WELCOME TO THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

by David Mathews
ABOUT THE KETTERING FOUNDATION

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

ABOUT THE COUSINS RESEARCH GROUP

The Cousins Research Group is one of the internal research divisions of the Kettering Foundation. Named for Norman Cousins, a leading American journalist and Kettering Foundation board member from 1967 to 1987, the group synthesizes different lines of study into books and articles and also proposes new lines of inquiry. The central focus for the group, as for the foundation, is on the role that citizens play in a democracy. Within the Cousins Research Group, there are a number of “departments.” One group looks at the effect of federal policy on citizens, communities, and democracy itself, with an eye for implications on the relationship between citizens and government today. Another subset, the political anthropology and etymology group, examines the origins of human history for clues to how human beings collectively make decisions. A core group is also asked to prepare our research for publication. This group regularly writes for Kettering’s periodicals, Connections, the Kettering Review, and the Higher Education Exchange, as well as for other publications.

EDITORS: Lisa Boone-Berry, Laura Carlson, and Paloma Dallas
COPY EDITOR: Lisa Boone-Berry
RESEARCH: Sherri Goudy and Collette McDonough
DESIGN AND PRODUCTION: Laura Halsey

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Welcome! In hopes of getting people who are new to the foundation off to a fast start, we have prepared some briefing materials for you. Those who have been at Kettering for a while have put together information that they believe is important to know. Several have also identified key insights from Kettering Foundation publications and some of the sources that we draw from. I’m contributing this report, which describes what the foundation does and how it works.

This report begins with a bit of history to show the importance of a certain kind of research, the kind inventors do. It then identifies our continuing challenges. For example, one challenge is bringing different lines of research together so that they can have a greater impact.

“Making democracy work as it should” has become our unifying objective, and from that point the report divides into two sections. The first is about our evolving understanding of democracy and its implications for working with others. The second explains how this understanding of democracy has shaped the way the foundation operates internally.

The story that I share is based on nearly 50 years of experience as a trustee and president. Yet it isn’t the only story you will hear. That’s good. My colleagues have different experiences, which lead to different interpretations of what Kettering does.

Because this report is intended to be read by people coming to the foundation in a future that I can’t predict, and because whatever is happening around the foundation in years ahead will influence how these pages are interpreted, I should acknowledge what is happening now as I write. Most of what you will read was drafted before 2020, but as the final draft was being completed, the United States was hit by three crises: one in health (a pandemic), another in the economy as a result of the pandemic, and a third in race relations. All of this came on top of a crisis in democracy that made it difficult to respond effectively to the three other crises. The crisis in democracy has been growing for decades and is deeply entrenched.
Kettering is a research foundation, not a grantmaker, but what we are trying to learn doesn’t require a white coat or a long list of degrees. It does require careful listening, observing, and finding common patterns in different situations. We don’t do academic research like social scientists. Our job is to know something useful, but Kettering isn’t a service organization. What we contribute to knowing through our research is what we contribute to doing.

Kettering may appear to be like organizations that you are familiar with, particularly if you have an academic background. However, appearances can be deceiving. The foundation is different for reasons I will explain later. The words we use will seem familiar, yet the definitions won’t be the same as those typically used. I suggest that you watch out especially for nuances: they are used to make subtle but critical distinctions.

Charles Kettering in his workshop, 1912
A LEGACY OF DISCOVERY, INVENTION, AND RIGOROUS RESEARCH

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

I never met these early inventors, yet they were, in a sense, our founders, whether or not they signed the foundation’s articles of incorporation. I was privileged to know some of their successors who were on the Kettering board in the 1970s when I joined it. They weren’t parochial, but rather were part of a new, nationally focused class of Americans.

These people left the foundation great legacies. One of the most important was that they prized inventiveness and conducted rigorous research. Their research was the practical kind that inventors do; it fostered useful discoveries. Yet while committed to immediate, practical ends (airplanes, light bulbs, and so on), these inventors looked behind symptoms to locate the root causes of problems—the problems behind the problems. The foundation today draws heavily from this legacy.

Two types of inventions: on the left, Charles Kettering’s diagram of a self-starter for an automobile; on the right, a political invention—a National Issues Forums issue guide.

Health Care

How Can We Bring Costs Down While Getting the Care We Need?
Kettering Moves into the World

I believe the Kettering Foundation, as it is now, began with the presidency of Robert Chollar (1971-1981). Bob took the foundation out into the world. He collaborated with Norman Cousins, editor of the *Saturday Review*, in the Dartmouth Conferences with the Soviet Union.¹ And, in 1972, he initiated what has evolved into a nearly half-century exchange with China.

Bob had a very helpful board, which included Norman as well as public opinion expert George Gallup. Later, they were joined by other innovators from different fields; for example, Dan Yankelovich (survey research), Madeline McWhinney (business/banking), Lisle Carter (law/government), and Lawrence (Larry) Cremin (American history). They all had in common a long-term perspective and patience with experimentation.

