

# HIGHER EDUCATION EXCHANGE



2018

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The *Higher Education Exchange* is founded on a thought articulated by Thomas Jefferson in 1820:

I know no safe depository of the ultimate powers of the society but the people themselves; and if we think them not enlightened enough to exercise their control with a wholesome discretion, the remedy is not to take it from them, but to inform their discretion by education.

In the tradition of Jefferson, the *Higher Education Exchange* agrees that a central goal of higher education is to help make democracy possible by preparing citizens for public life. The *Higher Education Exchange* is part of a movement to strengthen higher education's democratic mission and foster a more democratic culture throughout American society. Working in this tradition, the *Higher Education Exchange* publishes case studies, analyses, news, and ideas about efforts within higher education to develop more democratic societies.

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## **A Note of Appreciation**

David Brown has not just been an editor of *HEX* since 1994. He is also its cocreator, together with former Kettering Foundation program officer Deborah Witte. The *Higher Education Exchange*, as readers will know, is a publication whose purpose is to facilitate a conversation in higher education about the role of academe in democracy, particularly the role of students as actors and producers.

David was ideal as an editor of the journal because he brought to the work an astonishing breadth of experience, both inside and outside the academy: from serving as deputy mayor of New York City under Mayor Ed Koch to teaching at Yale's School of Management and New School's Milano Graduate School, and serving as president of Blackburn College. His perceptive insights were evident in the interviews he conducted, which were regularly published in *HEX*. And he undoubtedly drew on what he learned from the *Exchange* in his own books, including *The Real Change-Makers: Why Government is Not the Problem or the Solution* and *America's Culture of Professionalism: Past, Present, and Prospects*.

His most recent contribution to Kettering's work has been to help launch a new initiative in higher education to cultivate a greater civic and democratic understanding of professionalism. We are deeply appreciative of David's many contributions to this journal and to Kettering's research. We are pleased to have Derek Barker, who is leading Kettering's studies of democracy and higher education, continue on as coeditor of the journal. And we welcome Alex Lovit as coeditor; he is leading Kettering's research on teaching deliberative democracy through historic decisions.

*David Mathews*

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*Foreword*

# LEARNING TO STRENGTHEN DEMOCRACY, DEMOCRATICALLY

Derek W. M. Barker

When visiting the United States in the early 19th century, Alexis de Tocqueville remarked that the success of our institutions depended upon the richness of our civic life. Similarly, John Dewey described democracy as a “way of life,” rather than a set of discrete institutions. In the 21st century, many of the social tasks once performed by the citizenry have been taken over by impersonal institutions and organizations that are disconnected from our civic life. Kettering is a research organization with a stated mission to help make democracy work as it should. However, it is an organization that works with other organizations and professionals without intervening directly in particular communities. This year, as we have reviewed our research, we have asked ourselves, If democracy is understood as a civic culture or way of life, how can institutions and organizations, including Kettering and its network, hope to relate to democracy in a positive way?

In this year’s annual review of our research, we have focused not only on what we study but also how we at Kettering approach collaborative research. While Kettering is, itself, an organization composed of professionals, it aims to strengthen democracy that is understood as the civic life of the citizenry. The prospect of Kettering “creating” or “transforming” our democracy would be a contradiction in terms. Thus, we have asked, How can we work in a way that is consistent with the goals and substance of our work? How can an organization come to align itself with a democratic citizenry?

There are good reasons for the professionalization and bureaucratization of the civic sphere. The most efficient way to address large-scale and complex social problems is through social engineering, whether by authoritarian governments or by powerful nongovernmental funders. Indeed, social engineering can accomplish great things. Just look at the emergence of China’s market economy or efforts by international NGOs to eradicate malaria. Citizens working together, without a central authority, is a messier proposition and more difficult. Harry Boyte likens democracy to a form of *work*, and work is neither easy nor simple. The norms and habits of a citizenry may take centuries to develop.

It would seem that the world of institutions and professions simply has no role to play in strengthening our civic life. While these entities may be the most efficient in addressing the technical and policy dimensions of social problems, can they create a democratic culture? Prevailing models of social change may even be counterproductive from a democratic point of view, with any attempt to “serve” or “impact” society further displacing the work of the citizenry. Indeed, nothing could be more antidemocratic than creating democracy through social engineering. It is not apparent how professionals, working in organizations and institutions, can strengthen civic life without shutting down or destroying civic life at the same time.

Kettering’s annual review of its research focuses on this paradox. To avoid the pitfalls of the social-engineering approach, we have had to develop our own ways of working. These ways may, at first, seem unusual and counterintuitive in a world that tends to work through social engineering. In trying to align our work with the kind of democracy we hope to achieve, we have been led to work in ways that are perhaps more decentered than direct, more incremental than dramatic, more horizontal than vertical, and more facilitative than controlling. Kettering’s approach runs counter to the conventional logic of “scaling up,” “social transformation,” and so on. As a result, our approach needs some explanation.

In the process of this annual review, we have discovered just how different our way of working is from the social-engineering approach. At a fundamental level, institutions generally seek to use their power and resources to accomplish their agenda. Their impulse is to make a difference and demonstrate their impact. This can be tremendously effective at solving discrete technical problems with known solutions. However, different approaches may be needed when the problem is political in nature, involving inherent trade-offs among conflicting values. Moreover, social-engineering approaches also risk taking power away from the citizenry or creating dependency on funding and technical expertise. By contrast, as an operating foundation, Kettering does its own research, exchanging ideas and concepts with organizations and innovators. We do not fund programs of other organizations. Instead, we partner with other organizations as they become aligned with Kettering’s values, so, in a sense, they are doing Kettering’s work. While our partners always come with their own self-interests and professional perspectives, they come to have an overlap of interests as they are exposed to Kettering concepts and research. Of course, Kettering seeks to have impact, like any other organization with a mission, but we hope to work in a way that is impactful without creating dependency and power imbalance.

Social-engineering approaches often take already proven solutions (known as “best practices”) and replicate them on a larger scale. All that is needed is “training” in the best practices and the resources to spread them. While this is an efficient way of accomplishing change, our concern is that replicating existing practices may weaken the initiative and capacities of communities to develop their own solutions. By contrast, Kettering seeks to work through small experiments, tailored to specific circumstances and without any predetermined outcome. Kettering often plays a questioning role, rather than providing answers or “toolkits.” Our research exchanges tend to take place on a conceptual level, leaving questions of application and technical details to our partners (sometimes to their frustration). We are usually most effective in small, face-to-face groups in which we attempt to provoke deep scrutiny of our own concepts, as well as our partners’ experiences.

When assessing their impact, organizations often take a scientific approach using standardized metrics. While this ensures that they are objective about their own programs and can make the most efficient use of their resources, metrics-based assessment can have perverse effects, creating pressure on grantees to produce measurable results and shutting down innovation, as when educators “teach to the test.” We attempt to rigorously analyze experiments in our network, but more by asking questions and conceptualizing experiences.

Finally, when it comes to communications, organizations typically prefer to disseminate information from a centralized, authoritative source. They often seek to “leverage” networks as a way of expanding their control. Kettering is more interested to see members of our network communicating with one another, even when the interpretations and applications of our research are not what we intended.

None of this is to say that social engineering is bad, and democratic practices are good. Expert knowledge has a positive role to play in our society and can be tremendously effective at addressing certain groups of problems. Rather, the question, is How can expertise be aligned with a democratic citizenry, to recognize its limitations without colonizing the work and responsibilities of the citizenry?

This issue of *HEX* brings together a few examples from the field of higher education that have either informed or reflected Kettering’s approach to research. Whatever these stories lack in terms of measurable impacts, we hope you will find them rich in learning and collaboration. These experiments may appear frustratingly local and incremental, but we think these pieces at least capture the spirit and democratic energy of our network.

We begin with Harry Boyte's reflections on Public Achievement, a youth civic-engagement network that creates opportunities for college students to organize action projects with K-12 students in local schools. We asked Boyte to reflect on how Public Achievement maintained its grassroots character and managed to grow its network while resisting the pitfalls of the social-engineering approach.

An essay by Joni Doherty and Alice Diebel describes the evolution of a network of campus centers, united by a central focus on the principles and values of deliberative democracy through a series of research exchanges that have taken place over three decades at Kettering. As our research with these centers has evolved, Kettering has consciously eschewed a "training" model to allow learning and experimentation to take place within the network itself.

Similarly, the next two pieces illustrate the type of learning and network building that has taken place in Kettering partnerships with other organizations. Lorlene Hoyt recounts her experience representing the Talloires Network, a consortium of universities around the world that have committed to civic engagement, while Jay Theis, Carrie Kisker, and Alberto Olivas reflect on their work spreading dialogue and deliberation to The Democracy Commitment, a network of community colleges around the United States.

In an interview with *HEX*, Nicholas Longo and Marshalita Peterson talk about their learning process as they have come to practice and champion "deliberative pedagogy" as a democratic approach to the art of teaching. Built upon prior interests and experiences, interaction with Kettering and its network deepened their interest in and understanding of this important democratic practice.

Coeditor Alex Lovit considers three books that focus in large part on the question of whether higher education's benefits are primarily for private consumers or for the public good. The American higher education system has often portrayed itself as serving community needs and promoting democracy. However, if democracy is understood as rooted in the norms and habits of the citizenry, higher education cannot create its own public purpose. The recent literature on higher education's struggles for a sense of purpose may be understood as a reflection of this difficulty, suggesting that a new way of relating to the citizenry is needed.

Finally, David Mathews concludes with his reflections on the overarching challenge of realigning the way institutions and professions work to reflect the values of a democracy with citizens at the center and on Kettering's own experience in learning to strengthen democracy, democratically.



# PUBLIC ACHIEVEMENT

## The Work of Building Democratic Culture

Harry C. Boyte

Can a pedagogical approach to civic education—one in which the primary emphasis is cultural (developing young people’s civic identities, civic habits, and civic agency), rather than structural and institutional (increasing numbers of voters, improving standardized tests scores, or changing policies)—grow on a significant scale? What are the pitfalls? A grassroots democratic initiative faces continuing strategic choices and trade-offs between institutional efficiency and growing to scale on the one hand and civic energy and commitment to its defining qualities on the other. A democratic cultural movement must grow in a democratic fashion. From its beginning, Public Achievement (PA), the youth civic-education and empowerment initiative I founded in 1990 in St. Paul, Minnesota, has struggled with such questions. What lessons might be drawn from the Public Achievement experiences for democracy-building efforts generally?

The aim of PA is to cultivate the empowering grassroots capacities, confidence, and public identification of “citizen” as the foundational agents of democracy that I had seen and experienced in the civil rights movement while working for the Southern Christian Leadership Conference organized by Martin Luther King Jr. Public Achievement has spread to communities across the United States and more than 20 countries, from Northern Ireland and South Africa to Poland and Japan, and its offshoots have taken many other forms. Public

Achievement has features of both a network and a philosophy of citizen-centered democracy—democracy as a culture

***A democratic cultural movement must grow in a democratic fashion.***

infused with habits and practices. This differs from the predominant civic-education focus on knowledge (that is, emphasis on government) and skills (mobilizing the troops). Most broadly, it challenges the idea of democracy as an institutional system of government and elections. It puts citizens at the center as civic producers, not simply volunteers or voters or consumers of government services and solutions.

Public Achievement is based on a framework called *public work*. Young people, usually between the ages of 8 and 18—sometimes now including college students—work as teams on issues they choose that make a public contribution, undertaken in a nonviolent and legal fashion. In PA, young people tackle issues ranging from bullying, racism, gang violence, drugs,

***Public Achievement has features of both a network and a philosophy of citizen-centered democracy—democracy as a culture infused with habits and practices.***

and sexual harassment to playground improvements, curricular changes, and better school lunches. Teams are coached by adults—often college students—who help them develop public strengths and talents—what we call

civic agency. They use political concepts that challenge conventional views. For instance, young people are described as citizens who are “cocreators” of schools and communities, not citizens-in-waiting for the opportunity to vote. Politics is about creating a world of shared resources, not simply fighting over scarce resources. This brings into view a generative understanding of power as “power to,” not simply “power over” others’ actions. The following chart compares civic action in different frameworks of civic education.

Frameworks of civic education	Civics	Service	Public work
What is democracy?	Free elections	Civil society and elections	Way of life built through deliberative public work
Citizen	Voter	Volunteer	Cocreator/civic producer
Citizenship	Voting	Community involvement	Public work (including professional work)
Politics	Struggle over scarce resources: who gets what?	Search for harmony	Engagement across differences on public tasks
Power	Power over	Power with	Power to
Learning focus	What happens in government	Responsibility	Civic agency, habits of mind and action

The frameworks of civics and service are not wrong, but the public-work frame expands people's sense of who they are and what it means to live in a democracy. It also highlights the civic potential and roles of teachers, support staff, and school leaders to promote and sustain youth civic empowerment through their work to become "citizen teachers," "citizen staff," and "citizen administrators." The difference between PA as a set of skills and PA as a philosophy of democracy creates tension and opportunities.

## **Citizens as Civic Producers**

Public Achievement teaches skills of public problem solving and public creation that generate new ways of looking at politics, citizenship, power, and democracy. An iconic story of Public Achievement, told around the world, is about teams of fifth, sixth, and seventh graders at St. Bernard's Elementary School in St. Paul, the first significant home of Public Achievement. They worked for five years to build a playground in a neighborhood where adults had thought it would be too dangerous.

