others, emphasizes “a new role for professionals in a democracy: catalyzing the efforts of ordinary citizens, with professional expertise ‘on tap, not on top.’” Adapting public work concepts and practices to fam-
ily and health sciences, the approach begins with the premise that solving complex problems requires many sources of knowledge, and the greatest untapped resource for improving health and social well-being is often the knowledge, wisdom, and energy of individuals, families, and communities who face challenging issues in their everyday lives. Most recently, Doherty has cofounded the Braver Angels movement, a “We, the People” effort to depolarize the United States, which also translates such ideas to public life.

The Citizen Professional Center has generated multiple partnerships embodying this civic philosophy. FEDS, a project on diabetes led by Indian elders in the Twin Cities, brings together community members and medical practitioners. It has shown strong positive health outcomes according to conventional assessments. Other partnerships include a movement of suburban families working to tame overscheduled, consumerist lives; a project in Burnsville, Minnesota, in which families are developing strategies to counter obesity among children; and an African American “Citizen Fathers” project fostering positive fathering models and practices, which birthed a Black Men and Police initiative in Minneapolis focused on police working in respectful ways with communities on issues such as domestic violence. It was challenged by the murder of George Floyd and subsequent protests demanding the end of police in Minneapolis, but it survived. Several of the arguments by the police chief and a group of Black leaders in the police department to recruit and train “officers, not warriors,” with strong community connections, are gaining national attention.

The efforts advocated by those at the forefront of police reform comport with the views of participants in more than 200 deliberative forums organized by communities across the country. In the 2020 report Safety, Justice, and Policing: Insights from 2017 Forums That Speak to Today, the Kettering Foundation and the National Issues Forums emphasized that forum participants:

- pointed to “something fundamentally wrong” with the culture, training, and recruitment in many police departments.
- worried that officers often made snap judgments based on race or ethnicity rather than probable cause.
- saw an urgent need to increase understanding and mutual respect between police and people of color.
- recognized the need to tackle growing disrespect for law enforcement, especially among young people.
• called for increased mental health services in their communities.
• supported training police officers in de-escalation techniques.

**CITIZEN WORKERS, NOT ONLY VOTERS, VOLUNTEERS, OR ISSUE WARRIORS**

We need a nonviolent movement of democracy workers, not warriors for causes, to free our energies and spirits for the work ahead. Many people are legitimately alarmed about the chaos, threats, and poisonous atmosphere of the 2020 election. To respond requires a new birth of citizenship that renews our collective sense of civic responsibility for the work of democracy.

It is worth remembering the moments in living memory that have achieved such a civic rebirth. The nation remembers Martin Luther King Jr.'s “I Have a Dream” speech, calling for the country to “make real the promises of democracy” by ending segregation. But the demeanor, dignity, and calm of the marches themselves, communicating an ethos of citizenship, are forgotten.

The program notes to the march called people to a larger identity of citizen. “In a neighborhood dispute, there may be stunts, rough words and hot insults,” it read. “But when a whole people speaks to its government, the quality of the action and the dialogue need to reflect the worth of the people and the responsibility of the government.” This civic identity had been cultivated by experiences in communities across the South, including hundreds of “citizenship schools” in sites such as church basements and beauty parlors, that taught nonviolence, literacy, skills of civic discussion and action, and a civic patriotism that expressed love for the country through efforts to change it toward “a more perfect Union.”

Such stories of deliberative public work create foundations for a new citizenship and a renewed understanding of democracy as a way of life we all build together, with elections an important element, but not the heart and soul of the matter.

Harry C. Boyte is senior scholar in public work philosophy at Augsburg University and codirector of the Institute of Public Life and Work. He can be reached at boyte@augsburg.edu.