There is one more thing you should know about Kettering board members: You may meet some of them while doing your research. That doesn’t usually happen in other foundations. But when trustees help with the studies, they do so as members of research teams, not as board members. That is done to prevent any appearance of self-dealing. The line between a research role and the role of a board member has been strictly observed. Being able to draw on the experience of trustees has been invaluable, and the arrangement has made for a close relationship between the foundation and its board.

Searching for a Unifying Objective

In the Chollar era, the foundation’s research was organized into three divisions: science, conducted at the Kettering Research Laboratory in Yellow Springs, Ohio; schools, which was subcontracted to the Institute for Development of Educational Activities (IDEA) and researcher and scholar John Goodlad; and urban government. Bob wanted to bring those pieces together, so they wouldn’t be just a collection of glorified bits and pieces. Doing that became a major objective in the 1980s. And, as I said, it has proved to be a continuing challenge.

Democracy Becomes the Central Focus

A unifying theme did emerge but not immediately. At first, we thought that it would be “serving the public.” Unfortunately, the word *public* didn’t have a rich history to draw on. So, gradually, Kettering substituted a term that did—the “*democratic public*.” In time, “making democracy work as it should” would become
the focus for all the research. The *demo-* in *democracy* refers to “the public” or, originally, the citizenry of a village. So the focus on the public didn’t disappear; it remained as the citizenry, the *demos*.

**AN EVOLVING UNDERSTANDING**

Kettering’s concept of democracy has continued to evolve. The other half of the word, *-cracy*, or *kratos* in the original Greek, means “sovereign power.” This is power understood as the ability to act, to produce something. To enrich its understanding, the foundation went back to the origins of politics by drawing from paleopolitical anthropology. That literature suggests that democracy is actually much older than the word itself. It may be based on lessons learned by our earliest ancestors from their primary occupation—survival. The first lesson was that survival depends on cooperation. (We saw this lesson in action while dealing with the coronavirus pandemic.) Cooperative, collective effort made us more secure from ever-present dangers. Also, to survive when food was scarce, humans needed to be free to forage for anything edible. And when they combined efforts to forage and hunt, the food had to be shared equitably or else people who did not receive their share of the bounty would leave the tribe. That would make the group weaker and less secure.

It isn’t difficult to see how these lessons became the basis for democratic values like justice and freedom. Along with them came a desire for the control needed to secure the things people considered most valuable for survival.

*The Kettering Foundation’s understanding of the invention of politics, represented graphically*
Kettering has come to understand democracy at its most basic as collective decision-making for collective action, which gives people a measure of control. And from this excursion into the past, we also came to realize that people are indeed what they are sometimes called, political animals. Politics isn’t “out there”; it’s in us. We couldn’t survive without politics. The central question is how we behave politically. There have been many answers, some inspiring, some appalling.

For Kettering, understanding democracy has been, and still is, a journey. As the foundation continues to learn, its understanding of democracy continues to deepen.

THE PROBLEMS BEHIND THE PROBLEMS OF DEMOCRACY ITSELF

Democratic countries are troubled by many difficulties, and a number of these, like a pandemic, also threaten countries that aren’t democratic. Other problems lie underneath. These aren’t just problems in a country, they are problems of democracy itself.

So as not to lessen its effectiveness by trying to address all problems, the foundation has, consistent with its legacy, concentrated on the problems behind the problems, the systemic malfunctions that weaken a democracy. These are malfunctions in the mechanism of democracy that prevent it from working as it should.

All of the foundation’s research is focused on three problems behind the problems. Democracy depends on people who are engaged in carrying out the responsibilities of self-rule. A democratic system malfunctions when people make hasty, impulsive decisions about their future rather than exercising good judgment. The first research question is, How do people become engaged as citizens and make sound decisions about their future? Second, citizens must also work together, despite their differences, to serve the common good. That begins with joining together to make their communities fit places to live, work, and raise families. If communities fail, democracies fail; they are the homes of democracy. In our research, we try to learn how people can come together to work, even if they aren’t in full agreement. The third of the problems behind the problems are those that impair the relationship between the public and the institutions created to serve the public (governments, schools, and others, including nonprofits). People lose confidence in institutions and the institutions lose confidence in the people. This mutual distrust deprives institutions of the things only citizens can produce. The foundation tries to find out what could begin to improve this troubled relationship. So, Kettering’s concept of democracy is citizen centered. You will find more on this concept in other Kettering publications.
**THE WORK OF DEMOCRACY IS WORK**

Given the centrality of the citizenry, it is troubling when people today feel that they don’t have the power to make a difference in our political system. Yet, most people don’t want to be pushed to the sidelines. So Kettering looks for things people can do that are self-empowering. A Kettering senior associate, Harry Boyte, suggested that we think of what citizens do as work. Working together empowers us. This led to the insight that the “work of democracy” is, in fact, just that—work. (This highlights the critical role that associates and deputies like Harry play in our research.) The things that people produce by working together are powerful in their own right, and they generate a sense of ownership as well as a sense of being able to make a difference.