One morning in the autumn of 1998, just as snow began to fall, the lot donated for a playground by Saint Bernard's Catholic Parish filled with children, teachers, neighbors, college students, and a few professors and staff from the University of Minnesota. Some adults helped children put together swing sets. Others dug sand pits. Women from the church served refreshments. At the end of the day, all dedicated the playground with a plaque etched with drawings of cat feet that read, "PAWS: Public Achievement Works." The incoming governor, Jesse Ventura, visited the new playground on February 26, and in his State of the State address the following week, recognized five team members with the Governor's Award for a Better Minnesota for "reforming Minnesota every day through their good works." Joe Lynch, an eighth grader at Saint Bernard's who accepted the award for the group, was portrayed in Ventura's flamboyant style as a "citizen hero prevailing against all odds."<sup>1</sup>

Years later, Joe's sister Alaina Lynch, who also worked on the playground, remembered the overall lesson. "It was a 'no-brainer' to have a playground for kids instead of an old lot, but that didn't mean that making it happen was straightforward," Alaina explained. She learned about city politics. "Public Achievement opened my eyes to the processes of government—petitions, connecting with the city council, commenting, obtaining permits. [These were] not things I would have thought about as a ten- or eleven-year-old otherwise." She also learned about neighborhood politics. "I learned there

are multiple sides to every idea. Even something that seemed straightforward to me could have negative ramifications from another point of view.” For her, the gang issue was “not a huge concern. The neighborhood gangs would hang out in the empty lot.” But others saw it differently. “We had to demonstrate that we had a plan for mitigating any risk—a fence, with the playground closed after certain hours.” She learned about different perspectives and compromise.<sup>2</sup>

The teams got the parish council on their side. They negotiated zoning changes with city officials. They raised more than \$60,000 from local businesses in the North End Business Association and other groups. To accomplish these tasks, the children learned how to interview people, write letters, give speeches, and call people they didn’t know on the phone. They worked to understand the views of adults they originally thought were opponents. They mapped power, did research, and negotiated. Throughout, they had a sense that their efforts were public work, as suggested in the name young people chose for the park: Public Achievement Works. They also learned political concepts—power, interests, and politics itself. “For most of my life, I’ve wanted to get involved with politics,” said Jeremy Carr, a pioneer of Public Achievement. “When [Public Achievement] came around and I found I could do the stuff I wanted to change—and got adults to treat me seriously—I got excited.” This was also the opportunity the principal, Dennis Donovan, was looking for. “We wanted kids doing citizenship-type things,” he said, “more than just reading to other little kids.”<sup>3</sup>

Public Achievement’s concepts differ from conventional ideas. Power is not simply “power over” but “power to”—the capacity to act with others of different views and interests to shape the world around us. “I got a lot of empowerment from Public Achievement,” said Tamisha Anderson 20 years later. Tamisha, an African American student at Saint Bernard’s, worked on the playground and on a team trying to change dress-code rules in the school. “We didn’t get white shoes, but we got the uniforms changed. It was empowering to know that your voice matters regardless of what color or size or age you are.” The lessons stayed with her. “I use [the example of] ‘the little train that could’ to this day with kids I talk to. I push them to stay involved even though they get knocked down.”<sup>4</sup>

Participants also learn and practice politics that confounds partisanship. Zach Baumann, of German American background, worked for several years on the playground. “We had neighborhood meetings. We worked with the city to get the zoning changed and interacted with local business leaders to

try to get some money. We met with the county commissioners.” Zach said he learned to be accountable, “a huge deal for people that age. You were letting down your team if you dropped the ball. We knew we had to rely on each other to get things done.” He learned to work across differences:

Civic involvement has a stereotypically liberal quality in a lot of the media, but it’s about conservative values, taking responsibility for what’s going on, contributing how you can to improve your world, not about asking somebody to do something for you.

There were kids of different views. “I didn’t care what someone else’s thoughts on immigration were,” Zack said.

We were trying to get the playground. That’s one of the biggest things Public Achievement can bring, the ability to put aside your differences for a common goal. You don’t have to like the person to work with them. Standing up and walking out of the room isn’t going to accomplish anything.<sup>5</sup>

In St. Bernard’s, the practices of Public Achievement became part of a broad cultural change in which teachers, support staff, and involved parents also developed new ways of working together and thinking about the world, and themselves in the world.

## Challenges of Expansion

In one sense, PA involves a relatively simple “model,” translating core skills from community organizing into an action-oriented approach to civic education for young people. The model has parallels with other groups, like Alcoholics Anonymous, which have network qualities, rather than centralized organizations. Like AA,

Public Achievement has programmatic elements (in PA’s case, teams, issue selection by participants, coaches). But Public Achievement is not

***Our organizing team faced a series of key decision points. We opted for decentralization . . . to support local work.***

implemented in a standardized way, nor does it have a predetermined goal like an ideology or test scores. Participants liken it to jazz, rather than a set piece of music. Like jazz, it takes shape in particular places and is open-ended, with continuing improvisations.

Ori Brafman and Rod Beckstrom’s book *The Starfish and the Spider* describes networks like AA as decentralized, “no-one-in-charge” organizations. “Each AA [Alcoholics Anonymous] circle knows about the needs of its members

and each group can decide how to react accordingly,”<sup>6</sup> they write. Key decision points in Public Achievement’s history were pivotal for sustaining these network features, but the motivation for sustaining them grew from the concepts, as well as practical effectiveness.

In the late 1990s, when Public Achievement was spreading to Missouri and Wisconsin, our organizing team faced a series of key decision points. We debated whether to copyright the curriculum and franchise PA, whether to raise money for new regions, and whether to supervise the local network coordina-

***We made another key decision, to retain the improvisational, jazz-like qualities rather than to shape PA as a program that could be simply implemented.***

tors in Kansas City and Milwaukee. While continuing a coaching and connecting role out of the Center for Democracy and Citizenship, we opted for decentralization, with free access to materials, local

control, and local fundraising to support local work. There were downsides to such decisions, including less dependable revenue and diminished chances for rapid expansion. National fundraising supported an infrastructure of communications, training in the craft of public work, and periodic gatherings. Such funding was also increasingly precarious in the “No Child Left Behind” environment of education, with the relentless focus on standardized testing.

In March 2001, several of Public Achievement’s major funders hosted a roundtable in Kansas City with ten community foundations from across the country that work from a “donor services” model, meaning they identify donors who might support an initiative and connect them to projects reflecting their interests. The aim of the consortium was to explore possibilities for national expansion. The community foundation representatives listened to a remarkable panel of PA participants—children, coaches, and teachers—describe their work. Public Achievement did not fit the logic model traditionally used in funding, a linear account of how particular inputs produce predictable outputs. We made another key decision, to retain the improvisational, jazz-like qualities rather than to shape PA as a program that could be simply implemented.<sup>7</sup>

There is abundant evidence that Public Achievement develops civic and political capacities. For instance, RMC Research Corporation, a leading evaluation group, did a two-year evaluation of Public Achievement in 2005 and 2006, supported by the Carnegie Corporation. The evaluators used qualitative and quantitative methods, and found many positive impacts:

Participation in Public Achievement gave students wider perspectives on the world and better skills in working with others. It gave the students better ways to justify their opinions with evidence and helped them to work better with others by listening to differing opinions, balancing their needs with those of others to complete projects, and see how their actions impacted others in their communities.<sup>8</sup>

The obvious success of such skills in PA resulted in many adaptations, somewhat like AA evolved into many self-help groups. For instance, the model was used to create “Public Adventures,” the civic-education curriculum of 4-H that involves hundreds of thousands of children. It was the basis of the AmeriCorps curriculum during the Clinton years. It was also the original model for “Action Civics” by groups like Mikva Challenge and Earth Force. The Obama Foundation uses Action Civics in its youth organizing. Meira Levinson, a philosopher and professor of education at Harvard, identifies it as “the gold standard” of civic education in *No Citizen Left Behind*.<sup>9</sup> But one feature we noticed early on was the disappearance of the unconventional core concepts of Public Achievement about politics, democracy, and citizenship in these adaptations.

## **Democracy as a Way of Life**

The jazz-like qualities of Public Achievement are grounded in what are called “free spaces,” where participants make choices, interact across differences, and develop political skills and habits. Free spaces are face-to-face settings where people have room to self-organize, discuss ideas, and learn relational skills. They create the unpredictable, open-ended quality of Public Achievement and its adaptations. Sara Evans and I developed the concept of free spaces to name our experiences in the 1960s freedom movement. The movement was full of free spaces, from black churches and schools to beauty parlors and other businesses and the Brotherhood of Sleeping Car Porters. What generated their freedom was relative autonomy from the values and power dynamics of segregated white society. Their democratic qualities came from their public cultures, involving interplay of a diversity of views and interests.

Public Achievement cultivates new ways of thinking about young people’s identity and role in the world. This process requires attention to learning cultures, not simply individual learning—a motivation to resist turning PA into an easily implemented program. The pedagogy is challenging because sustained engagement with concepts and purposes goes against the grain of what Xolela Mangcu, a South African colleague, has called the “technocratic

creep” of the modern world. Schools, for instance, focus on technical skills and information transfer. They leave largely unexamined questions of purpose or the deep examination of the meaning of concepts like power, citizenship, politics, and democracy itself.

Public Achievement has drawn on alternative traditions of education and understandings of citizenship. Scandinavian folk schools, for instance, emphasized attention to “education for life,” the purposes of every kind of work, and involved an older sense of citizenship with roots before the rise of modern states. Folk-school approaches inspired Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, which birthed the citizenship schools of the civil rights movement. I organized citizenship schools after the initiative moved to the Southern Christian Leadership Conference. The Jane Addams tradition of Hull House settlement had similarities. In *Human Nature and Conduct*, John Dewey theorized about the vibrant learning culture of Hull House, full of different ideas, cultures, work experiences, and discussions. In his view, such democratic cultures depended on “habits”—not blind repetitions but learned patterns that create predispositions for action in unexpected circumstances. They can be changed and developed through intentional action. Deborah Meier, a great K-12 democracy educator, founded highly successful democracy-oriented public schools in East Harlem, New York, and Boston based on cultivating “five habits of mind.” Her schools’ cultures are also strongly connected to parents and community networks. They are characterized by endless public discussion, emphasis on education as work, and de-emphasis of standardized testing.

Public Achievement cultivates habits of action as well as of mind. In Mankato, Minnesota, Joe Kunkel, a political science professor at Mankato State University, developed a Public Achievement partnership with the Dakota Meadows local school and assigned his college students an essay reflecting on their experience with Public Achievement. He asked what the teams learned about “democracy, citizenship, politics, and working in groups.” A few quotes illustrate their reflections: “Coming into PA, I thought that citizenship meant to live in the United States and that politics was something only politicians were involved in,” said one. “As the year went on, I could not believe how big a role politics played even in a middle school.” Kunkel’s papers show the latent political and civic energies of young people. “I am amazed by what I have learned,” one student noted. “Not only did I learn to be an effective coach, I also learned about what it means to be an active citizen. We as coaches are renewing democracy for future generations. It has become clear to me through this course that the concept of democracy in America has lost much

of its luster and it must be restored.” Another explained, “No longer do I just sit back and let this crazy democracy machine roll by. If we do not like something, we can take steps to make the situation better.”<sup>10</sup>

Marie Ström, director of the democracy education efforts for the Institute for Democracy in South Africa for many years, adapted the Public Achievement model for public work in Africa. During that time, she witnessed shifts in how people understood themselves, each other, and democracy. In Burundi, where public-work education was taken to villages, the adult educators with whom she worked spoke about the dramatic impact. Emmanuel Manwangu commented:

I was afraid that people at the village level might get lost in the training, but even if it was a little challenging for them at the beginning, their minds were awakened and they very quickly came up to speed. Democracy started to become *concrete* for them—the power to take action on issues right where they live.

Eusébie Nzorijana described a dramatic relocation of “politics” that decentered the concept and the practice: “At the beginning, some participants were uneasy about conducting interviews. ‘This is politics,’ they said. Later a participant said proudly, ‘I can do politics myself now!’” Trainers reported remarkable changes in themselves, as well. Julienne Mukankusi said, “I had done research and training on democracy before this, but I had not lived it. Now I have seen that a skilled citizen has more power than one can imagine.” Manwangu described shifts in the meanings of democracy and citizenship: “This course changes one’s understanding of democracy itself. Our language has changed. Citizens are at the center.”<sup>11</sup>

The concept of public work emerged as the Center for Democracy and Citizenship sought to translate community-organizing practices into efforts to make larger civic change. A group of institutions, including St. Bernard’s, the College of St. Catherine, Minnesota Cooperative Extension, and Augustana Nursing Home, wanted to revitalize the civic *identities* of their institutions, rather than simply undertaking civic-engagement activities. It soon became clear that institutional civic identity requires changes in culture, with relationship building going against the grain of professional cultures based on information and activities. Maria Avila, a colleague in Public Achievement who pioneered bringing relational organizing practices into higher education, explained that it involves “building something based on people who [are] clear about their interests and passions, the things that matter to them deeply and enough to sustain their involvement over time,” which is different from

the “predominate culture of wanting quick, concrete, predictable results and . . . [that] undervalues process and relationality.”<sup>12</sup>

Others have seen the challenge similarly. As Isak Tranvik puts it, Vaclav Havel, a leader of the Czech freedom movement, drew on traditions of “honest and responsible work in widely different areas of life,” akin to public work.

***A citizen-centered view emphasizes the constitution of a democratic people.***

In Havel’s view, political institutions or ideology could not create a good society. “Life is something unfathomable, ever-changing, mysterious and

every attempt to confine it within an artificial, abstract structure inevitably ends up homogenizing, regimenting, standardizing, and destroying life,” Havel said.<sup>13</sup>

It is important to recognize the obstacles to such perspectives in a world where state-centered theories of democracy and citizenship, defined by relations to the formal political community, are overwhelmingly dominant, shaping the views even of those who take up exclusion of “noncitizens.” As the Swedish theorist Jonna Pettersson has observed:

The fields of critical human rights theory and cosmopolitan and multicultural citizenship theory [reproduce] the criteria for political subjectification [as] inclusion in the [formal political] community, leaving the political subject without any emancipatory power of its own.<sup>14</sup>

Hannah Arendt, reflecting on the American Revolution, similarly saw the shift to representative government as the triumph of a state-centered view of democracy:

Paradoxical as it may sound, it was in fact under the impact of the Revolution that the revolutionary spirit in America began to wither away, and it was the Constitution itself, this greatest achievement of the American people, which eventually cheated them of their proudest possession.<sup>15</sup>

A state-centered view emphasizes the constitution of the government as the fundamental question. A citizen-centered view emphasizes the constitution of a democratic people. In 1939, John Dewey issued a challenge in this vein to those who believed that democracy rests on formal institutions. Beware, he said, of the “belief that [totalitarian] states rest only upon unmitigated coercion and intimidation.” As Melvin Rogers puts it:

For Dewey, democracy’s survival depends on a set of habits and dispositions—in short, a culture—to sustain it. Checks and balances do not have

an agency of their own. A democracy is only as strong as the men and women who inhabit it.<sup>16</sup>

Democracy's future requires strong citizens. It will take many ways for them to develop.



## NOTES

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# CENTERS FOR DEMOCRATIC PUBLIC LIFE

## Learning as a Deliberative Democratic Practice

Joni Doherty and Alice Diebel, with Joseph Hoereth, David Hoffman, Marla Kanengieter-Wildeson, Windy Lawrence, David E. Procter, Norma Ramos, and Lisa Strahley

For more than 25 years, the Kettering Foundation has partnered with a large number of organizations to foster the development of centers for democratic public life. Based on what Kettering and the centers have learned over the years, the ways in which the deliberative democratic practices are understood and used have continuously evolved. Most of the centers convene deliberative forums and many develop their own issue guides. All are involved with strengthening a deliberative democratic ecology that fosters collective learning through practices that include deliberative decision-making, identifying resources, and acting in complementary ways with other individuals and groups. While maintaining a relationship with these practitioners, Kettering recognizes and affirms their independence, which has led to a diversity of interests and work. There is no single model.

The Kettering Foundation's internal directory currently lists 110 centers for democratic public life; most are at higher education institutions and some are community based. Their organizational structures vary. Many might more accurately be described as spheres of activity rather than as discrete organizational units. Some are comprised of a few faculty members from one department; others are independent institutes with their own offices, staff, and budget. Some are involved in a wide array of activities; others may only hold a few forums each year. Sometimes the work is primarily with students and colleagues in curricular, cocurricular, and/or extracurricular programs; other centers focus on working with their institutions to realize their civic mission and are primarily community centered.

This essay grew out of a conversation among a group of center directors who are also faculty members. They committed to integrating deliberative democratic principles and practices into their work with students, both on

campus and in the community. Since deliberative democracy is not limited to a single field of study, it is relevant to an array of disciplines. This discussion generated insights about the challenges and benefits of integrating deliberative democratic practices into their teaching, research, and civic work. The work of the centers housed in colleges and universities is grounded in some basic

***Deliberative democracy principles and practices put citizens at the center.***

theory and practice of deliberative democracy, as is used in communities, but the faculty also describe particular chal-

lenges of introducing collaborative practices into universities, where they can conflict with traditional hierarchies of expertise between faculty members, students, and the broader public.

**A Deliberative Democratic Ecology**

Deliberative democracy principles and practices put citizens at the center. The term “citizens” is defined here not legalistically, but as individuals who work together to address a public problem. These practices include ongoing collective learning; naming issues in terms of what people hold dear; identifying possible actions for addressing these issues, including weighing trade-offs; making decisions deliberatively; identifying resources; and working together in complementary ways that recognize the strengths different parts of the community (individuals, organizations, and institutions, including governmental entities) can bring to bear on issues of common concern. Sometimes these practices coalesce, as in more formally structured deliberative forums; at other times the practices are used in ways that are more improvisational or informal.

The six faculty are from various institutions, including land-grant and research universities, community colleges, and a private liberal arts college. Faculty members represented various disciplines, including public administration, communication studies, community economic development, education, and urban planning. Participants have all been involved in research and learning exchanges with Kettering. Some focus most heavily on building capacity for deliberative democracy by working with students, while others are involved with building capacity for citizens to work democratically in communities. All are well grounded in ideas concerning the ecology of deliberative democracy.

Deliberative democracy is part of a growing civic-engagement movement in academic institutions. Sometimes that movement is co-opted by concerns about public relations—a somewhat self-serving effort by the academy to build

town-gown relationships or recruit students. Often outreach takes the form of service to the community, which can leave people in dependent positions. But the faculty in this conversation see the community not as a bundle of needs to be served, but instead as a complex network of interactions that they may join. These faculty recognize that citizens need to be at the center of public life.

The “ecology of democracy” is a metaphor describing the complex and interconnected parts of any community that must find ways to exist together in a place. The ecology includes citizens, living their family lives; organizations, both large and small, loosely structured and formal; and significant institutions that provide service and governance structures, such as public schools, governments, colleges, and the media. The community is the place where people decide what their lives will be like within this ecology, and they can decide more or less deliberatively and democratically. Community-based decisions about how to educate and socialize the next generation, and how to maintain safety, prosperity, and health are the core of ecological work. The faculty in our conversation were trying to encourage an eco-friendly path to decision-making by facilitating citizen deliberation, encouraging collective choice, and cocreating actions and resources that will work for the benefit of the whole. The ecology recognizes that individualism puts citizens in competition or at cross purposes, rather than in collaboration and coproduction of the common good. The common good is decided collectively and can be a shifting and changing vision of what it takes for human flourishing.

In our conversation, we quickly realized that these centers were thinking of deliberative democracy as a radical act. David Procter, who directs the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy at Kansas State University, said that talking together to make important decisions doesn't seem as though it should be controversial, but it was among many of his colleagues. Earlier in his career, he and his colleagues studied political advertisements and speeches. He said it felt like they were working for the wrong team. They shifted their focus to what citizens were saying and, as a result of that change, developed an institute that makes it more likely that citizens will discuss these issues with one another. He believes it is important for faculty and institutional actors to listen deeply to these conversations and craft their approaches to addressing issues with these citizens in mind.

The “centers” work with Kettering through learning exchanges that focus on public deliberation. Through their work, they have changed the democratic practices of their communities, both in the academy and among citizens. All

of these centers use forums to support public deliberation about challenging issues so that people might make sound choices. The centers learned how to listen to citizens as they name their concerns, frame options to address those concerns, deliberate and choose a course of action that uses resources from all parts of the community, and learn together so the work of community constantly evolves. It is a creative and iterative set of practices, and when used to build the capacity for stronger and ecologically sound democracy, the work is transformative.

Faculty, administrators, and students associated with these centers built new networks of interaction by crossing disciplinary lines, institutional barriers, and community sectors, and by creating new intersections for public work. Most were initiated by faculty members who started self-created centers and then built support over time within their institutions and through a network of organizations. Through these circles of engagement across various lines, they have each become a steward of a place. Part of that stewardship means building the capacity of others to engage democratically. Capacity building might include students or community members, or students and citizens together. Whatever the approach, they move democratic practices outward, in, and through the ecology of democracy.

## **Decision-Makers and Knowledge Producers**

In deliberative democracy, citizens, institutions, and communities work in complementary ways, and the unique and essential contributions of each are recognized. The central position of citizen as decision-maker and knowledge producer is not how most people think about their roles in addressing public problems. Also, citizens, including students, are too often perceived by elected officials, administrators, and educators as inadequately informed and incapable of making thoughtful decisions about controversial issues.

David Procter is familiar with the apprehension experienced by many academics when they begin using these practices to address community problems. When he first began convening deliberative forums, colleagues said things like, “Oh, man, this is going to be terrible!” and, “It’s just going to get out of control.” At the beginning, he was “super-nervous,” but things turned out well. “It makes a difference when you start off by asking people to speak from personal experience, when you agree on a set of ground rules, when it’s not an either/or choice. There are very, very few times where things have gotten really crazy.” His conclusion? “People can be very reasonable and thoughtful given the right structure of the conversation.”

Windy Lawrence's experience echoes Procter's. She told of a time when a new provost at the University of Houston-Downtown, who was not familiar with the work of the Center for Public Deliberation she directs there, said to her, "If you can get through discussing immigration, you will really have proved your center." Lawrence recalls, "Of course, [the forum] went well. That's something that isn't surprising."

David Hoffman, cochair of the Civic Forum at the City University of New York, agrees that the source of these productive outcomes lies in the structure of the conversation. Most public sessions use debate-like formats, where individuals state

their positions and then make arguments to defend them. In contrast, in deliberative forums participants share personal narratives that establish how the issue affects them in their daily lives.

"Beginning with a personal narrative," he observed, "draws people into the conversation and opens up the richness of

the topic in a way that just stating a position can't really do. If you're arguing the affirmative or the negative on a particular policy, you don't see all the ways that it intersects with people's lives."

The use of deliberative democratic practices influences how people relate to each other and to issues, and also deepens their understanding of the role of citizens. As Lawrence reflected on her work in Houston over the past 10 years, she noted:

One of the things that has been eye-opening to me is the way people understand politics differently after the experience of public deliberation.

One of the things that we are adding to this notion of politics is that politics is the ability to understand, to learn, and to navigate systems.

Public spaces are increasingly elusive because they only come into existence when political activity occurs. They are the places where "I see myself," observes Marla Kanengieter-Wildeson, whose work is diffused across the university and the curriculum at St. Cloud State (and not within a center per se). It is where

***"Beginning with a personal narrative draws people into the conversation and opens up the richness of the topic in a way that just stating a position can't really do. If you're arguing the affirmative or the negative on a particular policy, you don't see all the ways that it intersects with people's lives."***

individuals are in relation with others and in the work of creating “the world.” The world, as defined by Hannah Arendt, is the very fragile public space where all are free to propose and debate actions for the common welfare. Public spaces in a democracy affirm the value of the individual and the community because they come into existence when citizens communicate and work together with

***Public spaces in a democracy affirm the value of the individual and the community because they come into existence when citizens communicate and work together with others as equals for the common good.***

others as equals for the common good. This kind of political activity is also a source of creativity. Engaging in political activity in a public space, with all of its unpredictability, is, according to Arendt, how individuals become fully human.

The retreat from public spaces is not a new phenomenon. It was a concern for Arendt in the years following World War II. She warned against the intrusion of the private—where things are hidden and hierarchies are secure—and the social into what she called the space of appearance, or the public space. Forty years ago, the political theorist Hanna Fenichel Pitkin also pointed out the threat to public work. She wrote:

By almost all the available evidence, we are witnessing a widespread turning away from public life. . . . The possibility that public participation might be intrinsically rewarding, a fulfillment of our nature rather than a burden, is pursued by almost no one.<sup>1</sup>

Today, the withdrawal to the private and the social continues, and opportunities for interaction with others in a noncommercialized public space are increasingly rare.

Kanengieter-Wildeson reminded us of the dangerous erosion of public space and the importance and fragility of “face-to-face presence” that forums offer students. Deliberative forums and other “invitational places” developed by Kanengieter-Wildeson and her colleagues are “spaces where students can be present to one another in a thoughtful and open way.” The diverse perspectives prompt individuals to stop and think. Deliberative democratic practices, including deliberative pedagogies, prompt people to think, and to think deeply. This is an activity that cannot be assumed. As Arendt has observed, “A life without thinking is quite possible; it then fails to develop its own essence—it is not merely meaningless; it is not fully alive.”<sup>2</sup>

## Complementary Expertise

Deliberative democratic practices challenge the culture of expertise in higher education in two ways. First, because the culture and modes of deliberative democratic interaction in communities differ from how public problems are approached in academia, faculty are challenged to adapt the familiar methodologies of their disciplines in order to work in complementary ways with citizens and community organizations. Second, deliberative pedagogies utilize democratic approaches to teaching and learning, and also alter relationships between faculty and students.

Expertise rests not only on the knowledge associated with a discipline, but also the practice of it. Practices associated with deliberative democracy invite scholars to practice their discipline differently. That can create tension, since, as they learn to adapt these practices to their own work, academics who are deeply immersed in their field's content and methodologies are put into situations where they are the novices rather than the experts.

Last year, the Institute for Civic Discourse and Democracy at Kansas State began a civic-engagement fellowship program with a cohort of faculty who were interested in incorporating deliberative practice into their various disciplines. They met five times over the course of the year in sessions that ranged from two hours to a full day. But even at the end of the program, there was still nervousness on their part about taking the leap to this new way of working. David Procter reflected on the project, noting:

They weren't as confident as we hoped that they would be. They were all willing to give it a shot. They talked about how they were going to restructure their approach to teaching to incorporate more deliberative democratic work into their courses. But it struck me how all of them were still very nervous about the kinds of things that we had talked about. They came from different disciplines. They didn't have the vocabulary even though they were familiar with deliberative forums and had, in some way or another, worked with communities. But they seemed really tied to their particular disciplines. They were trying to get their heads around what we were saying and figuring out how it might look in their particular work.