Using this insight, Kettering began to break down the work that citizens must do into more detailed “practices,” a word used to distinguish what we were finding from “techniques.” Practices are intrinsic; techniques are merely instrumental. That which is intrinsic belongs to us naturally. It is part of who we are. Practices show who we are and demonstrate our power. That is why we own what we make by using our intrinsic power in a way we can’t own what others make or do for us. This insight was captured in the lyrics of a song, “We are the ones we’ve been waiting for.” At Kettering, this insight is considered essential to a strong democracy. And for that reason, practices became the primary focus in the foundation’s study of communities.

**Naming, Framing, and Deliberative Decision-Making.** Giving a name to a problem to be solved (naming) and creating a framework of action options to consider (framing) are necessary in any kind of work. Practices are self-empowering when citizens name their problems in a way that anyone can understand what is at stake (what is deeply valuable). That engages people. They aren’t apathetic about what they hold dear. Naming and framing an issue puts a handle on an otherwise unmanageable problem.

The “body politic” shows how the six democratic practices are related.

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1. Naming Things Valuable
2. Framing Issues for Decision-Making
3. Deciding Deliberatively
4. Identifying and Deploying Resources
5. Organizing Action
6. Evaluating
You can find a detailed account of these democratic practices in other Kettering publications. Look especially at what has been written about democratic decision-making, also called public deliberation. Naming problems and identifying options for action are major parts of deliberative decision-making. They set the stage for weighing possible options against what is deeply valuable to human beings. These are the things that humans learned were essential to their survival. I am elaborating on what we mean by deliberation because it is often confused with civil, informed discussion. (The distinction between discussion and deliberation is one of the nuances I mentioned earlier.) Discussion is fine, yet it isn’t as likely to produce sound judgments or to combat the divisiveness that inhibits the work of citizens.³

Sound public judgment is essential when we realize something is wrong, yet there is no agreement about what should be done. While people all hold dear the things essential to surviving, they live in different circumstances and have different priorities, which often conflict. Many times, this tension leads to impulsive behavior and hasty reactions. Deliberative decision-making moves people toward more shared and reflective judgment. They face the tensions among priorities and begin to work through them, not to the point of full agreement but to the point that they recognize the possible solutions they can and can’t live with. The outcome is seeing what is and isn’t acceptable. That can show a way forward, even when there is no consensus.

Moving from hasty reactions to more shared and reflective judgment by deliberating isn’t a special technique. It is simply exercising the human faculty for judgment. Although we don’t always use this faculty, it is hardwired into our brains. There is a word for deliberation in every ancient language we have seen, going back to Sanskrit.
Identifying Resources, Organizing Complementary Action, and Evaluating by Learning. Working together effectively depends on the deciding together that produces sound judgment. (Here I should acknowledge that deliberation only increases the chances that the results will be sound. It is no guarantee.) The work, however, doesn’t end with decision-making. The practices continue as citizens identify the resources they have access to and can use. Then citizens can use their powers for self-organizing to combine their actions in complementary or mutually reinforcing ways. They don’t have to rely on centralized, bureaucratic control. Perhaps the most important practice in working together is learning together all along the way. People may decide to or be required to use outside, quantitative processes of evaluation, but they don’t have to be entirely dependent on them.

I want to emphasize the phrase I just used—“all along the way”—because the practices I am talking about aren’t sequential, independent steps in a process as might be imagined. Democratic practices are integrated in democratic work. For instance, a great deal of the decision-making occurs in the process of acting, not just in advance of it, and learning happens every step of the way.

DEMOCRACY: AN ECOSYSTEM

As Kettering’s understanding of democracy took on more detail, we realized that the different elements we were seeing were interconnected in a political ecosystem. That system has two interdependent parts.

Civic Wetlands. Civic, or citizen, democracy serves as the wetlands, the breeding grounds for political society. These wetlands teem with small associations, which another Kettering senior associate, John McKnight, sees as the primal life forms of democracy. The wetlands are where public goods are produced by citizens, goods that Nobel Prize-winner Elinor Ostrom has shown are essential to the effectiveness of even the largest and most professional institutions.
**Governing Institutions.** Outside the wetlands are institutions that play other essential roles. These include schools, hospitals, religious bodies, and the many agencies of governments—local, state, and national. These structures depend on what a vibrant civic wetlands provides.

**The Whole System.** You will often hear us say that it is essential to understand the whole of democracy, not just the parts, like voting and passing laws, important as they are. That is why the next section discusses the necessary integration of different lines of research. The importance of this integration in how we go about our research reflects our understanding of democracy as a whole, interrelated ecological system.

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"The Parable of the Blobs and Squares" is a clever animated video about how grassroots associations can be harmed unintentionally by larger institutions trying to help them. It can be viewed at [https://www.kettering.org/blogs/parable-blobs-and-squares](https://www.kettering.org/blogs/parable-blobs-and-squares).