Lisa Strahley, coordinator of the SUNY Broome Community College Center for Civic Engagement, compares the experience to riding a bicycle: "The first time you try it, you're wobbly. But with practice and confidence in yourself, it becomes easier. There's a sense of caring that causes us to worry. A certain amount of nervousness is healthy." It speaks to how powerful this culture of the expert is, especially in the academy. David Procter concluded:

We've spent our entire lives learning from our particular perspective. When we start talking about doing things a little differently, it feels radical. This is a really important insight, at least for me. I've often thought about this culture of the expert in higher ed as being one centered around content: "I know this stuff, and you don't. Therefore, you should listen to me." Now I also realize that part of this power of the expert is not just the content knowledge but the how-to-do-it-ness of different disciplines.

In contrast, Kanengieter-Wildeson questioned the strength of this culture:

I want to say I'm not an expert. I'm continually learning. When the questions come up from colleagues about my work in deliberative democracy, I think, "Hmm, I'm not sure how to answer that." Faculty want certain answers. "Well, how can I do this in my class?" I will give them information and materials but I am also trying to emphasize the flexibility of these practices.

Joseph Hoereth, who directs the Institute for Policy and Civic Engagement at the University of Illinois at Chicago, warned against underestimating the persistence of the culture of expertise. He believes deliberative democratic approaches are often seen as an inferior way of communicating. "It's just really hard to break from the notion that if a faculty member has some important work to share, the best way is through a traditional academic talk." In his experience,

[Most colleagues believe] the best way to learn about a topic or even to "discuss" an issue is through some sort of faculty presentation. If you try to do something that varies from that, it's often viewed as a light take—somehow not as in-depth—and that doesn't help students understand the structural roots of the issue. There's a tension between folks who understand the need to bring people together to talk about a contentious policy or political issue and folks who feel like what we need to be doing is educating the students about their work and the way they've done it and approached it.

A question central to this work is how to incorporate expertise and facts with public action based on the things that people hold dear. Even those whose disciplines rely heavily on data, such as scientists, and whose disciplines are based on an expert model have discovered that they need to be interested in this question. The intersections between factual information, personal experiences, and things that people hold dear are important because they not only affect possible actions for addressing an issue, but even how the problem is defined.

## Deliberative Pedagogy

Deliberative pedagogy is an approach to education designed to prepare students to develop the attitudes and skills needed to effectively make thoughtful decisions with others as they work together to address problems that are ethical, rather than technical, in nature. It builds on changes that date back to the 1990s, when some in higher education began to “create environments and experiences that allow students to discover and construct knowledge for themselves and to become members of communities of learning that make discoveries and solve problems.”<sup>3</sup> Deliberative pedagogical approaches ask students to “undertake a process of discovery . . . and work alongside teachers to engage in reflective, often transformational, dialogue in which they gain self-awareness and discover multiple possibilities for collective action.”<sup>4</sup> Faculty and students “take on roles and responsibilities to both teach and learn from and with one another.”<sup>5</sup>

The challenge posed by these practices to the way expertise is understood and employed has the potential to open up new pathways for learning and change the nature of faculty-student relationships. The evolution of David Hoffman’s approach to teaching is an example of this, where the “sage on the stage” gives way to the “guide on the side.” “My first years in teaching were done in the traditional way,” he remembers. Hoffman says:

Students gave speeches and then I made critical comments about the speeches. Especially with first- or second-term undergraduates, it was a very uneven power situation. Over the years I have structured my courses more and more in ways that didn’t put me in the center. I think I’ve succeeded now. And after the students respond to the other students, there’s still a place for me. But it feels like I’m no longer in that position of somebody who’s supposed to be the expert on everything that every student is talking about or on the best way of presenting the case. And I like that. Students also begin regarding each other differently. They have the authority to think together, and they have the authority to critique each other.

Deliberation differs from critical thinking because it extends beyond factual analysis. Past experiences, personal beliefs, priorities, and things that are held dear, such as being treated fairly or having the freedom to do as one wishes or concern for the well-being of others, also need to be weighed as people work toward decisions about what to do. David Hoffman notes:

One of the problems with actually getting down to that deeper level is that we tend to constellate, to cluster facts that are in harmony with values that are often unarticulated. We have most of our disputes about matters of

fact, but there's usually a value question behind it. A lot of times, the thing valued is never clearly stated, much less do we see what other things we value that might be in conflict with whatever is being prioritized.

Although her colleagues sometimes admonish her, saying, "students are not your equal," Lawrence believes there is value in questioning the customary roles of faculty and student. Once she began dismantling this hierarchy, she found it was "hard for me to see myself as above the student when I am learning just as much, if not more, from them as they are from me. That's not just a cliché."

The shift from expert-centered teaching to student-centered learning places more responsibility on the students. When faculty ask, "so what do you think of this?" it can be a unique experience for students. Learning, then, becomes about so much more than what can be put into their minds. Lisa

***"[It was] hard for me to see myself as above the student when I am learning just as much, if not more, from them as they are from me. That's not just a cliché."***

Strahley pointed out that teaching informed by deliberative democratic ideas involves "offering material [in a way] that they can chew on it and think about it and analyze it and question it. It is what makes deliberative democratic

practice in the classroom so rich." It is not an "add-on," but rather a different way of teaching and learning.

## **Conclusion: Learning as a Democratic Practice**

As this conversation demonstrates, faculty associated with centers for democratic public life think critically about what they are doing, and they are developing a shared language and understanding of deliberative democracy. Central to this is the recognition that learning is a democratic practice. Learning is at the center of the Kettering Foundation's research. Kettering has learned as much from these centers as the centers have learned from the foundation. The 30 years of relationships among the centers and Kettering have led to changes we cannot always see clearly unless we take the time to talk together, much like deliberative democratic practice itself. The iterative practice of talking, acting, and refining theory and meaning, done inclusively and democratically, models what the authors hope to see in institutions of higher learning.

The authors also understand that deliberative democratic theory and practices challenge the culture of expertise that currently exists and the hierarchies that it generates. Doing so begins to reveal the assets that citizens (including students) can bring to bear on the most pressing problems of our time and the challenge of living well together. In a democracy, living well together depends on citizens who have the ability to communicate and the willingness to think, make judgments, and act with others. This can only occur in a public space, a kind of democratic ecology that the centers seek to foster. Deliberative democracy is the antidote to the ongoing retreat from the public space.

***Deliberative democracy is the antidote to the ongoing retreat from the public space.***

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**NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Hanna Fenichel Pitkin, “Justice: On Relating Private and Public,” *Political Theory* 9, no. 3 (August 1981): 327, <http://www.jstor.org/stable/191093> (accessed April 27, 2018).
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# REFLECTIONS ON ADVANCING UNIVERSITY CIVIC ENGAGEMENT INTERNATIONALLY

Lorlene Hoyt

Increasingly, we are exposed to stories and images of public protest and violence in nations around the world. Political polarization is on the rise, and public discourse is becoming more dysfunctional. Citizens doubt the competencies and motives of their elected officials and the media. As people retreat into their ideological enclaves and lose faith in the notion of self-rule, democracy in the United States and beyond is struggling.

Optimists contend that our democratic institutions will prevail; our young democracy was designed to survive such challenges. At the same time, they acknowledge a discernable decrease in the public's confidence in societal institutions, including institutions of higher education.

In the United States and the world over, universities are scenes for waves of unrest. In South Africa, for example, universities were caught up in the #FeesMustFall movement as students and the South African government tackled issues about affordability and the right to an education. As institutions, universities occupy a conflicted space in the popular imagination. They conjure competing images of elitism and social mobility; ivory tower isolationism and community uplift; places of exclusion and places where diverse people interact and thrive. Recent protests at the world's universities suggest that people recognize the power and potential of institutions of higher education and are holding them accountable. At the same time, there is less awareness of the historic public purpose of universities, and few people view them as institutions capable of strengthening democracy.

This essay reflects a decade of experience with the Kettering Foundation and the ways in which it works with *innovators* and *partners* in higher education to align universities with a democratic citizenry. As an associate professor of urban planning at MIT, working with citizens in Lawrence, Massachusetts, I participated in the foundation's workshops as an innovator in higher education from 2008 to 2011. More recently (2012-2018), I have been a foundation partner while working as executive director of the Talloires Network, a global

coalition of engaged universities. Our shared interest in advancing democracy by strengthening the civic roles and responsibilities of higher education institutions internationally has held steady. And we have worked hand in hand in a variety of ways with campuses and communities around the world that are experimenting with democratic practices and collaborating across cultural, religious, racial, and other differences to make sound decisions and take action.

The Kettering Foundation's focus on strengthening democratic practices presents distinctive challenges. How does an autonomous and well-resourced institution put the citizenry at the center of social problem solving? How can the foundation promote self-rule, demonstrating democratic practices by way of example, without imposing a particular style or type of self-rule?

*Convenor. Curator. Coach.* While the Kettering Foundation does not necessarily use these words, in my experience, they best characterize its role in working to advance university civic engagement internationally. As convenor,

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the foundation collaborates with its partners to identify innovators in higher education and encourage ongoing face-to-face interactions among innovators. As curator, the foundation

maintains a shared vocabulary and invites participants to explore, challenge, and experiment with ideas outside of and within their home communities. As coach, the foundation demonstrates democratic practices by cultivating an environment for experimenting with democracy (problem solving by self-rule). It meets with partners and innovators in higher education to name problems, exchange experiences (deliberate), and take collective action (experiment).

## **Convenor**

The foundation creates a space for people to empower *themselves*. This is easier said than done. In my experience, collaborative learning and action with the Kettering Foundation begins with an invitation to participate, accompanied by a set of "framing questions." Framing questions help to initiate and guide conversations; they at once challenge prevalent ideas and provoke new ones. For those of us who have been identified as innovators in higher education and invited to a workshop, the experience is, at first, disorienting and, at times, awkward and frustrating. This was the case for me in February 2008 when

the foundation invited me to join a conversation in Dayton, Ohio, entitled, “Democracy and Higher Education: The Future of Engagement.” I was excited and intrigued, but also very confused about how to participate in the workshop conversation.

Our small group grappled with a set of framing questions, sharing experiences and trying to figure out what we might plan to do together during the week and in the future. At the same time that I was feeling very confused and uncertain about the

foundation’s approach to convening, another person new to the foundation said aloud what I was thinking:

***We take the time to learn and grow, individually and collectively.***

“Where is this conversation going? What are we trying to achieve?” I did not realize at the time that she had, in a way, highlighted the very genius of the foundation—stepping back. Putting people, problems, and the power of decision-making in the hands of a small group of people is an invention in the making.

Though the group discussion felt somewhat unsatisfying to me at the time, my notes from this and subsequent workshops reveal multiple benefits. By meeting with and getting to know innovators in higher education from near and far, I rediscovered my love of learning and renewed my sense of purpose as a member of the higher education community. Some excerpts from the notes I took at that first meeting include “I can contribute more than expertise”; “Academics are not apolitical”; and “Blending expert knowledge and public knowledge requires a capacity to learn and unlearn in collaboration with others.” Importantly, the foundation, as convenor, affords scholar-practitioners like myself an opportunity to focus their time and energies on the exchange of experiences and ideas. This is a gift. For those of us in—and working to reform—ivory towers, the foundation assumes a host of responsibilities (scheduling flights, making hotel reservations, providing meals), while we take the time to learn and grow, individually and collectively.

My relationship with the Kettering Foundation has evolved over time. In 2012, as then-incoming director of programs and research for the Talloires Network, my involvement shifted from innovator to partner. Natural allies, the Talloires Network and the Kettering Foundation launched a multi-year research and writing collaboration and have, for several years, jointly explored how universities around the world understand their democratic mission and engage their students in the civic life of their communities.

Together, we engaged a variety of innovators (university faculty, staff, students, and community partners from seven countries on six continents), crafted framing questions and workshop agendas, and facilitated discussions, exposing innovators in higher education to Kettering Foundation and Talloires Network research. The foundation encouraged this series of exchanges, known as “Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement.” Rather than providing services or expert knowledge to communities, we asked participants to reflect on their experiences working *with* communities to strengthen their civic capacities. They articulated their practices and visions in writing, and decided to produce a book to inspire new perspectives on how higher education understands civic engagement. The book was their idea and project—the foundation served a vital role as convenor, with assistance from the network. In a way, the book itself reflects the democratic practices it espouses.

## Curator

Institutional barriers that undermine and deter efforts to engage citizens in problem solving frustrate many innovators in higher education. Their experience is similar to the lack of control over problems that citizens feel and face in their communities. The foundation, it seems, attempts to address such barriers by functioning as a curator. In other words, it focuses attention on listening to people, naming problems, and maintaining a vocabulary for people to use as they exchange ideas and determine avenues for action. Its approach is slow, subtle, and persistent. Shaped with its innovators and partners, and discernable upon reflection, the fundamental building blocks of the foundation’s vocabulary include *research*, *experiment*, *deliberation*, *naming*, *framing*, and *democracy*. Importantly, “democracy” is understood as the power of people to shape their future; it is not a formula, a technique, or a formal system of government institutions. In caring for these ideas, the foundation and its partners and innovators build and steward a cultural heritage.

The shared vocabulary is useful. The foundation invites innovators in higher education to engage with one another for several years at a time. Newcomers are added to the mix regularly. A foundational, yet malleable, vocabulary provides people from different walks of life a common set of ideas to consider, explore, challenge, and take home.

In my experience, engagement among innovators takes place primarily in semi-structured group discussions or workshops. The foundation works hand in hand with its partners to craft workshop agendas, which are loosely bound by a set of framing questions. To help ground an exchange of experiences

and encourage new interpretations, the foundation often embeds the evolving vocabulary in the framing questions.

The following quotes from an exchange (“Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement,” December 2013) may bring these and earlier points to life. The framing question, What problems of democracy and civic life are you attempting to address in your regions through efforts to better engage students in communities? prompted the following exchanges:

Maria Fernanda Pacheco Bravo (university student from Mexico): “People don’t believe in themselves. They think they don’t have agency; we focus on empowerment.”

Thabo Putu (community partner from South Africa): “People expect the government to do things for them; we say you don’t have to leave politics to the politician—everyone is a politician.”

Eric Brace (community partner from Australia): “There are some in government who are intent on determining where aboriginal people live and people are becoming cynical about policy. Nearly three hundred indigenous languages in Australia are endangered or dormant. Culture is under attack, yet the issue isn’t given the urgency it deserves.”

Loshini Naidoo (university faculty from Australia): “We encourage teachers in training to value the knowledge of refugees. Teachers aren’t prepared to work with these communities, and racism is built into the larger schooling system.”

(University faculty from Scotland): “We look at the whole community and schools; we reconnect people with civic life and let them know they can influence and change things.”

Joseph Francis (university faculty from South Africa): “The young generation is disinterested and leaves decisions to elders. We need to reconnect different groups. Students need to see value in productive engagement; we need to develop leaders.”

Nelly Corbel (university staff from Egypt): “We want civic leaders to discover their values, to discover what is inside.”

Margaret Fraser (community partner from Scotland): “The perception is that the community is disadvantaged. People are convinced that their misfortune is their fault as “bad mothers.” We must get to the root causes—get people beyond accepting how things are.”

James Koh (university faculty from Malaysia): “There has been a lot of land grabbing from the government and private corporations. Villagers have become very dependent. We found a high level of apathy and distrust. We would like to see them take charge of their health. We are hoping students will become policymakers and leaders [if] they are exposed to the villages.”

On the surface, this may look like a lot of talk with no structure or purpose. Admittedly, it is a lot of information to make sense of in real time. However, this dynamic, messy, and honest exchange illuminates the ways in which the group discussion is an exercise in strengthening democratic practices. Participants experience and learn about their own power by stepping forward, naming problems, and listening to others. And despite differences in geopolitical context, universal themes emerge: apathy among the citizenry, citizenry’s distrust of institutions, and hope that another way is possible.

## **Coach**

As coach, the foundation poses questions more frequently than it answers them; it listens and observes more than it speaks; it provides spaces for people to gather, to talk, and to decide; it values and welcomes public knowledge as well as expert knowledge. In large part, the foundation demonstrates democratic practices by example.

To bring this point to life, I have excavated the following from another conversation the Talloires Network recorded and transcribed. This is different from the prior example because the conversation itself required coaching. As I recall, the morning conversation started with the framing question, What practices have you used to more successfully build democratic relationships between the university and community partners, and what differences have these practices made in the civic life of communities? After more than an hour of discussion, several people in the room had not yet spoken, or had said very little. In this instance, the foundation’s ability to function as coach contributed to increased participation and learning:

Derek Barker (foundation program officer): “We want to make sure that we hear from everyone on questions of practices you’re using as universities and communities develop relationships and what differences that’s making in civic life. We can also weave in challenges. I heard James (university

faculty from Malaysia) say something about the community taking charge of their health. Could you say more about this?”

James Koh (university faculty from Malaysia): “Malaysians are pretty apathetic when it comes to health. Most citizens are very ignorant about health. There is no agency to go [to] for a yearly check up. Our university is a medical university—almost every class has teaching and learning activities for students.

The community we work with is indigent, but the people ruling the country are not from this group.

***This can be frustrating, especially when participants desire and seek direction.***

There is a lot of distrust. Back to taking charge of their health, we discovered that most villagers were unaware of health issues. Some people go through their entire life without seeing a doctor, and most deliveries are done in the village by midwives. If they are sick, they wait it out unless they are really, really sick. The first task was to find out their needs—teenage pregnancy and drug and alcohol abuse were big problems. Hygiene is a huge problem—hair lice, scabies. This was a big culture shock for the students. The key issue in our work is dialogue—we have to tread very carefully because there are a lot of sensitive issues. Now the community is prepared, they come on their own accord, they ask about their health.”

Joseph Francis (university faculty from South Africa): “What is the role of traditional medicine?”

James Koh (university faculty from Malaysia): “They have their own traditional medicine. The university learns from them as well. The university has difficulty with traditional medicine and the villagers can help us. We want to know what they know.”

Nelly Corbel (university staff from Egypt): “I am curious to know—in your case, where does lack of trust come from?”

James Koh (university faculty from Malaysia): “Most of the people in the village are Catholic, but 10 percent are Muslim. They are the ones with the power in the village. They think that the university is part of the 90 percent and trying to organize against them.”<sup>1</sup>

Interestingly, this exchange illustrates two points. First, the foundation’s role as a coach helps to ensure that all voices are heard. Perhaps more importantly, skillful coaching also creates an environment that encourages others to

take part in coaching. In this way, everyone is a coach, a teacher, and a student. By working in a way that is more horizontal than vertical, the foundation actively welcomes different ways of knowing—both expert knowledge and public knowledge.

In addition to cofacilitating conversations with partners in ways that are democratic, the foundation consistently resists the temptation to impose its desires upon its partners and innovators. Admittedly, this can be frustrating, especially when participants desire and seek direction from those who they assume are in charge. This approach is also more time-consuming and can be difficult to accept as so many of us have adapted to a fast-paced culture that prioritizes immediate gratification.

The foundation reminds people to slow down, to talk about problems that concern them. It reminds us to listen and to reflect. It places the power of decision-making and the task of moving forward together productively in the hands of workshop participants. In this way, the foundation provides fertile ground for deliberation in its many manifestations. The following notes (from “Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement,” July 2014, with narrative added by the author) aims to illustrate this point:

Joseph Francis (university faculty from South Africa): “I would like to play a game to deliver the point.” (*He arranges the tables in the room into a closed circle, with the workshop participants seated in chairs outside the circle, facing the center of the room.*) “I am inviting four people into the center of the circle.” (*He does not tell them how to get to the center; each chooses how they want to enter. He takes a piece of paper with four sides, draws a curved line on it, and places it on the floor in the center of the circle. He asks each volunteer to stand on one side of the paper.*) “Now, what do you see? What is the reality?”

Nelly Corbel (university staff from Egypt): “I see a 3.”

(University faculty from Scotland): “I see a *W*.”

(University partner from Egypt): “I see the Arabic letter *ayn*.”

Mark Wilson (university faculty from the United States): “I see a MacDonald’s sign.”

Joseph Francis (university faculty from South Africa): “Who is right? They are all right because they have different perspectives. We focus on the same thing from different angles. [We] see things from our own perspective. Communities are fighting for resources and no one wins. We build bridges between people. Solutions to social problems do not lie within us at the

University of Venda, but rather within the community. We create a platform to discover solutions as villagers engage one another. We are outsiders building on what already exists, not creating something new. Our approach is cross-generational—a platform where anyone, any age or background, can contribute to solutions. This is critical because communities are becoming more uncomfortable with the service they are getting from the public sphere. South Africa has good policies around public participation. The reality on the ground is that only a few people are connected to leadership and participating. Our Constitution (South Africa, 1996) says the people should govern, but they can only govern through making decisions collectively.”<sup>2</sup>

This is a vivid example of the Kettering Foundation’s approach to community building. Rather than impose its interests, it yields. In this example, an innovator in higher education felt empowered to physically rearrange the room and teach a lesson about democratic practice. Significantly, in doing so, he conveyed his knowledge of practice while also highlighting the urgency and relevance of democratic engagement in his community.

## Summary

Foundation “insiders” are more likely to agree with the characterization of “Convenor-Curator-Coach” that I have set forth. Understandably, foundation “outsiders” may be wondering, How are so-called innovators in higher education identified and selected to receive an invitation to participate in a workshop? How does someone become a foundation partner? In what ways are these processes and decisions democratic? These are reasonable questions that I have not attempted to answer.

Those readers who self-identify as “in-between” (neither “insiders” nor “outsiders”), who have had limited exposure to the foundation’s practices, may also resist or otherwise challenge my characterization. Perhaps their own experience with the foundation’s open-ended structure made them uneasy and unsure. Perhaps they were part of an exchange and did not appreciate the foundation’s approach—instead, they felt that the people in their group pontificated too much, indulged in personal stories, or made extraneous statements.<sup>3</sup> Perhaps they did not find value in discussing ideas (democracy, research, experimentation, deliberation) and taking action with others, deciding that their experience with the foundation was not relevant to their interests and goals.

Every organization is subject to criticism and falls short on occasion. What matters is that the foundation’s mission aligns with its practices, and,

by and large, they are a fit. The foundation sees citizens as leaders. It provides some encouragement—it convenes, curates, and coaches—while people make decisions through their relationships with each other. The foundation’s efforts to advance democracy internationally are, in effect, experiments in collective responsibility.

In a world where so many societies are coping with political conflict and division, dysfunctional public discourse, cultural and religious differences, and differences of race, class, and polarized ideologies, the work of Kettering and its partners has become more vital than ever before. Directly and indirectly, it has nurtured an ever-expanding network of people who are working together to reinvigorate the civic roles and legitimacy of higher education institutions in their communities around the world. Together, they are naming problems, engaging in experiments, and learning from failure, while reinventing the university as a democratic institution.

I am grateful to the foundation for the many invitations I have received, the risks we have taken, relationships and projects we have built, and for this opportunity to reflect on my experience.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> Notes from “Regional Perspectives on University Civic Engagement,” meeting, December, 2013, in possession of author.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> David Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy: Finding Ways to Have a Stronger Hand in Shaping Our Future*, Dayton, Ohio: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014, 79.

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# DEEPENING DELIBERATION IN COMMUNITY COLLEGES

## Reflections on Our Research

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

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

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

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

***Deliberation represents a way to redirect civic initiatives away from a focus on the problems in democracy to the problems of democracy.***

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

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

## **Civic Engagement in Higher Education**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Project Design**

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

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

## **Reflections on the Project**

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

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

seeking a way forward without acrimony and the traps of regular political conversation.<sup>6</sup>

Another participant made a similar point:

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## **Kettering’s Role**

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

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

## Conclusions

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

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

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

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

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

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



## NOTES

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

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# LEARNING TO TEACH DEMOCRACY

An Interview with Nicholas Longo and Marshalita Sims Peterson

*In this interview, two scholars, Nicholas V. Longo and Marshalita Sims Peterson, discuss their learning process in the use of deliberation to enhance academic learning of college students—what they call “deliberative pedagogy.” In this process, they participated in research exchanges at Kettering, where they shared and reflected upon their practices with a cohort of other scholars engaged in similar experiments. We think their stories exemplify the type of learning and network building that occurs in Kettering research exchanges.*

**Barker:** Nick, tell us about yourself and some of your early involvements with Kettering.

**Longo:** I was immersed in local politics even before I went away to college to formally study political science. But like so many young people, I became disillusioned with the way politics was taught and practiced on campus and in our national scene. This was the mid-1990s, a time of deep divisions and polarization in our politics—which have only gotten worse in the two decades since. At the same time, I felt like too many of my courses were too narrowly academic and detached from the world.

Yet Providence College (where I was a student and am now a professor) was just launching a new program focused on “public and community service.” The program brought me outside the “bubble” of the college campus as I began to do work in collaboration with members of the broader Providence community through community-based learning courses. I helped to coordinate an afterschool program at a local middle school, and learned more from that experience about the issues of educational policy, student achievement, and public leadership than anything I was learning in the classroom.

These experiences were transformative for me. And they set the trajectory of my future work that soon thereafter brought me to the Kettering Foundation. Community-based learning allowed me to connect my studies with real-world engagement and then begin to envision how I could continue trying to lead what Parker Palmer describes in *A Hidden Wholeness* as “an undivided life” as a civic professional.

Further, community engagement introduced me to a different way to think about and practice politics. I saw how the type of relationships I was developing across age, race, class, and cultural boundaries with my colleagues in the Providence community could be more productive and public. I don’t want to romanticize this experience or disregard the issues of power and

privilege in campus-community relationships. The program I was directing had a really dynamic principal who was moved halfway through the year, so it was messy and full of conflict. While I didn't have the language to articulate this at the time, I was being introduced to a different kind of politics—what David Mathews has termed “citizen politics,” where ordinary people could work across differences, together, to solve problems. And it seems this type of citizen-centered approach, which is focused on local relationships, is more relevant than ever. For example, James and Deborah Fallows' new book, *Our Towns*, contrasts the dysfunction in our national politics with the hopefulness and pragmatism of civic engagement on the local level in America's heartland, where the focus is on “practical problems a community could address”<sup>1</sup>—an approach to civic life, they tellingly note, “that has generally escaped any outside notice.”<sup>2</sup>

These trends, however, have been at the core of the research of the Kettering Foundation for several decades.