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**FROM SEPARATE DIVISIONS TO A MATRĚŠKA DOLL**

The foundation’s research, which was once carried out in three separate divisions, was originally organized in a way consistent with how most institutions are structured. However, separate divisions can easily become silos, making it difficult to see relationships among areas in the study of democracy. Silos block the view of a whole system. Research that was done to understand democracy, we came to see, could only be accomplished by combining separate lines of research into an integrated whole. That combination would become another continuing challenge as the research evolved. One way of meeting this challenge was to move program officers periodically from one area of research to another. That helped avoid the silos and gave researchers a better opportunity to see the whole of democracy.

Another way of encouraging integration was to broaden the focus in areas of research. An example of this is the way the study of schooling expanded into the study of education (education “writ large,” as Larry Cremin would say). From there, the study of education grew to looking at the role of the public in education and, from there, to the role of communities. Schools remained important, yet the boundaries were
extended. The research then expanded further to consider communities in all of their roles, not only in education but also in areas like health, welfare, and economic development.

All these institutions are now studied in their relationship to communities and citizens, just as citizens are studied in relation to communities and communities in relation to citizens. This combination of the research produced something like a set of Russian matrëška dolls, nesting one inside the other.

**INTEGRATING LINES OF RESEARCH**

You will hear repeated conversations at the foundation about the need to find more connections between various lines of research. Although sometimes called “collaboration,” I now think that the *integration* of our research is a more accurate term for what needs to happen.

In designing integrative meetings, the foundation draws on a concept of collective learning and discovery, which is spelled out in detail in *Together: Building Better, Stronger Communities*. Learning about problems with others who have different experiences can shine a light on possibilities for collaboration and integration. And some of our most productive studies have been about the interconnections among the various things that citizens, communities, and institutions are doing.

You’ll be in meetings intended to find these interrelations, which can’t be shown by researchers simply reporting on what they are doing or what is happening in the particular
organizations or professions they are working with. Integration begins by describing the problem we want to focus on and then asking ourselves what we know or need to know about the problem. Without clarity about purposes, our discussions would shift to administrative matters and research would suffer. No one wants that to happen.

It isn’t the case, however, that these research conversations should only be about fundamental, systemic malfunctions like those of democracy itself. Those problems fall into three major categories having to do with citizens, communities, and institutions. The categories are useful for explaining what we mean by democracy. But they are very broad. Using them, Kettering has to focus on specific researchable questions that have practical applications. For example, people unable or unwilling to do the things citizens must do in a democracy is a systemic malfunction. It stops democracy from working. However, it is too big and amorphous for coherent research. What is possible is a study like that of the political socialization of young people, which can shed light on how people come to understand their role as citizens. Another study could ask the same question about adults. And these are only two of the researchable questions in this category.

WORKING WITH OTHERS

This section explains how Kettering’s evolving understanding of democracy influences the way the foundation relates to others. The foundation employs fewer than 50 people full time and, of that number, only about 35 are directly involved in research. However, the work the foundation does reaches throughout the United States. And organizations in more than 100 countries around the world draw on our studies. That outreach would be impossible even if all 35 researchers were trying to respond to citizens across the globe. The foundation’s outreach is possible because we work with intermediaries, organizations that do deal directly with citizens. These organizations also have the credibility and legitimacy that an outside agency like Kettering does not. Intermediaries have ranged from NAACP chapters to local libraries, to schools, to religious institutions. Kettering research goes out through them when they find it serves their objectives.

PART II. HOW THE KETTERING FOUNDATION OPERATES
DEMOCRATIC CHANGE AND LEARNING

One of the most powerful influences that Kettering’s understanding of democracy has had on the way the foundation functions has come from realizing how democracies make changes. Without a supreme authority to dictate what should be done, people have to rely on their collective judgments about what those changes should be. That is especially true when questions about the future have more than one plausible answer. Expert information can help, but good judgment is still essential. Deliberation is important because it is a form of collective learning used in collective action. The ancient Greeks described what we call deliberation as the talk we use to teach ourselves before we act.8

While our evolving understanding of democracy has been the principal influence on the way the foundation functions, Kettering has never imagined that it, itself, is a democracy. It is a working body of some people for some purposes, not all people for all purposes. Nonetheless, the foundation can’t operate in a way that disregards what it is learning about democracy. And if the way Kettering does its work resonates with the spirit of democracy, that resonance can contribute to a better understanding of democracy.

To deliberate is to carefully weigh possible civic actions, laws, or policies against the various things that people hold dear in order to settle on a direction to follow or purpose to pursue.
RESEARCH: WITH, NOT ON OR FOR

One of the first ways that seeing democratic change as learning influenced the foundation’s research was in moving away from doing research on others. Research is usually done on something or somebody. That is justified under certain conditions. Research is also done for some group or some cause. That can be beneficial. Kettering, however, only does research with others. That’s because, in a democracy, citizens should not be just the objects of the actions of others. Citizens must be treated as agents themselves.