I was introduced to Kettering's research as I became interested in finding others who were exploring more citizen-centered approaches in the late 1990s. I was inspired by the writings of leaders in this field, including Harry Boyte, Benjamin Barber, and, of course, David Mathews. I decided to go to graduate school at the University of Minnesota and work at the Center for Democracy and Citizenship (CDC), which is now housed at Augsburg College. The CDC was doing innovative work to develop a practical philosophy of “what works” to engage citizens in public life with projects like the Jane Addams School for Democracy, a contemporary settlement house with college students and recent immigrants, along with Public Achievement, a youth civic-engagement project. And the CDC was working closely with the Kettering Foundation to learn from these civic experiments. I got a chance to meet Dr. Mathews just after his book *Politics for People* was published. This provided a useful conceptual framework for the public work I was trying to do.

I stayed connected to the Kettering Foundation and its research, which deeply informed my dissertation and subsequent book *Why Community Matters*, and have been working closely with various workgroups and projects at Kettering since I finished my dissertation in 2005.

**Barker:** Marshalita, please tell us about the Whisenton Public Scholars and your involvement in that group.

**Peterson:** It was through the Whisenton Public Scholars program that I became acquainted with the Kettering Foundation more than ten years ago. The Whisenton Public Scholars program began in 1998 and is a collaboration

of Joffre T. Whisenton and Associates, the Kettering Foundation, and participating higher education professionals. The program works primarily with faculty and administrators from institutions with a mission to serve minority communities (such as Historically Black Colleges and Universities, Hispanic-Serving Institutions, and Tribal Colleges and Universities). Many of these institutions have maintained close ties to their communities and focus on developing student engagement. The two-year Public Scholars program encourages scholars to explore aspects of citizen-centered democracy and public deliberation, including naming and framing issues and weighing trade-offs and tensions, as well as community decision-making, action, and learning.

The Whisenton Public Scholars partnership focuses on extending Kettering's research on public deliberation into minority-serving institutions. It provides a distinct focus on the way students learn ideas of democratic practice, the impact of the learning, and the role of faculty and administrators who incorporate these ideas into the classroom. While in many ways the learning may be the same, there are differences in the way these historical institutions teach and engage students. The work of the Whisenton Public Scholars addresses what we might learn from these institutions as they experiment with these ideas of public discourse and citizen engagement.

My journey and involvement as a Whisenton Public Scholar began in 2007, when I served as a scholar and was also a faculty member at Spelman College. As a Whisenton Public Scholar, I had the wonderful opportunity to interact and connect with other scholars within the cohort and also connect and establish relationships with researchers, faculty/administrators, and civic innovators around the world who are committed to democratic practice, public scholarship, and public discourse.

The Whisenton Public Scholars network conducts novel research through public scholarship addressing the fundamental problems of democracy. In addition, the scholars are provided opportunities to share their research and discuss the experiences and insights through research exchanges, joint learning, and exposure to Kettering's research on the theory and practice of deliberation. These activities are actualized through a variety of experiences, such as teaching/learning seminars, curricular enhancements/modifications, dialogue, activities involving citizens of local communities, and National Issues Forums—all a result of creating space for authentic dialogue and transformative experiences in higher education and connecting campus with community.

**Barker:** Nick and Marshalita, your separate interactions with Kettering eventually led to involvement in a group of college faculty that are using

deliberation as a form of pedagogy, leading to the publication *Deliberative Pedagogy: Teaching and Learning for Democratic Engagement*. Can you tell us how this group came about, and the central finding or insight that the book represents?

**Longo:** One of the most significant aspects of Kettering is its role as a civic convening organization. Kettering has helped to nurture and connect a vast network of scholars, practitioners, and engaged citizens who care about “making democracy work as it should.” Marshalita is one of the talented scholars I’ve had the privilege to meet and work with through Kettering.

Beginning in fall 2011, Maxine Thomas, vice president, secretary, and general counsel at Kettering Foundation, convened a group of faculty members who were utilizing deliberative practices in the college classroom. This built upon research Thomas, John Dedrick, yourself, and others from Kettering had been conducting for many years on deliberation in higher education. The group was also intentionally global, with participants experimenting with deliberation not only in North America, but also Latin America, Europe, the Middle East, and Africa.

As we continued our conversations, we began to feel like the work we were doing was unique, even groundbreaking. We began to focus in on something we found was under-researched in the field: namely, the role of deliberation as a pedagogical practice. Over the past few decades—and building on traditions from

***We were using two words, “deliberative” and “pedagogy,” that are often met with blank stares and confusion. So we’ve had our work cut out for us.***

much earlier—public deliberation has become more integral in domains like public policy and the political sphere, with practices like participatory budgeting getting more visibility. But less had been done in trying

to understand the role of deliberation as a pedagogical practice and how it fits with engaged learning practices, which have also been growing. We started to ask how deliberation fits with, but also expands upon, other “high-impact” practices. More specifically, we examined how deliberative approaches to teaching and learning might be part of the larger democratic mission of a college or university.

We began using the phrase “deliberative pedagogy” to capture how this was a new concept, which opened up creative possibilities. But it also had challenges. We were using two words, “deliberative” and “pedagogy,” that are often met with blank stares and confusion. So we’ve had our work cut out for

us, and this ultimately led to the desire to put together the book *Deliberative Pedagogy* with Michigan State University Press.

**Barker:** Yes, you might say that the deliberation piece was new to higher education conversations that took place around service learning and civic engagement, while the pedagogy piece was new for Kettering. From Kettering's perspective, we have seen deliberation as an alternative to adversarial politics. It never really occurred to us that it could also be effective in teaching academic content. However, it seems to resonate on both levels. Marshalita, what did "deliberative pedagogy" mean to you?

**Peterson:** I am honored to be a part of the book project *Deliberative Pedagogy*. This text presents a range of approaches utilizing deliberation as a key pedagogical practice across varied disciplines. The common factor of deliberation provided the groundwork for gathering and sharing information regarding various approaches. Involvement in the book project also provided an opportunity to interact with outstanding innovators from both Kettering and campuses around the world, such as Maxine Thomas, Nicholas Longo, Idit Manosevitch, and Timothy Shaffer.

For me, the common insight is that through shared experiences of public deliberation, faculty and students have an opportunity to explore curricular and cocurricular experiences within discipline-specific and interdisciplinary structures, as well as engage in public scholarship and creative work linked to democratic practice. Creating spaces in the curriculum for public voice and citizenship through deliberative pedagogy reinforces the concepts of collective action, campus-community connections, and civic agency.

My primary question involving deliberative pedagogy and student engagement is centered on "how" we can use pedagogical processes effectively to enhance student learning experiences such that students explore, initiate, and apply public deliberation and civic engagement during their campus years and beyond.

In facilitating the "how," my work in deliberative pedagogy and civic education focuses on opportunities for institutions of higher education and communities to connect and commit to the public work of democratic practice. This includes four primary areas of my work: (1) support of faculty/administration in higher education utilizing deliberative pedagogy for civic engagement and deliberative practices; (2) student development through deliberative pedagogy and utilization of a train-the-trainer model for engaged learning experiences encompassing deliberative dialogue, public voice, and civic education; (3) holding deliberative forums using issue guides published

by the National Issues Forums Institute; and (4) creating spaces for public voice by connecting institutions and communities through deliberative dialogue. I have found deliberative dialogue to be essential and transformative as students explore processes for learning, navigate communal approaches for addressing issues, consider multiple perspectives, weigh trade-offs, make sound judgments, assess challenges, engage in communal decision-making, recognize citizen assets, and align the work of citizens for collective action.

I am ever mindful, however, that civic innovation, social problem solving, the scholarship of engagement, and curricular enhancements, as well as addressing the civic-engagement movement in higher education, are not easy;

***I have found deliberative dialogue to be essential and transformative.***

these practices require systemic work and problem solving. *Deliberative Pedagogy* provides insights about how to support,

assess, and enhance learning experiences for students while acknowledging that deliberation and deliberative pedagogy in higher education represent a continuum of engagement with the community.

**Barker:** I am guessing that neither of you had much interest in, or perhaps even awareness of, *deliberation* prior to your involvement with Kettering. Can you tell us about how involvement with Kettering has affected your understanding of democracy in general, and deliberation in particular?

**Longo:** Myles Horton, the cofounder of the Highlander Folk School in Tennessee, observed that belief in a democratic society means creating spaces for education that are democratic. That, for me, is a simple, yet profound, idea about the connection between education and democracy. And it's an area where higher education is particularly hypocritical: with mission statements and pronouncements about the importance of educating democratic citizens, and yet too little done to put these lofty democratic ideals into practice.

I saw this firsthand when I worked on a national civic-engagement campaign for Campus Compact, which allowed me to talk with college students on campuses across the US. My takeaway from this experience was that college students learned most about democracy by how it is practiced—or more often, not practiced—on campus. Kettering's research on this topic came to similar conclusions when they studied college student perceptions of politics (first with *College Students Talk Politics* in 1993, conducted by the Harwood Institute, and then again with *Millennials Talk Politics* in 2006,

conducted in collaboration with CIRCLE). And so, if we care about the future of democracy, we can't just talk about it or research it as an abstract idea. We need to put democracy into practice.

Recognizing the importance of developing these democratic practices in education is at the core of what I have learned from my involvement with the Kettering Foundation. And this insight is why my introduction to deliberation was so profound. The work of the Kettering Foundation helps to understand, build, and strengthen an ecosystem of democracy, with a citizen-centered democracy network across the world. And the practice of deliberation is a sort of lifeblood that flows through the system. Connecting this lifeblood to the multitude of educative institutions (formal and informal) is vital work that the Kettering network has inspired me to be part of.

**Peterson:** My experiences involving the concept of deliberation can actually be captured in three phases of my career: as a student at Spelman College, faculty member at Spelman College (and Whisenton Public Scholar of the Kettering Foundation), and my current role as a researcher/consultant.

My initial involvement and exposure began many years ago—not in a formalized manner, but through imbedded experiences as a student at Spelman College in Atlanta, my alma mater. I vividly recall the impact of Spelman's ideals and core values of intellectual engagement, leadership, public voice, social awareness, and community involvement.

I was exposed to aspects of deliberation through these experiences (not in

***Myles Horton observed that belief in a democratic society means creating spaces for education that are democratic.***

the terminology of academe at that particular time, but nonetheless, empowering experiences of engagement). I was guided and positively encouraged to explore leadership, do research within and outside of my academic discipline, speak up and speak out, take action regarding social issues, and pursue opportunities to support, serve, and collaborate with the community—which all touch on deliberation and democratic practice.

The next phase of my interest in, and awareness of, deliberation involves my serving as a faculty member and chair of the Teacher Education Department at Spelman. As a faculty member, I sought to incorporate the key tenets of the Spelman ideals into course experiences. I guided and trained my students to use their public voice, develop their leadership skills, and engage with the

community to support and empower the collective voices of others in addressing common issues.

I recognized that even the smallest of spaces for deliberative dialogue can have long-lasting impact and, as such, I was intentional in exposing preservice teachers to concepts of democratic practice and deliberative pedagogy. These

*I recognized readily that this work is not stagnant, but rather a living, ongoing process.*

experiences were imbedded in teacher education courses and included naming and framing issues and deliberative dialogue.

In addition, I engaged

students in deliberative dialogue through addressing the work of citizens, community issues, communal decision-making and communal action—all of which are essential for student involvement in shaping the future.

As a researcher and consultant, my work involving deliberative pedagogy in higher education, and that of civic education and civic agency, has continued to evolve. I recognized readily that this work is not stagnant, but rather a living, ongoing process.

This work, which has led to my enhanced focus on civic agency, also brings to mind the significance of our personal responsibility, collective responsibility, and civic relationships. I am reminded of a quote by David Mathews: “Civic relationships aren’t just with friends and neighbors; they are the pragmatic working relationships we create with anyone who is needed in order to solve the problems that threaten everyone’s well-being.”<sup>3</sup>

**Barker:** Nick mentioned the Myles Horton philosophy about higher education needing to do a better job of embodying the sort of democracy it hopes to see. That is something we talk about a lot at Kettering, and it’s the theme of this issue, not only in how we understand democracy, but also in how we do our work as a research foundation. Both of your stories illustrate the type of learning we try to facilitate, where Kettering, hopefully, provided some resonant and useful concepts, but you contributed your own ideas, experiences, and networks. Thank you so much for sharing your stories. In ending, would you care to elaborate or add any final thoughts?

**Longo:** Thank you for your many years of asking the right questions to untap the civic potential in stories and collective problem solving. This is really essential at a time when there’s growing evidence that we are in the midst of a crisis of democracy. But how colleges and universities go about addressing the problems of our democracy matters. I’m reminded that Myles

Horton aptly titled his autobiography *The Long Haul*. Building a democratic culture in higher education (or elsewhere) doesn't happen in snapshots or with one-time programs; rather, it requires a purposeful and rigorous long-term commitment to developing ideas and practices that cultivate democracy. That takes time. This kind of effort is a counterforce in a society that rewards instant gratification and commodifies the production of knowledge. My experiences engaging with the Kettering network demonstrate the power of connecting with a community of learners striving to embody the kind of democracy we wish to see. I've learned so much from these dialogues and greatly appreciate your enduring commitment to reflective practice and civic learning.

**Peterson:** Higher education as a “civic innovator” is a conduit for a democratic citizenry. Kettering's network is to be commended for its tremendous work in engaging higher education partners around the world in this area of research. There are various stories to share regarding aligning the work of institutions with a democratic citizenry. This ongoing task calls attention to the innovations of varied institutions, faculty/staff, and networks in higher education wherein the commitment to civic engagement and democratic practice is evident.

The capacity for higher education to be a civic innovator through deliberative pedagogy is powerful and far reaching in fostering a more democratic culture and

preparing citizens for public life. I recognize the challenges in our democracy posed by polarization, opposi-

tion to extend beyond traditional practices, exclusion of diversity (diverse thought), and fear of experimentation, but as the ultimate optimist, I am encouraged by the dedication of Kettering's partners and innovators in higher education who are committed to “making democracy work as it should” by sharing their stories. I am certainly grateful to be a part of this network of innovators—thank you.

***Higher education as a  
“civic innovator” is a conduit  
for a democratic citizenry.***



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> James Fallows and Deborah Fallows, *Our Towns: A 100,000-Mile Journey into the Heart of America* (New York: Pantheon Books, 2018), 402.
- <sup>2</sup> *Ibid.*, 13.
- <sup>3</sup> David Mathews, *The Ecology of Democracy* (Dayton, OH: Kettering Foundation Press, 2014), xvi.

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# A LOSS OF PUBLIC PURPOSE

## How Will Higher Education Respond?

Alex Lovit

*In this essay, HEX coeditor Alex Lovit reviews For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America by Charles Dorn (Cornell University Press, 2017), A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendency of American Higher Education by David F. Labaree (University of Chicago Press, 2017), and What Do You Think, Mr. Ramirez?: The American Revolution in Education by Geoffrey Galt Harpham (University of Chicago Press, 2017).*

American colleges and universities are facing a crisis of public confidence. Citizens express dissatisfaction with the rising cost of tuition and distrust in the current leadership and structure of higher education institutions. For years, the Kettering Foundation has tracked this trend, noting that Americans increasingly see colleges as promoting the private interests of their graduates, rather than as providing public benefits for society as a whole.

Recently, higher education institutions themselves are coming to see declining public support as an existential threat, and scholars have sought to recapture and reinvigorate higher education's sense of public purpose. Recent historical accounts of American colleges and universities by Charles Dorn, David Labaree, and Geoffrey Galt Harpham all focus on how these institutions balance claims to provide private benefits to their graduates (such as technical skills and improved job prospects) and public benefits to American society and democracy (such as contributions to public knowledge and better informed voters).

The scholarship reviewed here chronicles American higher education's long history of promoting both the private (primarily financial) interests of students and the public (economic, social, and political) interests of the nation as a whole. It is encouraging to see prominent scholars of higher education embracing and articulating their institutions' role in promoting the public good. These authors' diagnosis of the challenges facing higher education is fundamentally similar to Kettering's. Collectively, these books are sincere, scholarly, and smart attempts to reckon with the legacies of American higher education and to articulate colleges' and universities' past and ongoing contributions to the public good of the nation.

However, it is hard to see how books like these—written by academics for an academic audience—can influence higher education's fading legitimacy

in the eyes of the public. Nor do they provide much of a road map for the future; as paeans to how higher education's history of serving the public good, these texts are fundamentally conservative. They are backward-looking, not forward-looking, arguments that academia is already serving the public, rather than calls for reform. This critique is not to question the accuracy of these accounts, nor to impugn the motives of faculty and administrators, but simply to point out, as Kettering Foundation president David Mathews has written, "Only the public can confer a public mission in a democracy."<sup>1</sup>

Nevertheless, there are elements of this literature that might interest readers of *Higher Education Exchange*. These accounts help to provide context

***"Only the public can confer a public mission in a democracy."***

and historical legitimacy to colleges' and universities' claims of promoting both private and public goods. This literature also helps to define a conver-

sation to which the Kettering Foundation as an organization, *Higher Education Exchange* as a periodical, and deliberative democracy as a concept, might usefully contribute. As higher education confronts its legacy and the current predicament of waning public support, these authors are imagining how to recapture colleges' and universities' public mission. Again, David Mathews has something to say about this: "The response from academe has to be more radical in the sense of getting at the roots of the problem. And the roots . . . have to do with how academe understands the role of citizens."<sup>2</sup> To rebuild public trust, higher education must be outward-facing, not inward-looking. And colleges and universities must invite input and participation from the public, in capacities beyond the usual list of student, alumnus, research subject, and so forth.

*For the Common Good* by Bowdoin education professor Charles Dorn, the most substantial and scholarly of these three texts, provides a comprehensive account of American higher education from the foundation of the republic to the 21st century. In 10 chapters, describing 11 institutions representative of trends and types of colleges over the course of American history, Dorn describes the evolution of higher education.

As the title of his book suggests, Dorn emphasizes the long-standing tradition of American colleges and universities promoting the general benefit of local communities and of American democracy. By dint of archival scholarship, Dorn demonstrates higher education institutions' sustained commitment

to public benefit, covering the major trends and types of institutions that define the history of American higher education. Early national colleges primarily sought to train public servants in genteel professions—most prominently ministry, law, and politics. In the late 19th century, agricultural and “normal” (teacher-training) public colleges and entrepreneurial private universities promised to lift students to success in applied fields. During the same period, new institutions were founded to educate women and minorities. After World War II, urban universities and community colleges rapidly expanded to serve burgeoning demand for post-secondary degrees.

Dorn provides convincing evidence that college faculty and administrators have perennially seen their work in terms of public benefit, but his emphasis on continuity of purpose and his focus on institutional origin stories somewhat obscures the shifting meaning of “common good” over time—from training civic leaders to producing research for public benefit to helping communities retain middle-class jobs. As his account grows closer to the present moment, Dorn notes a shift in “higher education’s central purpose toward providing a credential that helped men and women procure the wealth necessary to fully partake in the nation’s consumer culture,”<sup>3</sup> and that an “emphasis on educating for citizenship by prioritizing teaching gave way to the entrepreneurial priorities of generating wealth and increasing institutional prestige.”<sup>4</sup> But in this text, these remain tensions that distract from higher education’s guiding purpose of promoting the common good. The impressive breadth of Dorn’s historical research belies the simplicity of his argument.

David Labaree, professor of education at Stanford University, offers a more skeptical account of this history in *A Perfect Mess*. Where Dorn argues that American higher education has always been focused on the public good, Labaree takes a contrary position. “Over the long haul, Americans have understood higher education as a distinctly private good.”<sup>5</sup> In this view, most citizens see colleges’ primary purpose as advancing or cementing students’ socioeconomic position. Labaree sees the Cold War as an exception to this pattern, when the federal government invested heavily in higher education to reintegrate World War II veterans into the economy and to provide scientific research. Declines in state funding for public universities in recent decades, therefore, should be seen more as a reversion to the mean than as a betrayal of principles. Meanwhile, for most students, higher education remains the sole path to climbing the socioeconomic ladder or preserving positions of privilege, with the hierarchy of prestige among institutions allowing for both advancement and perpetuation. “The system lets us have things both ways: access and advantage,

opportunity and privilege, mobility and stasis.”<sup>6</sup> But in Labaree’s view, students of every description primarily see higher education as promoting their own private benefit.

This might seem a cynical take on higher education, but Labaree closes his book with a surprising paean to the “perfect mess” of the American system. Paradoxically, he argues, American higher education “continues to serve the public good—promoting economic growth, national power, cultural richness—

***“Universities are much less useful to society if they restrict themselves to the training of individuals for particular present-day jobs or to the production of research to solve current problems.”***

pursuing personal benefit.”<sup>7</sup>

Labaree is suspicious of efforts to reform higher education by introducing greater transparency or focusing strictly on job preparation. “Universities are much less useful to society if they restrict themselves to the training of individuals for particular

present-day jobs or to the production of research to solve current problems.”<sup>8</sup>

In the end, although Dorn and Labaree’s arguments appear diametrically opposed, neither author would deny that American higher education produces both private and public benefits. The debate between them is more about emphasis than about substance.

Geoffrey Galt Harpham, a fellow at Duke University and former director of the National Humanities Center, offers a historically and philosophically narrower argument for higher education’s contributions to enhancing civic skills. Harpham’s title, *What Do You Think, Mr. Ramirez?*, is based on the story of a Cuban refugee who enrolled in a community college, where a professor challenged him to analyze a Shakespeare sonnet with the titular question. For Ramirez, “It was the first time anybody had asked me that question,” and it ultimately helped to propel him to a career as a professor of comparative literature. Harpham argues that this question—prompting students in every type of college to develop their own analysis of difficult literary texts—is emblematic of American higher education’s contributions to democracy.

Harpham develops this argument in three historical narratives. The first (chronologically, though not in the organization of the book) is a story of the United States’ origins as a society of Protestants dedicated to biblical literacy

and as a nation whose principles were enshrined in written documents. The origins of American democracy were based in “a citizen’s right that is so deep-laid in the American self-understanding that contradiction of it is almost unimaginable: the right to read and interpret foundational texts such as the Constitution and the Declaration of Independence . . . and . . . to argue for one’s interpretations in court and in public.”<sup>10</sup>

Harpham’s other two narratives both describe trends in American universities following World War II: the rise of general education requirements as the core of college curriculum and the growing dominance of the New Criticism movement in English departments. The ideal of general education, as outlined in 1945 by a committee of Harvard professors in the book *General Education in a Free Society*, required all college students to study the humanities, and through them liberal values, including civic capacity, self-realization, and grounding in common cultural heritage. Meanwhile, within newly empowered English departments, close textual interpretation was becoming the dominant method of literary analysis. In the view of New Critics, “The future of democracy and all its individual citizens . . . depended . . . on the cultivation of the cognitively and politically crucial skills involved in the interpretation of poetry.”<sup>11</sup>

The confluence of these historical trends, Harpham argues, created the world in which college students were challenged to generate their own readings of complex texts. Requiring students to construe literature, in this argument, is training for civic skills of public interpretation and deliberation:

The interpretable text, which is at once open and accessible to the public . . . gives us an immediate and intimately familiar model for a concept that should be precious, the rights-bearing individual living in a lawful civil society, the kind of society . . . in which citizens in a democracy should expect to live.<sup>12</sup>

Harpham’s reasoning is convincing, and his daring yet fluid writing is testimony in itself for the study of the humanities. His analysis of the New Criticism and general education demonstrates that seemingly esoteric disciplinary and administrative discussions within higher education can be relevant to broader questions of these institutions’ role in society. Yet Harpham’s argument, like any that focuses solely on colleges’ educational mission, cannot fully account for higher education’s benefits to the public. After all, a college education has never been a prerequisite to the privileges of citizenship.

What is lacking from these accounts—and from academia, generally—is a concept of how higher education institutions might relate to citizens who aren’t students (or alumni or donors and the like). As long as the relationship

between student and institution remains central for how citizens and colleges understand each other, the private benefits that higher education supplies for graduates will be more obvious to all parties than any public benefits to the broader society or nation. The history of American colleges and universities,

***Colleges and universities, which are suffering from a lack of public trust, might gain from identifying the communities they serve and encouraging public deliberation about what citizens expect and desire from higher education.***

as reviewed in these books, also demonstrates that institutions have enjoyed the greatest public support when they served particular constituencies (such as local communities, demographic groups, and economic classes), rather than when they pursued a single model of scholarly prestige. Higher education cannot generate

a public purpose without the public. Colleges and universities, which are suffering from a lack of public trust, might gain from identifying the communities they serve and encouraging public deliberation about what citizens expect and desire from higher education.



## NOTES

- <sup>1</sup> David Mathews, “Democracy’s Challenge for Academe: From Public Good to Consumer Good and Back?” in *Democracy, Civic Engagement, and Citizenship in Higher Education*, William V. Flores and Katrina S. Rogers, eds. (New York: Lexington Books, forthcoming).
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.
- <sup>3</sup> Charles Dorn, *For the Common Good: A New History of Higher Education in America* (Ithaca, NY: Cornell University Press, 2017), 172.
- <sup>4</sup> Ibid., 198.
- <sup>5</sup> David F. Labaree, *A Perfect Mess: The Unlikely Ascendancy of American Higher Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 142.
- <sup>6</sup> Ibid., 177.
- <sup>7</sup> Ibid., 195.
- <sup>8</sup> Ibid., 189.
- <sup>9</sup> Geoffrey Galt Harpham, *What Do You Think, Mr. Ramirez?: The American Revolution in Education* (Chicago: University of Chicago Press, 2017), 3.
- <sup>10</sup> Ibid., 96.
- <sup>11</sup> Ibid., 132.
- <sup>12</sup> Ibid., 174.

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# A QUESTION OF CULTURE

David Mathews

My job every year is to write a piece for Kettering's three annual periodicals: *Connections*, *Kettering Review*, and *Higher Education Exchange*. Each piece is about a specific area of the foundation's research on democracy. This year, the focus is on nongovernmental institutions, which include foundations, civic organizations, and universities. The question behind this research is, What role should these institutions be playing in our democracy?

We are looking specifically at problems of democracy that are found in the relationship between the large, professionally run, hierarchical institutions, which we have called "Squares," and the smaller, often ad hoc civic associations that inhabit what we have described as the "wetlands" of the democratic ecosystem. We have called these organic associations of citizens "Blobs" because they are often loosely organized. There are significant difficulties in the relationship between the Blobs and Squares, even when they try to work together, and these difficulties weaken democracy.