ALLIES NOT PARTNERS

This emphasis on with, however, can be misleading. Research with others may imply a partnership, as in the joint ownership of a single business. Kettering shares what it is learning with a worldwide host of institutions, professionals, associations, and communities. Few of them are in the research business like Kettering. So, there is no one “business” owned in common. The other groups aren’t partners; they are more like allies or “fellow travelers.” The foundation has to recognize that it doesn’t know much about their businesses and has to structure its relationships with allies keeping that limitation in mind. We have allies in fields from government to education and from philanthropy to journalism. But we aren’t authorities in any of those areas.

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

National Issues Forums. One of the first alliances Kettering made was with the network of local National Issues Forums (NIF). These forums are organized by civic, educational, and religious organizations—even prisons—across the country. Later, the National Issues Forums Institute (NIFI) was founded to assist these sponsors.

National Issues Forums are sponsored by civic, educational, and religious organizations across the country.
Kettering’s alliance with NIFI was, and still is, based on a division of duties, with each doing what it is best able to do—with benefits to both organizations. Kettering performs research, which is used in preparing issue guides for the forums, and it analyzes the results. This analysis of how people make up their minds on contentious issues draws on what happens in the deliberative forums that are organized by those in the NIF network. For its part, NIFI recruits forum sponsors and builds networks among them.

Getting to know forum sponsors has given the foundation one of its most direct contacts with the citizenry. That has contributed significantly to Kettering’s research. For example, Kettering learned that most people aren’t interested in just discussing issues; they also want to take action. This discovery came from a forum in 1997 on how to counter the use of illegal drugs. The principal options given in the issue guide were for the government to stop drugs at the border or for professionals to treat people with addictions. Participants complained, however, that these options ignored the importance of what families, religious institutions, and communities could do about drug abuse. From that point on, the issue guides changed. Citizens and communities were recognized as necessary actors. This lesson underscored the insight that, for a democracy to be strong, citizens have to be actors themselves, not just the objects of the actions of others. This is another way of saying that citizens have to be producers.

The collaborative relationship between Kettering and the National Issues Forums taught the foundation another valuable lesson. Kettering was once charged with being an elite group that, by using its research in NIF issue guides, was telling the American people which issues were important and what to think about them. To guard against that misperception, neither the foundation nor NIFI selects the issues. That is the responsibility of the local organizations holding forums.

Kettering has many other allies, ranging from the North American Association for Environmental Education and Public Agenda, to the European Union’s Association for Local Democracy and the Sustained Dialogue Institute. Also on the list are numerous civic and community outreach organizations, institutes in colleges and universities, and other organizations.
**A WAGON TRAIN**

All of these allies have been in a relationship with the foundation somewhat like that among the settlers going to the American West in wagon trains. Each party was responsible for its own wagon, but they traveled together for mutual benefit. (As a newcomer, one of the important contributions you can make is to build alliances of this sort with those who are likely, for their own reasons, to be doing the kind of projects that Kettering needs to learn from in order to better understand how democracy should work.)

**NETWORKING**

Many of Kettering’s allies are connected through their own associations and networks. Relating to these networks has been both a special challenge and an opportunity. In order to be in tune with how networks function best, the foundation learned it had to stay out of the center as an authoritative figure with all the answers. As I said earlier, not being familiar with the different circumstances of the organizations in the network, the foundation couldn’t possibly tell them what to do. (When organizations had such expectations, some understandably became quite annoyed with Kettering when it proved unable to deliver what appeared to have been promised.)

What the foundation hopes to create with networks is a mutually beneficial relationship among independent parties. That is what the wagon train metaphor proposes.
A MULTINATIONAL PERSPECTIVE

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

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

The Kettering Foundation is positioned as a node in many networks rather than as a hub or central point of any network.
Citizen/Supplemental Diplomacy. The foundation’s perspective on the world has been especially enriched by “sustained dialogues” with groups in other countries, going back to the Dartmouth Conferences with Russia in the Soviet era. That initiative was followed by the research exchange with China. And an exchange with Cuba got its start in the 1990s. Today, Kettering contributes its research on public thinking in America to these exchanges, which are intended to increase mutual understanding with countries whose governments are often in conflict with the US government.

These exchanges are all joint ventures between Kettering and one or more organizations in each of the three countries. Meetings are held alternatively in the United States and the other country. The host country proposes a meeting agenda, and each side pays its own expenses. As you can see, these joint ventures are unlike the domestic alliances in this country. You can find more information about this work in Kettering publications and in our archives.

AN EXPERIMENT STUDYING EXPERIMENTS

Allies join with the foundation because of their own self-interest, and those interests cause them to launch new initiatives. Kettering has a different focus, which is on research to better understand democracy. When the initiatives of other organizations promise to shed more light on democracy, the foundation may propose an alliance in which each party pursues different objectives but agrees to share information.

JOINT LEARNING AGREEMENTS

The sharing of information is organized through a joint learning agreement. In this agreement, each party spells out what it wants to accomplish. Kettering asks a few simple questions it hopes to answer, being careful not to influence the allied organization. The questions are: What was the problem your organization wanted to combat? Why was that a problem? What did you do? What did you learn as a result (about your organization and about the problem)?