One of the problems is that the large, professionally staffed institutions may not recognize the importance of the smaller associations of citizens, or Blobs, as the cellular building blocks of democratic life. Because some may only involve a handful of citizens and have none of the structure of a Square, they may seem insignificant. Another more serious difficulty is that even when the Blobs are recognized as valuable, Squares may dominate or colonize them in their efforts to help them—although they do so quite unintentionally. That "colonization" can turn the Blobs into little Squares, which robs them of their civic legitimacy and effectiveness.

Even though the Blobs are essential to democracy working as it should, Kettering has not been able to find any Squares that are fully able to prevent this colonization. The heart of the problem, as I will try to explain, is that what the culture of the Squares considers valuable is nearly the opposite of what the culture of the Blobs prizes. And the culture of the Squares dominates the relationship between the two, leading to colonization.

All three of this year's publications address this problem. In *Connections*, you will read about institutions that are experimenting with what it would mean to align their work with the work of Blobs. In the *Kettering Review*, you will find some thoughtful scholars exploring this problem, identifying both challenges and opportunities. And in the *Higher Education Exchange*, you will

hear from those in academe who have been wrestling with this problem in their own work.

Kettering discovered this problem when asked by some grantmaking foundations why their funding in certain communities was often ineffective in solving problems. The grantmakers knew that grassroots associations of citizens could be effective in combating community pathologies like drug abuse and crime. And the grantmakers wanted to help them, but something was going wrong. That was when Kettering discovered the colonization of the Blobs, which undermines their authenticity and legitimacy.

Edgar Cahn drew on our research in his book *No More Throw-Away People*. He then turned the foundation's findings on the Blobs and Squares mismatch into a clever animation, *The Parable of the Blobs and Squares*. Cahn noted that the Blobs have the energy and networks that can be useful in combating many community problems. Squares, on the other hand, know how to manage money and organize institutional action. They have equipment and professional expertise. The problem, as Cahn explained, is that "no matter how much the Squares promised to reach out in the community and get at the root causes of the problems, the Squares never got there." They couldn't "mobilize the energy of the community."<sup>1</sup>

The Squares try to meet this challenge by giving money to the Blobs. Naturally, this has meant that the Blobs have had to show financial accountability. Many Squares have also insisted on measurable results. "Grassroots groups," Cahn wrote, "were taught to develop mission statements and strategic plans in order to remain 'true' to mission. Neighborhood leaders were trained in how to be Board members, how to conduct 'proper' meetings, [and] how to write and amend by-laws."<sup>2</sup> The sad result was that the Blobs lost the very qualities that made them effective at the grass roots.

Blobs play an essential role in democratic life in a number of ways. They convert energy, even cynicism, into constructive action. They connect and engage people. They also promote values that are essential to a democratic culture, norms like cooperation and respect. Blobs are self-generating because human beings are social creatures. People are continuously building ties to one another and forming all kinds of Blobs, from neighborhood associations to street gangs. We ignore their importance—good or bad—at our peril.

## **A Way Forward**

The relevance of the problem of the relationship of Blobs to Squares today was impressed on us by one of our international residents, Tendai Murisa, from

Zimbabwe. Tendai is attempting to create a civic organization in his country that will strengthen democracy from the grass roots up. He is trying to create a Square that is Blob friendly. Despite criticism that his understanding of democracy is impossibly utopian, Tendai knows that there are many Blob-like associations in Africa to work with. He has in mind citizen groups that aren't registered officially yet already exist. They pool financial savings for economic development, form bereavement societies, protect the environment, and enhance village security. He wants to create an institution that will listen to and learn from what these Blobs are doing. At Kettering, Tendai is asking, How can both established NGOs as well as newly created ones be more supportive of Blobs without colonizing them?

What Tendai is asking resonates with similar questions we have heard from many other Squares. These days, major nongovernmental institutions—from academic ones to those in philanthropy—believe that democracy is in trouble and that they need to do more to be of assistance. But they aren't sure what they should do or how. Part of the difficulty is that they are all Squares and, as should be expected, they have Square-ish norms and cultures. This makes relating to the Blobs a challenge. The way Squares work is very different from the way the Blobs do democratic work. It is as though the two are gears on the same machine that don't mesh.

The solution for how to mesh the gears is elusive because the obvious answers don't work. It can't be for the Squares to become more "Blob-ish," because their cultural norms are appropriate for what they do. And it certainly isn't for the Blobs to become more "Square-ish." The culture of Squares properly values things such as efficiency, good management, and professional expertise. However, the culture of the Blobs has different values, which leads to different ways of working. Blobs are responsive to the intangibles that people hold dear, such as the feelings of security that come from having personal control over their future. They identify problems in terms that reflect what is deeply important to people, not in terms that professionals use. Blobs do their work mostly by connecting small groups of people rather than by building organizations. They foster collective decision-making that spurs myriad complementary actions.

As Elinor Ostrom demonstrated in her Nobel Prize-winning research, despite their differences, the Squares need the Blobs because even the largest and most powerful institutions—hospitals, school systems, governments, and NGOs—can't do their jobs as efficiently as they need to without reinforcement from what citizens contribute through the work they do in Blobs. The example I often use is in health care. Hospitals can care *for* you. But only people can

care *about* you. Blobs organize this caring and make it available in many ways to those who are ill.

## **Our First Response**

Kettering's first and perhaps natural impulse was to respond to questions like Tendai's by reviewing what our foundation, which is Square-ish, has done to relate to Blobs. We went through boxes of files to recover our history. Yet as soon as we started down this path, we stopped suddenly in our tracks. We stopped when we realized that Kettering would appear as a model to copy with best practices to emulate. Whatever we did, our experience (that is, our mistakes) taught us *not* to do that. Our reaction has to do with the importance of learning in a democracy. Following a model or copying best practices can be imitative, and that can inhibit learning. Coming to Kettering, Tendai was intrigued by the idea of not following a foreign model or copying best practices but finding his own answers. He was open to looking at the way democracy benefits from and grows through collective learning.

## **Experimenting and Learning**

Democracies depend on collective learning because they do not accept any authority about what should be done except for that of the citizenry itself, "We the People." This understanding of the citizenry as the ultimate authority in a democracy is evident in the roots of the word. The *demos* is the citizenry or a collective body, as in a village. And *cracy* is from *kratos*, which is supreme power, the kind Zeus has. This means that when there are problems, citizens have to "figure out" what to do themselves through collective decision-making in civic groups or representative assemblies. "Figuring out" means learning together, which involves more than copying or imitating.

On problems such as making the relationship between the Blobs and Squares mutually beneficial, answers have to come from collective learning, and that requires experimentation to see what might work. Finding ways to deal with the Blobs-Squares mismatch is going to take a lot of experimenting along with the ability to fail successfully; that is, the ability to learn from inevitable setbacks and failures.

## ***Realigning Ways of Working***

What might these experiments look like? When gears don't mesh, they have to be realigned. There need to be experiments to better align the work of

each so they won't clash as much and might even become mutually supportive. After all, there are things that Blobs can do that Squares can't. And vice versa.

As I mentioned before, the ways Squares work are not the same as the ways Blobs work—and for good reason. Yet, whether done by Blobs or Squares, most every kind of work involves carrying out certain tasks—identifying problems, making decisions about what needs to be done, finding the necessary resources, organizing the efforts, and evaluating or learning from what happens. Nothing exceptional about that. However, understanding the differences between the ways Blobs and Squares carry out these tasks is a necessary step toward realignment.

These are some of the differences. Citizens don't usually identify problems in the expert terms often used by the institutions we have called Squares. As I discussed, people name problems in terms of the things that humans hold dear—their family's safety, their freedom to act, the amount of control they will have. The options for actions to solve problems that citizens consider go beyond the things that can be done by institutions, such as the actions that families and civic associations can take. People make decisions about which options are best but not usually by methods institutions use, such as cost-benefit analysis. In the best cases, people decide by using the kind of deliberation that exercises the human faculty for judgment. The resources citizens draw on to act, such as personal talents and collective experiences, are different from institutional resources. Citizens also organize their work less bureaucratically than institutions do. And they evaluate results differently, using the things they hold valuable as standards rather than just quantitative measures.

Despite these differences, realigning ways of working to reinforce one another seems possible. Better alignment between institutions and the citizenry doesn't require massive reform or asking overworked professionals to take on an extra load of new duties. Either would be extremely difficult. Instead, realignment only asks that the professionals in institutions do what they usually do a bit differently, so their work reinforces what citizens working together in Blobs do.

It wouldn't be too difficult for Squares to take into consideration the names people use when they describe how problems affect what they consider valuable, and it shouldn't be hard to consider what citizens could do as actors. Neither would it seem impossible for Squares to take note of the way people go about making up their minds as they deliberate on controversial issues. Recognizing the resources Blobs use when they act—people's experiences and talents, their ability to form associations—isn't a big stretch. Respecting ways

of organizing that aren't centralized and bureaucratic? Why not? How about evaluating results using the things people hold dear as the standard? Why not do that along with quantitative measures? There are all kinds of opportunities for Blobs and Squares to mesh what they do.

## **The Greatest Challenge: A Matter of Institutional Culture**

If realigning ways of working is possible, despite requiring considerable experimentation, Tendai's question boils down to one of how to develop cultures in Squares that will support experimentation with Blobs. Tendai found an institutional cultural impasse in some of his early efforts to create an environment in which people could learn from their own experiences and those of others rather than following an approved development model. And he is certainly not alone.

### ***Using Democracy as a Focus for Experiments***

Democracy has many different meanings and, as an institution experiments with its role, the meaning may, and probably should, evolve and grow richer. This growth is learning. The evolving understanding of democracy makes settling on predetermined results difficult.

To complicate matters even more, it makes a difference whether institutions have in mind problems *in* or *within* a democratic country, which range from poverty to crime, or problems *of* a democracy, which prevent democracy from functioning because they are systemic. For example, citizens being unable to exercise power and make a difference in the political realm is a basic, fundamental problem of democracy. (That, by the way, is what many people say today: they can't make a significant difference.)

I am not suggesting that experiments by Squares in realignment be controlled by a rigid definition of democracy, but rather that returning time and time again to the question of what democracy is and what it requires is essential to experiments in realignment. An understanding of democracy, even an evolving one, gives consistence and coherence to the experiments; they can fit together and build on one another. And what the Squares learn from the experiments should expand and enrich their understanding of democracy.

One of the most important changes in the concept of democracy may have to do with the role of citizens. Squares are "built" to see citizens more as clients, people to be served, or consumers of services. Blobs, on the other hand, are "built" to see citizens as producers because they usually do most of the work.

A crucial issue in realignment is for Squares to find ways to treat citizens as producers in their own right and not just as the beneficiaries of the many things they provide. In the case of institutions of education, for example, the benefits include public service, publicly relevant research, and community engagement. These services are all commendable, yet they tend to treat citizens as objects of the good work of others rather than actors doing their own work. What would it mean for colleges and universities or other Squares to relate to citizens as producers? The answers aren't clear. Finding them will take a lot of experimenting.

Such experiments could change the Squares themselves in constructive ways and not just in how they relate to the Blobs. A similar cycle can begin by institutions asking themselves whether the way they are going about their work is consistent with the way they are coming to understand democracy. To really be effective in strengthening democracy from the grass roots up, institutions have to behave themselves in ways that promote the kind of democracy they advocate. This process of reflecting and adjusting ways of acting is a process of constant learning, which is consistent with the way a democracy makes positive changes. It is also one way to change institutional cultures.

### ***Being Realistic about the Obstacles***

As I have acknowledged, the dominant culture in a Square admirably suits what Squares do: produce, solve problems, provide services. The usual expectations of Squares aren't unreasonable. There are good reasons to have goals, timetables, and definite outcomes. Squares also speak admiringly of being innovative, taking reasonable risk, and "thinking outside the box." So, what I have just stated could be written off as reformulations of what Squares already do. But that would minimize the real obstacles to realigning with Blobs.

Blob-ishness can be, and often is, very off-putting to Squares. Blobs have purposes but not necessarily detailed plans and measurable goals. A bottom line or tangible outcome may be elusive. There may be no goal line to mark completion of an initiative or even to mark progress. What appears to be an endless journey can be maddening to Squares.

Even experimenting and learning from it can be troubling for Squares. In some institutions, experimenting may be impossible because their professionals don't have permission to fail, as one school superintendent sadly told us. Furthermore, experiments dealing with the systemic problems of democracy don't suddenly, or perhaps ever, yield to instant breakthroughs. It is necessary to play the long game. Dealing with such inevitabilities requires patience, tol-

erance for ambiguity, and acceptance of unresolvable tensions. Few of these may be valued norms in Square-ish cultures.

### **What About Tendai's Question and the Blobs-Squares Mismatch?**

We are hoping to find others who share a concern about the Blobs-Squares mismatch. Because Kettering's research is done with, not on, others, our first priority is always to find allies. Writing this piece for our publications is one way we hope to find them.

One thing does seem clear, looking ahead. Despite the obstacles, building and perpetuating institutional cultures that support democratic experimentation is crucial, particularly at a time when democracies and hope-to-be democracies around the world are facing more systemic problems than they have since World War II. Tendai's question couldn't be more on target, the challenge of the Blobs and Squares couldn't be more relevant, and a culture that fosters experimentation and learning couldn't be more valuable.



#### **NOTES**

- <sup>1</sup> Edgar S. Cahn, *No More Throw-Away People: The Co-Production Imperative*, 2nd ed. (Washington, DC: Essential Books, 2004): 83. The video, *The Parable of the Blobs and Squares*, animation by Trevor Hardy, can be accessed at <https://vimeo.com/42332617>.
- <sup>2</sup> Ibid.

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