Kettering, for its part in the exchange, agrees to provide the allied party with what it is learning about democracy. Because the foundation isn’t a grantmaker, it can’t pay the allied organization to do something; but it does provide funds to prepare the response to its questions. These
reports must come from the allied organization itself, not an outside evaluator. Only the allied organization can say what it learned.

An example: A number of libraries in the US and other countries have been interested in Kettering’s research on communities. Many libraries are community based and see part of their mission as strengthening the places where they are located. Democracy may or may not be explicit in their mission statements. That’s not necessary to work with the foundation. Libraries are ideal for learning about experiments to encourage public deliberations on local issues. From the foundation’s perspective, community forums in libraries are “experiments” in deliberative democracy. However, for the libraries, these “experiments” are programs.

A learning exchange that included librarians and journalists working in communities in the United States and Colombia.

LEARNING EXCHANGES

As the foundation began to draw on what our allies were learning, we discovered that the learning went deeper and grew richer when several different kinds of organizations, but with similar concerns, were in the same meeting. These organizations didn’t need to be in the same field. It was better if they weren’t. There was something about the chemistry in the integrated gatherings that was different from gatherings of professionals from the same field. Kettering also found that the act of reporting itself was more valuable than just sharing information. And for different experiences from different actors to be shared, the meetings had to have a central focus on one of the systemic malfunctions of democracy. That made the exchange coherent even though the
participants weren’t from the same profession or organization. When there was a diversity of experiences in the room, everyone learned more. There was less shoptalk and fewer accounts of successes. Participants talked about what went wrong and what they were struggling with. They were learning and so was Kettering.

**A METHODOLOGY**

As Kettering found out more about how exchanges work best, something like a research methodology developed. The foundation also learned a lot about exchanges from years of experience observing deliberative forums. When forum participants were in a setting where different points of view were encouraged, the experiences of others might not alter anyone’s opinion, yet they could encourage people to modify the way they understood a problem. Participants became more aware of an issue’s complexity. And they became less closed-minded about opinions other than their own. The different experiences of others were the catalyst; people developed what philosophers called an “expanded mentality.” From this enlarged perspective, citizens were more likely to discover possibilities for combating problems that weren’t apparent before. (At the foundation, we thought that a similar process might promote learning in our exchanges.)

**FINDING YOUR OWN ANSWERS**

Learning exchanges don’t depend on the foundation giving authoritative answers to questions, offering models to emulate, or prescribing best practices to follow. Although Kettering may have relevant insights to share as appropriate, the goal of the exchanges is for everyone to learn how to find their own answers. Kettering tries to contribute to that discovery, but we do so not as an instructional institution or a service provider, but rather as an incubator for democratic learning.

To sum up, the reason that learning exchanges became one of the primary modes of operation at Kettering is because the different experiences of those involved in these exchanges allow everyone (including the foundation) an opportunity to see their problems and themselves in a different light. And that light shines on the path to innovation.

**EVALUATING IMPACT**

The surest evidence of whether allied institutions, community organizations, and citizens have benefitted from their association with the foundation is whether they move into a learning mode. If they do, the chances are good that inevitable failures won’t stop them from making progress. They will profit from their mistakes and continue to move forward as long as they are learning. And whether others are learning is how Kettering evaluates its work.
**WORKING WITH ONE ANOTHER**

Understandably, people new to the foundation want to know about all the meetings going on, either in person at the 200 Commons Road campus or online. So, I’ll turn now to the internal meetings of program officers, associates, deputies, research assistants, and multinational residents. That is where the learning exchanges are designed and the research is launched.

**WHERE THE SAUSAGE IS MADE**

When I was searching around for a title for this discussion of how Kettering works, I thought of the messy business of making sausage. (I once worked in my uncle’s butcher shop, so I know what the process is like.) The obvious choice for this heading was “Workgroups and Collaboratives,” but that seemed rather dull. So, I went with sausage-making.

**Workgroups.** Joint learning agreements and the learning exchanges don’t just happen. At Kettering, a small group has to move from a broad problem of democracy to a researchable subject. This group also has to find potential allies, work out a mutually beneficial learning agreement, and design an exchange. That is our equivalent of making sausage. And it is a creative or inventive process because there is little else like it to copy. Far more is required than the usual planning and administration.

Some examples may help. A workgroup once designed a learning exchange within a mixed group of professionals from different fields who were telling one another about the declining public trust they were encountering and how they were responding. It suddenly became obvious that they were dealing with the same problem and using the same defensive strategy, which wasn’t working. The workgroup saw a common pattern in conversations with different professionals and wanted to see whether more mixed groups (like a Noah’s Ark) would lead to more useful insights. Not all of the exchange designs worked. However, one did. It brought together academics with foundation leaders and journalists. It is still going on. So now we have another question: What is making the difference?

**STAYING THE COURSE, KEEPING ON TRACK**

Charles Kettering once said that research is just a welcoming attitude toward change. And the foundation today has to constantly update its research reports to keep up with changes in what it is finding. However, the main objective of the research remains the same—the well-being of democracy. Workgroups are responsible for that continuity because it adds value to the research. Recently, Kettering issued a report on how citizens made decisions about the health-care system. It was able to draw on 40 years of
studies to give a complete picture. As of 2020, research on nongovernmental diplomacy, like the Dartmouth Conferences with Russia, goes back 60 years; with China, 48 years; and Cuba, 25 years. Those contributions would be impossible if the objective of Kettering research was constantly changing.

In your work at the foundation, it’s a good idea to check in the archives to see what may have already happened in the research on a problem before you begin your study. For example, an alliance with USA TODAY to improve their coverage of the 2020 election was possible, in part, because of research on the public and the media done with, not for, journalists years earlier.

**CONNECTING THE PIECES**

The task of combining various lines of research is now, and has always been, critical. That is why I’ve mentioned it several times. Keeping an eye open for connections to other lines of research has to be part of what workgroups do. And all the workgroups have to come together regularly to share what they are learning.

Researchers at the foundation can find a wealth of information about past Kettering research in the archives and the KIMS database.
Designing research, including constructing learning exchanges, seems to be done best by small workgroups, yet the research would fall into isolated silos without time spent on synthesizing what is being learned. As I have emphasized, because the foundation sees democracy as an ecosystem, the research has to account for how the whole of democracy functions. The foundation can’t just describe the parts. This means everyone working at the foundation has to know something about what everyone else is doing. That is the reason program officers rotate through the workgroups.

The monthly Dayton Days general session and a meeting the following morning are set aside for integrating different lines of research. That is also the mission of a monthly “collaborative” day of meetings.

**DISTRACTIONS**

From time to time, the foundation finds itself drifting off track. That is natural. Some of the distractions are very enticing. We all have to be on the alert for them because they can be very compelling.

**Deadly Sirens.** From time to time, we have stopped what we were doing and made lists of these distractions (called “deadly sirens”). Something like the force of gravity seems to pull anything novel back to established norms. Kettering isn’t immune.

One of the distractions is the temptation to operate bureaucratically, which promises to save time and promote efficiency. Bureaucracies have existed since the first cities were founded because they provide structure and order with rules and policies. These structures, however, can inhibit experimentation and innovation. Kettering is a small enough organization that, in most cases, it can follow whatever we think makes common sense.

Another distraction is trying to be helpful. What’s wrong with being helpful? Actually, nothing. However, there are different ways of being helpful. People coming to the foundation naturally expect to get some assistance with their problems. What they are doing is admirable, and our first impulse is to help them in their business, which is what they expect. The problem is that we don’t know their business or their circumstances. All we have to offer is our research; others have to find out how it applies to them.
Planning and Administration Eclipse Research. Because of numerous learning exchanges, plus the Deliberative Democracy Exchanges, and other major events such as the Public Voice program in Washington, DC, considerable time is needed for planning and administration. However, we have to protect the time needed for doing the research, which is the reason for the meetings. The foundation has to learn from what the exchange participants are learning. Holding a learning exchange can’t be an end in itself and substitute for the research Kettering has to do.

**INSIGHTS FOR DISCOVERING POSSIBILITIES**

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

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

Another example: The power to make a difference in the political system, which many people would like to do, might come not just from getting officials in institutions to do their bidding, but also from producing things that the institutions need in order to be effective, things that only citizens can provide. The example I often use to show something only citizens can do is in health. Hospitals can care for people, but only families and friends can care about them. Clinical studies have shown that this kind of care can help people who are ill. It is a powerful “medicine.” The question is, What would happen in the health-care system if more use were made of human caring?

**WE AVOID TALKING ABOUT “FINDINGS” BECAUSE THAT SOUNDS SO FINAL. INSTEAD, WE DESCRIBE WHAT WE ARE LEARNING AS INSIGHTS.**
WITH THE PEOPLE: A COLLECTION OF INSIGHTS

A 2020 Kettering Foundation Press publication, *With the People*, is a synthesis of insights from nearly four decades of research. The major question that grows out of the insights is, What would happen if all of our governing institutions, nongovernmental as well as governmental, worked more *with* citizens? That’s a very relevant question in a time when institutions are struggling with a significant loss of public confidence.

Perhaps a *with* strategy could help improve the relationship between citizens and the governing institutions. Our largest and most powerful agencies might also benefit because they can’t be fully effective without supportive public assistance. (Recall the Ostrom research on coproduction cited earlier.)

Where did Kettering get the idea that a *with* strategy might work in some circumstances? Observing efforts to deliberate in NIF forums was one source. Two other experiences were also influential. One was the foundation’s study of supplemental or citizen diplomacy, which I mentioned earlier. A coalition of citizens no longer or never in government can sometimes imagine ways to avoid or deal with conflicts that aren’t likely to be seen by officials who are constrained by defending existing policies. Governments listening to what these citizens groups have to say is a form of working *with* people. Another influence on the foundation’s thinking was seeing both state and federal officials compare their deliberations on contentious issues with those of citizens who had deliberated on the same issue.

We hope to find other examples of how a *with* strategy might be used, but that will require experiments by both civic groups and institutions. Now Kettering is looking into what self-interests on both sides could prompt innovations.
COMMUNICATIONS AS RESEARCH

Obviously, research has to be shared to be useful. And both the message as well as the authenticity of the source influences the effectiveness of communications. This means that what Kettering learns from exchanges with other organizations is best conveyed by those organizations themselves. Teachers listen to teachers because they know what teaching is like. Lawyers listen to lawyers and so on. The foundation is delighted when the research that comes from alliances is presented in publications other than those published by Kettering.

The foundation also reports on its research through the publications of the Kettering Foundation Press and online platforms. Our three major journals have different missions and target audiences. The Review deals in ideas about democracy and what Kettering is trying to learn about it. The Higher Education Exchange concentrates on the role of colleges and universities in a democracy and looks for experiments in working with citizens as producers. Connections features stories about people, organizations, and their experiments, successful or not, that try to make democracy work as it should.

Because the communications are so integral to the research, the responsibility of sharing what the foundation is learning begins in the small research workgroups and goes from there to the integrative meetings. There is no communications department because communicating is a part of the research.

I put communications at the end of this report to make a point. Before anything is said outside Kettering, it has to be communicated within. You are entering a world that thrives on open, candid exchanges of experiences, ideas, and concerns. Our conversations are opportunities to think out loud and try out developing thoughts. We argue, but not to win arguments. We are just testing our ideas. In these conversations, the shared mind that emerges influences all that we do, as well as how we do it.

Kettering’s annual publications, Connections, Kettering Review, and Higher Education Exchange, share research with different audiences.
A CULTURE OF COLLABORATION AND DELIBERATION

We realize that Kettering’s way of operating isn’t always comfortable for some people. “Coming to a foundation meeting makes my head hurt,” one visitor said. The foundation is also a relatively flat organization; there isn’t a ladder of success to climb. The people who thrive here do so because they believe what they are doing is unique and important. However, like every other collection of humans, we have disputes and get on one another’s nerves from time to time.

The foundation is unique, too, in that it doesn’t operate through hierarchies or a command system with numerous rules and policies. As I noted, we are a small organization and our personnel “policy” is essentially to help our colleagues whenever we can. They will do the same. Our research has a lot to say on this subject, and we try to follow our own insights.

Kettering researchers are more like the partners in a law firm or scholars in a coalition of scientists. We don’t operate like members of a staff, a faculty, or an army with different ranks, reporting to superiors up a chain of command. We are colleagues in a common cause. Everybody’s ideas are to be judged on their own merits, not on the “rank” of the individual. There is no one dictating what each of us must do every day.

Program officers have to take initiative and be self-organizing. Yet no one can work productively in isolation. Everyone has to consult with colleagues. We all need to know something about what everyone else is doing. There shouldn’t be any surprise projects or publications.

We differ in many ways, yet we all care about democracy. And democracy depends upon people who want a hand, not just a voice, in shaping their future by working together. Those are the people we work for. We are delighted that you are considering joining or have already joined us.
1 The Dartmouth Conference is the longest bilateral dialogue between citizens of the Soviet Union, now Russia, and the United States. It is a sustained dialogue on the changing nature of the relationship between the two countries for the purpose of preventing nuclear war. It has gone on to encourage strengthening the relationship between the two powers, a relationship that could contribute to world peace and prosperity.

2 Harry Boyte and Nancy Kari wrote about public work in *Building America: The Democratic Promise of Public Work* (Philadelphia: Temple University Press, 1996). Boyte is considered the founder of Public Achievement, a theory-based practice of citizens organizing to do public work for the common good that is used in schools, universities, and communities across the United States and in more than a dozen countries.

3 Kettering’s research has been significantly influenced by Dan Yankelovich and Public Agenda and their studies of deliberation, which they call “choice work.” Kettering calls choice work “deliberative decision-making,” which describes the process of moving from opinions and first impressions to more shared and thoughtful judgments on how best to act.


5 John McKnight is the founder and codirector of the Asset-Based Community Development (ABCD) Institute.

6 In illustrating this point about citizens being critical “coproducers” of public goods, we often cite Elinor Ostrom, “Covenanting, Co-Producing, and the Good Society,” *PEGS (Committee on the Political Economy of the Good Society) Newsletter* 3, no. 2 (Summer 1993): 8.

7 This publication was shared in draft form in the fall of 2020.

8 In the “Funeral Oration of Pericles,” Pericles describes public deliberation as *prodidacthenai . . . logo*, or the talk Athenians use to teach themselves before they act. See Thucydides, *History of the Peloponnesian War* 2.40.2.

9 In 1996, the Capital Research Center published criticisms of the Kettering Foundation and other philanthropic foundations in the first issue of its newsletter *Foundation Watch*. 